

B2B Lead Quality Report 2026

Why most MQLs never close, and how AI-era buyers changed the rules

Benchmarks from 6sense, G2, Forrester and Gartner, plus a vendor scorecard, a 100-point lead scoring model and a handoff SLA template.

BENCHMARKS

SCORING MODEL

VENDOR SCORECARD

ARS B2B Social Bridge · arsb2bsocialbridge.com · 26 pages · Free to read and share

What is inside

Four chapters. Four tools you can copy.

Chapter 1 · The buyer changed first

Pages 4 to 9 · How buyers spend their time, who sits in the buying group, how AI now builds the shortlist, and what it means for lead quality.

Chapter 2 · The funnel in numbers

Pages 10 to 14 · MQL, SAL and SQL defined, conversion benchmarks, channel differences, and what a lead really costs.

Chapter 3 · Why good-looking leads fail

Pages 15 to 18 · Why sales rejects leads, speed to lead, and the content syndication trap.

Chapter 4 · Fix it

Pages 19 to 23 · Scorecard, scoring model, handoff SLA and a 30-day plan.

 **In a hurry?** Read pages 3, 12, 20 and 23.



Vendor scorecard

Page 20 · Score any lead supplier out of 100



Lead scoring model

Page 21 · 100-point model to grade every lead



Handoff SLA

Page 22 · Every MQL gets an owner and a clock



30-day fix plan

Page 23 · Four weeks to a working funnel

Methodology, limits and sources: Pages 24–25 · **About ARS B2B Social Bridge:** Page 26

Six numbers that change how you run your funnel

In one line: Buyers decide earlier and know more, so a form fill is no longer proof of interest. Lead quality is now a shared sales and marketing job, measured at the SAL and SQL stage, not at the MQL stage.

94%

Rank vendors before first contact

Buying groups that rank preferred vendors before they first contact a seller.

51%

Start with an AI chatbot

Software buyers who now start research in an AI chatbot rather than Google.

13%

Typical MQL-to-SQL rate

Most MQLs never reach sales. This median comes from several 2026 benchmarks.

21×

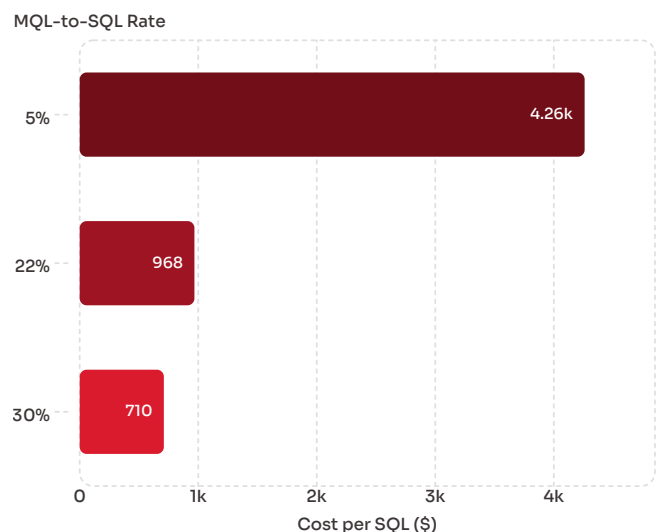
Speed advantage at 5 minutes

Better odds to qualify a lead contacted within 5 minutes versus 30 minutes.

Key takeaways

- Buyers rank their preferred vendors before they first contact a seller. 94% of buying groups do this (6sense, 2025).
- Half of software buyers now start research in an AI chatbot: 51% (G2, March 2026).
- The typical MQL-to-SQL rate sits near 13% across several 2026 benchmarks, so most MQLs never reach sales.
- Channel mix matters. In one 2026 B2B SaaS dataset, SEO leads moved from MQL to SQL at 51%, against 26% for PPC (SaaS Hero).
- Speed still decides. Leads contacted within 5 minutes were 21 times more likely to qualify than leads contacted at 30 minutes.
- Do the maths on cost per SQL, not cost per lead. Moving from 13% to 30% MQL-to-SQL cuts cost per SQL by 57% (ARS calculation).

Cost per SQL: the gap that matters



Source: ARS calculation using \$213 median cost per lead (SaaS Hero, 2026)

94%

of buying groups rank their preferred vendors before they first contact a seller.

Source: 6sense 2025 B2B Buyer Experience Report

In this chapter



How buyers spend their time



Who sits in the buying group



How AI now builds the shortlist



What it means for lead quality

The 2025 buyer in five numbers

In one line: By the time a buyer talks to sales, most of the decision is already made.

10.1

**Months: average
buying cycle**

Down from 11.3 months in 2024.
Cycle length varies by region.

61%

**Journey done before
first contact**

Share of the journey already
completed when buyers first
contact a seller (69% in 2024).

83%

**Define requirements
before sales**

Buyers who mostly or fully
define their requirements
before speaking to sales.

94%

**Rank vendors before
first contact**

Buying groups that rank
preferred vendors before they
first speak to any seller.

95%

**Were on Day One
shortlist**

Winning vendors that were on
the buyer's initial shortlist (85%
in earlier years).

Source: 6sense 2025 B2B Buyer Experience Report. About 4,000 buyers plus a supplemental survey of 766 responses on AI and economic pressure. Cycle length varies by region: a CustomerThink summary reports that North America was nearly unchanged at about 11 months.

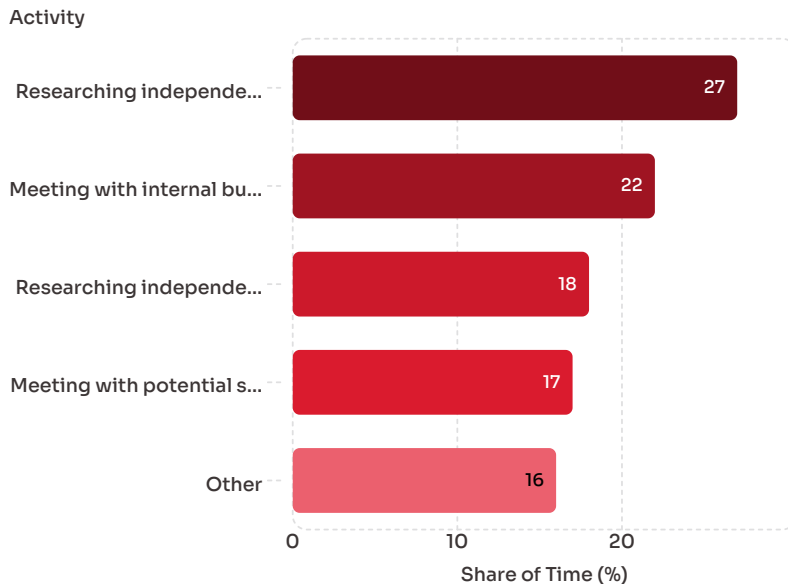
 **CHECK THE SAMPLE:** 6sense sells buyer intent data. Read the numbers as a clear direction, not as exact values for your market.

THE ARS TAKE · A lead who fills your form today has usually built a shortlist weeks ago. Your job is not to create interest at the form stage. Your job is to be on the shortlist earlier, and to qualify the lead properly when it arrives. ARS B2B Social Bridge builds its programmes around this order.

Where buying time goes

In one line: Sellers get about one-sixth of a buyer's time. Content, peers and internal meetings get the rest.

How a buying group spends its time (Gartner)



Source: Gartner survey of 750 B2B buyers, as reported by SalesIntel and Mediafly. Secondary summaries round the "Other" slice to 15% or 16%.

17%

of buying time spent meeting potential suppliers

5–6%

goes to any one supplier when the buyer compares several

77%

of buyers said their purchase was complex or difficult



CHECK THE SAMPLE: This survey was done before the pandemic. Use it for the shape of the journey, not for exact shares today.

THE ARS TAKE · Sales gets 17% of the time. What buyers read before that meeting decides who gets the meeting at all. Lead quality starts with what you publish, not with what you send after the form fill.

Who is in the room

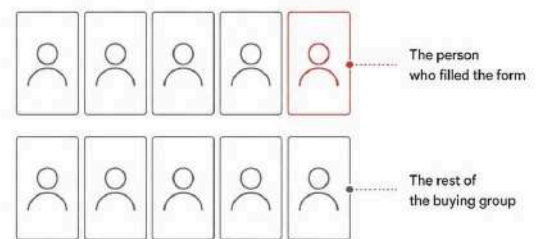
In one line: One form fill is one voice in a group of about ten.

Source	Figure	What it measures
6sense, 2024	11 people	Average size of a B2B buying group
6sense, 2025	~10 people	Typical purchase team size
Forrester, 2025 Buyers' Journey Survey	13 internal + 9 external	Average B2B purchase stakeholders (via Prospeo)
Demandbase, 2025	72%	B2B purchases involving high-complexity buying groups across several functions

Do not compare these rows directly. Each study counts people in a different way.

⚠ CHECK THE SAMPLE: The Forrester and Demandbase figures reach us through secondary summaries. Confirm them in the original reports before you quote them.

One form fill = one voice



THE ARS TAKE · If you score only the person who filled the form, you are judging one voice out of ten. Score the account too. Ask who else in the company has shown interest, and which functions are missing.

The AI shortlist

In one line: Buyers now ask an AI chatbot for the shortlist, and many change their mind because of what it says.



G2 · Survey of 1,076 software buyers, March 2026

- **51%** start research in an AI chatbot more often than in Google (29% in April 2025)
- **71%** rely on AI chatbots for software research (60% earlier)
- **69%** chose a different vendor than they first planned because of chatbot guidance
- **85%** think more highly of a vendor that an AI chatbot recommends



Forrester · 2026 Buyers' Journey Survey, ~18,000 business buyers

- **94%** used generative AI in their most recent purchase (89% in 2025)
- **54%** use AI for product information
- **55%** use AI to compare vendors
- **47%** use AI to build the business case



Wynter · January 2026, 101 mid-market SaaS CMOs

- **84%** use AI for vendor discovery (24% in 2025)
- **68%** start with AI tools before traditional search



Semrush · Survey of 600+ US business professionals

- **92%** say AI has shaped their vendor shortlist
- **83%** say AI influenced their final vendor decision
- **75%** still use Google or another search engine as well



CHECK THE SAMPLE: These are vendor and agency surveys, and most cover software buyers. Buyers of services may behave differently. Use the direction, not the decimals.

THE ARS TAKE · If AI builds the shortlist, a lead arrives pre-sold or pre-rejected. Make sure your site, your published research and your third-party mentions give AI tools something clear and accurate to say about you.

What this means for lead quality

In one line: The old rules for judging a lead no longer match how buyers behave.

Old rule	New rule
A form fill means interest	A form fill is late validation. 83% of buyers have defined requirements already.
Score the person	Score the person and the account. Buying groups have about ten people.
Count MQLs	Count the share that sales accepts (SAL) and the cost per SQL.
Call back within a day	Respond in minutes for high-intent leads.
Gate every asset	Publish useful, citable content openly so buyers and AI tools can find you. (<i>ARS view</i>)

Not everyone agrees

6sense ran a control check on its own headline. Buyers contact the eventual winner first about 80% of the time. But among buying groups where the first vendor contacted was tracked, that vendor won 57% of the time, not 80% (reported by SerpSculpt). The preference was formed earlier.

The Gartner time-split study is from before the pandemic. Critics note that buyers have always spent most of their time in internal meetings, so "5% of time with sellers" is often misread.

Most AI-usage surveys come from companies that sell AI or visibility tools.

13%

is the typical share of MQLs that become SQLs across several 2026 benchmarks.

Source: GrowthSpree (First Page Sage data), SaaS Hero, Visionary Marketing, 2026

In this chapter



MQL, SAL and SQL defined



Conversion benchmarks



Channel differences



What a lead really costs

MQL, SAL and SQL defined

In one line: Write the definitions on one page. Get sales and marketing to sign it.



Lead

A contact who has given you their details.



MQL — Marketing Qualified Lead

A lead that fits your profile and has engaged with your content.



SAL — Sales Accepted Lead ★ The stage most teams skip

A lead that sales has formally agreed to work. This is the accountability checkpoint most teams skip.



SQL — Sales Qualified Lead

A lead with a confirmed need, timeline and budget.



Opportunity

An active deal in the pipeline.

Source: Prospeo, B2B Leads in 2026. Prospeo also warns that every benchmark study defines MQL in its own way.

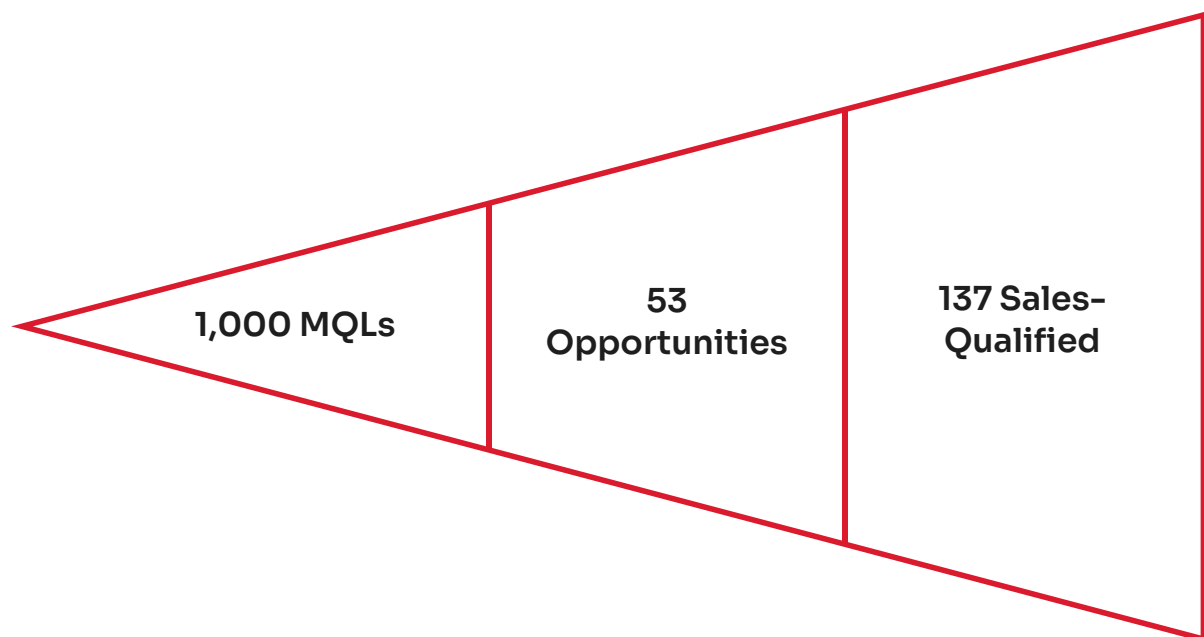
THE ARS TAKE · The SAL stage is where blame ends and data begins. When sales must accept or reject every MQL with a reason, marketing learns what "good" means within weeks.

Conversion benchmarks

In one line: Benchmarks vary a lot. Use them as a mirror, not as a target.

Stage	Figure	Source and note
Visitor to lead	Above 5% strong, under 2% weak	Prospero
Visitor to MQL	1.8% median (2.4% in 2022)	Visionary Marketing first-party study, Q1 2026
Lead to MQL	25%–35% average, 45%–60% top performers	SaaS Hero, 2026
MQL to SQL	~13% median	GrowthSpree (First Page Sage data) and SaaS Hero, 2026
MQL to SQL	13%–22% across B2B funnels	SaaS Hero, 2026
MQL to SQL	18%–22% average, 25%–35% top performers	Data-Mania, 2026
MQL to SQL	39%–40% with behavioural scoring	SaaS Hero, 2026
SQL to opportunity	38.4% median	Visionary Marketing, 2026
Opportunity to closed-won	23.8% median	Visionary Marketing, 2026
Lead to customer	Above 20% strong, under 10% weak	Prospero

What the medians mean: starting from 1,000 MQLs



Source: ARS calculation using Visionary Marketing medians (13.7%, 38.4%, 23.8%).

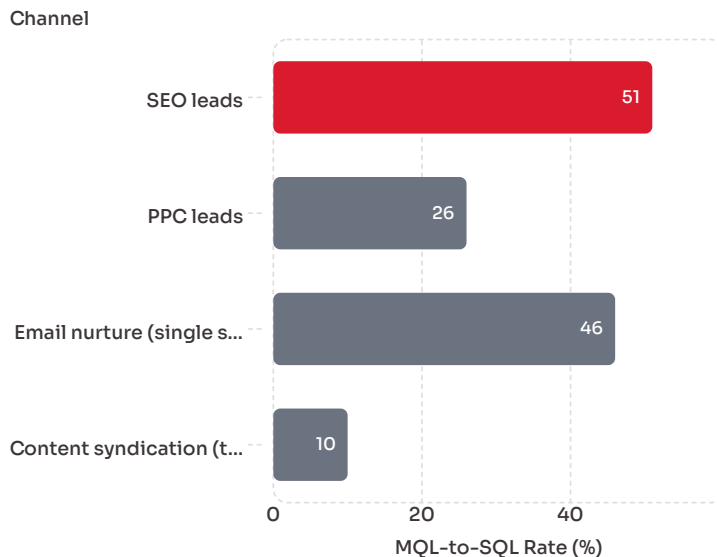


CHECK THE SAMPLE: The Visionary Marketing study is an agency's own research and was not independently audited. An MQL-to-SQL rate above 80% usually means the MQL bar is set too high (Prospero).

Channel differences

In one line: If your blended rate is low, the problem may be your channel mix, not your sales team.

MQL-to-SQL rate by channel (B2B SaaS, 2026)



Source: SaaS Hero, 2026 (SEO and PPC). Data-Mania for email (single source). Abmatic for syndication range.

Content syndication at a glance

Lead to MQL

12% to 28% for well-targeted programmes (RevNew)

MQL to SQL

Typically 5% to 15% (Abmatic)

Opportunities per 100 leads

At a 15% SAL-to-opportunity rate, 100 syndicated leads give about 2 to 4 real opportunities (RevNew)

i Note: These figures come mainly from B2B SaaS data. Services, manufacturing and other sectors will differ. The channel insight comes from GrowthSpree.

What a lead really costs

In one line: Cost per lead hides the real price. Cost per SQL shows it.

The formula

Cost per SQL

= Cost per MQL ÷ MQL-to-SQL rate

The median cost per lead for B2B SaaS is **\$213** across channels (SaaS Hero, 2026). Replace \$213 with your own figure.

Other sectors: ~\$650 in legal services · ~\$391 in manufacturing (Prospeo)

MQL-to-SQL rate	SQLs from 1,000 MQLs	Cost per SQL
5%	50	\$4,260
13% (typical)	130	\$1,638
22%	220	\$968
30%	300	\$710
39% (behavioural)	390	\$546

2.3×

More SQLs

From the same MQLs when rate moves from 13% to 30%

57%

Lower cost per SQL

At the same spend when MQL-to-SQL improves to 30%

Source: ARS calculation using the SaaS Hero median cost per lead. SaaS Hero gives a similar example: a \$200 MQL with a 5% conversion rate costs about \$4,000 per SQL.

21x

better odds to qualify a lead when you respond within 5 minutes instead of 30.

Source: MIT and InsideSales.com Lead Response Management study, 2007

In this chapter



Why sales rejects leads



Speed to lead



The content syndication trap

Why sales rejects leads

In one line: Most rejections trace back to seven fixable causes.

79%

Never convert

of marketing leads never convert to sales opportunities (MarketingSherpa, cited by Rework). Use as a signal, not a current benchmark.

RollWorks surveyed 527 salespeople and 323 marketers. Salespeople said they reject leads that do not fit the target account criteria, do not fit the target person criteria (role and seniority), or have not filled a content form. Marketers predicted the first two but underestimated the form fill.

SOURCED

1 No shared ideal customer profile

Sales and marketing describe the buyer in different ways. (RollWorks)

SOURCED

2 A loose MQL definition

Prospero names vague MQL definitions as one of the three usual causes of a sub-10% rate.

SOURCED

3 Slow follow-up

The second of the three usual causes named by Prospero.

SOURCED

4 Bad or missing contact data

The third usual cause named by Prospero.

ARS VIEW

5 Different scorecards

Marketing is paid on lead volume, sales on close rate.

ARS VIEW

6 No rejection reasons

Without reason codes, the same bad source keeps sending leads.

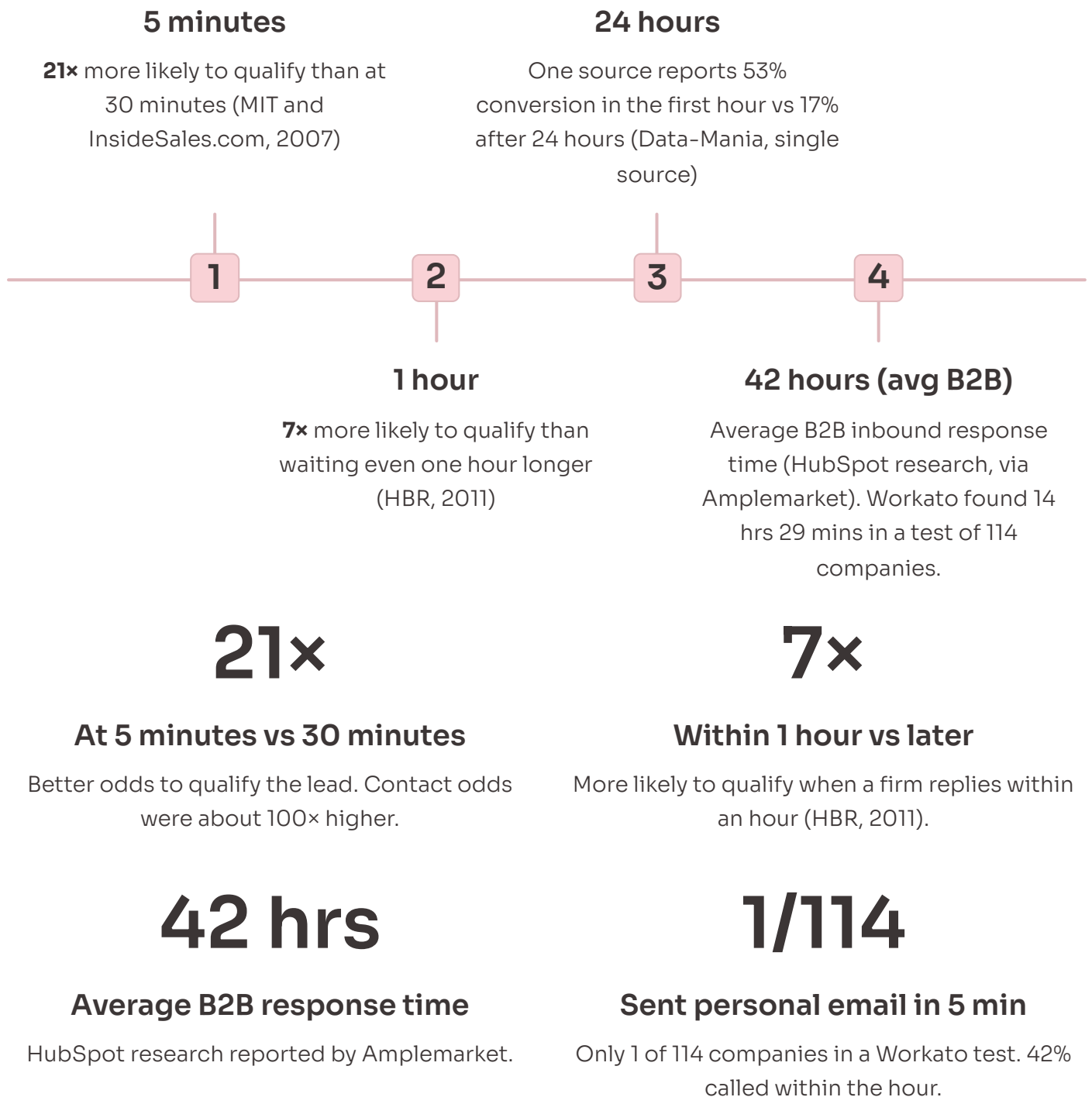
ARS VIEW

7 Purchased leads with no proof

No proof of consent or engagement from the lead before purchase.

Speed to lead

In one line: Minutes matter. Most companies answer in hours.

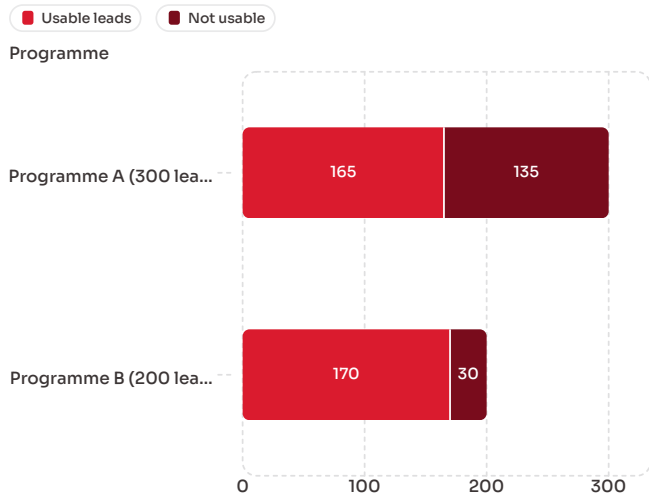


⚠ CHECK THE SAMPLE: The two key studies are from 2007 and 2011. The exact ratios vary from study to study. The direction is the same in all of them: faster is better.

The content syndication trap

In one line: A cheap download is not a qualified buyer. Count usable leads, not total leads.

Programme comparison (RevNew)



Source: RevNew. The smaller programme gives more usable leads.

A hard bounce rate above 5% is a data quality problem that damages email delivery and wastes sales time (RevNew). Cost per lead is one of the most misleading metrics in syndication (Reach Marketing). At a 15% SAL-to-opportunity rate, 100 syndicated leads give about 2 to 4 opportunities (RevNew).

Ask before you buy

- ☐ What is the ideal customer match rate, in writing?
- ☐ Which content did each lead consume, and for how long?
- ☐ What is the hard bounce cap, and how is it checked?
- ☐ Will invalid leads be replaced at no cost?
- ☐ Will you report cost per opportunity, not only cost per lead?

100

points to grade a vendor. 100 points to score a lead.

In this chapter



Vendor scorecard



Lead scoring model



Handoff SLA



30-day fix plan

Vendor lead quality scorecard

In one line: Score any lead supplier out of 100 before you sign.

#	Question	10 points	5 points	0 points
1	Ideal customer match	Commits in writing to 80%+	Verbal promise	No commitment
2	Source transparency	Names every source and publisher	Names categories only	Refuses
3	Consent proof	Shows consent wording and date per lead	General privacy policy only	Nothing
4	Data quality	Hard bounce under 5%, verified before delivery	Cap above 5%	No cap
5	Replacement policy	Replaces invalid leads within 7 days at no cost	Credit only, slow	None
6	Engagement proof	Shows which asset each lead consumed and for how long	Shows the asset only	Nothing
7	Reporting	Reports MQL, SAL, SQL and cost per opportunity	Reports MQL only	Raw leads only
8	Duplicate control	Removes duplicates and your existing database	Duplicates removed on request	No control
9	Pilot terms	Small paid pilot with exit rights	Pilot with lock-in	Annual contract only
10	Proof	Verifiable references with named outcomes	Case study without names	None

Strong

80–100 points. Proceed with confidence. Negotiate volume terms.

Negotiate

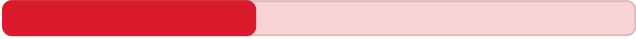
60–79 points. Negotiate tighter terms before signing. Run a pilot first.

Walk away

Below 60. Do not sign. The risk of wasted spend is too high.

100-point lead scoring model

In one line: Start here. Then test the score against your closed-won deals every quarter.

 40%

Fit — 40 points

Industry match (10) · Company size (10) · Role and seniority (10) · Region (5) · Use case or tech stack match (5)

 30%

Intent — 30 points

Demo, contact or pricing request (15) · Repeat visits within 7 days (8) · Third-party intent topic match (7)

 20%

Engagement — 20 points

Relevant content downloaded (8) · Email reply or click (6) · Webinar attended (6)

 10%

Timing and data — 10 points

Valid business email and phone (5) · Active buying signal — funding, hiring, new leader (5)

Negative scoring

–15 · Competitor, agency or student email

–10 · Outside target region

–10 · Free email domain

–20 · Hard bounce or unsubscribe

Thresholds

Below 50

Hold

50–69

Nurture

70+

MQL → route to sales within SLA

Teams that use behavioural scoring report 39%–40% MQL-to-SQL (SaaS Hero). This model is an ARS starting point, not a published standard.

Handoff SLA template

In one line: Every MQL gets an owner, a clock and a reason if it is rejected.

Trigger	Owner	Time limit	What must happen
Demo or contact request	Sales	5 minutes (business hours)	Call or personal email. Log it in the CRM.
Score of 70+ (MQL)	Sales	1 hour	First touch. Accept (SAL) or reject with a reason code.
Sales decision	Sales	1 business day	Accept or reject. No "pending".
Rejected lead	Marketing	2 business days	Read the reason code. Fix the source. Recycle or drop.
Accepted lead — no reply after 3 attempts in 7 days	Sales	Day 7	Return to nurture with a note.
Pipeline review	Sales and marketing	Weekly	Review accepted, rejected and converted counts.

Six reason codes

1

Not an ideal customer account

2

Wrong role or seniority

3

No response after 3 attempts

4

No budget or need now

5

Bad or duplicate data

6

Already in pipeline

20-minute weekly huddle agenda

- Count of MQLs, SALs and SQLs
- Top rejection reasons this week
- Fastest and slowest response times
- One change to test this week

All time limits are ARS suggested defaults. The 5-minute target follows the MIT and InsideSales.com study.

30-day fix plan

In one line: Four weeks to a shared definition, a working score and a clean source list.

3



Week 1 · Agree the words

Write one page that defines lead, MQL, SAL, SQL and opportunity. Agree one ideal customer profile. Both heads sign.

Week 2 · Install the rules

Switch on scoring model version 1, the handoff SLA and the six reason codes in your CRM.



Week 3 · Audit the sources

Work out cost per SQL for every channel and vendor. Score each vendor with the scorecard.

Week 4 · Review and reset

Compare score bands with real outcomes. Cut the weakest source. Set targets for SAL rate and cost per SQL.

Track these five numbers

SAL acceptance rate

The share of MQLs that sales formally accepts

MQL-to-SQL by source

So you can cut underperforming channels

Median response time

Minutes, not hours.
Measure from lead creation to first touch

Cost per SQL

The true price of every sales-qualified lead

Cost per opportunity

The ultimate efficiency metric for your funnel

📅 Take the baseline in week 1. Measure again at day 30 and day 90.

Methodology, limits and stats we left out

How we built this report

We collected published research from October 2026 and earlier. We prefer named studies with a stated sample or date. Every number carries its source on the page. We did the arithmetic on pages 3, 12 and 14 ourselves, and we label it "ARS calculation". This edition uses published research only. It does not use ARS client data.

Limits

- We read several primary reports (6sense, G2, Forrester, Gartner) through press releases and secondary summaries. Check the original before you quote a number.
- Many sources are vendors or agencies with a commercial interest.
- Benchmark studies define MQL and SQL in different ways. Do not compare rows from different studies as if they were the same measure.
- Most buyer-behaviour data covers B2B software buyers.
- Two key speed-to-lead studies are from 2007 and 2011.

Stats we chose not to use

Claim	Why we left it out
"Misalignment costs B2B companies \$1 trillion a year"	Repeated widely, but we could not trace a primary source.
"73% of marketing leads are never contacted by sales"	Credited to HBR (2023) by a secondary site. We could not find the original.
"Only 44% of reps can spot a hot lead"	Credited to Salesforce by a blog post. We could not verify it.
"90% of MQLs never become customers"	Appears in an AI answer aggregator with no study behind it.

Sources

Buyer behaviour

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Lead quality, speed and syndication

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- Reach Marketing, Biggest Content Syndication Mistakes: reachmarketing.com/blog/the-biggest-content-syndication-mistakes-to-avoid

About ARS B2B Social Bridge

ARS B2B Social Bridge is a B2B lead generation company. We help companies reach the right buyers and qualify them properly before leads reach sales.



Qualified before delivered

Every lead is qualified against your ideal customer profile before it reaches your sales team.



Built for sales acceptance

Our programmes are designed to maximise SAL rate, not just MQL volume.



Measured to opportunity

We report on cost per opportunity, not only cost per lead.

Want to grade your current lead sources with the scorecard in this report? Talk to the team at ARS B2B Social Bridge.

arsb2bsocialbridge.com