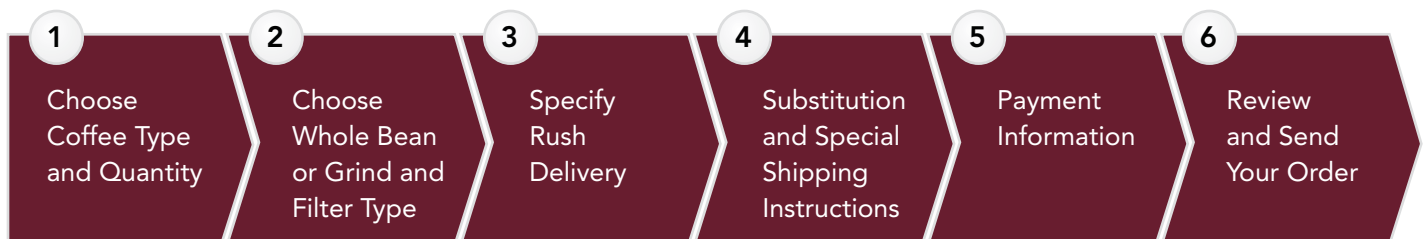


# HOW TO OPTIMIZE YOUR WEBSITE TO SUPPORT THE SALES CYCLE

**Managing the Sales Cycle on Your Website.** Almost from the day of its inception, the World Wide Web has been leveraged to move site visitors through the sales cycle. In 1993, the Los Gatos Coffee Roasting Company offered a virtual shopping experience on the web that presented a simple, step-by-step pathway to purchase coffee online:



Visitors moved from consideration, to selection, to commitment and purchase in a short, guided experience. And it worked. Our research shows that even in 1993, prior to the invention of SSL, JavaScript, Flash and many of the more powerful and sophisticated web tools we have today, visitors were willing to complete the coffee sales cycle online – beginning to end.

Today, after more than 15 years of explosive growth and technological innovation, one of the most powerful and profitable uses of the web continues to be leveraging the online experience to move prospects through the sales cycle. However, it is not unusual to experience poor conversion rate, poor sales, high numbers of abandoned sessions, and other symptoms of a “broken” sales cycle on modern sites. Even with all of the progress that has been made over the years in mapping sales cycles to online experiences, there is no single “magic bullet” approach that is universally accepted as a solution to these problems. Why is that, you may ask? There are two obstacles to successfully weaving sales cycles into online experiences:

## FIRST OBSTACLE: THE PERFECT SALES CYCLE DOES NOT EXIST.

In fact, there is no universally accepted model of a sales cycle. Most sales cycle models follow stages similar to these:

1. Awareness
2. Research
3. Consideration
4. Selection
5. Purchase
6. Fulfillment

However, sales cycles vary by company, by target market, and even by product. It is also important to understand which parts of your company’s sales cycle take place on the web, and which do not.

## SECOND OBSTACLE: THE PERFECT WEB VISITOR DOES NOT EXIST.

Given a perfectly architected website, with a well articulated sales cycle presented in an attractive, user-friendly design, expected results may still not be realized. Web visitors are not so predictable. Upon arrival at your site, the visitors will not necessarily be in the right place, or in the right frame of mind to follow your carefully planned sales cycle path.

- ✓ Many site visitors appear initially on pages within the site, rather than the home page. Search engine traffic is a common source for such visitors. These visitors may miss opportunities to engage with the first stage of the sales cycle if it is exclusively mapped to a single location, such as the home page.
- ✓ Visitors may depart and return to the site multiple times, possibly over an extended period of time. They may be progressing through the sales cycle, but not in a single session on your site. This presents challenges to re-engage with the visitor according to their current position in the sales cycle, rather than starting at the beginning every time they return to your site.
- ✓ Visitors may be in more than one sales cycle, and they may be in different stages for each cycle. If there is any possibility that your visitors may be involved in multiple sales cycles simultaneously, driving them into a single pre-defined path may be counterproductive.
- ✓ While a well-conceived sales cycle theoretically encompasses every possible sales cycle stage a visitor could occupy, visitors will not progress through the sales cycle until they are ready. Each stage must satisfy the needs of the visitor and make the next phase or phases of the sales cycle available, but it is the visitor who will decide when to move forward.
- ✓ Finally, the experiences comprising the sales cycle must not be presented to visitors as a rigid, formulaic set of steps they must follow. Flexibility is needed, as visitors may skip phases of the sales cycle altogether, or return to previous phases if they feel a need to repeat previous activities.

To summarize, the twin challenges of defining your company’s sales cycle and managing unpredictable visitor behavior within that cycle may seem like insurmountable obstacles at first. With a methodical, step-by-step approach, and possibly the assistance of an experienced Agency partner, however, you can succeed.

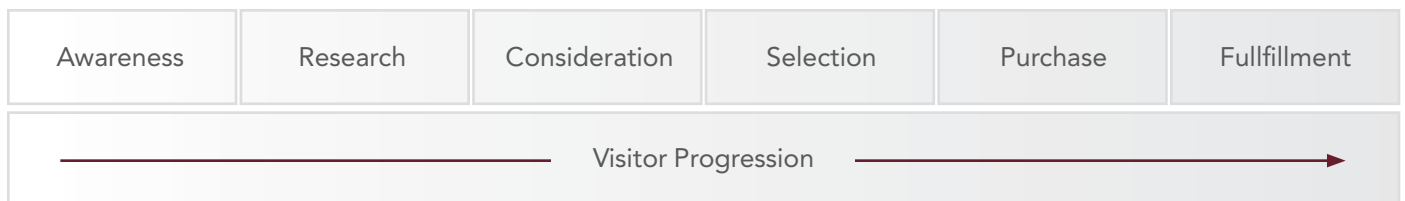
## MAPPING YOUR SALES CYCLE TO YOUR SITE

Before you assess your site to see how well it supports the sales cycle, consider this: What parts of the sales cycle is your company’s website designed to support? Obviously, if you do not sell online, there will be no “Purchase” step supported on your site, and it’s likely “Fulfillment” will be irrelevant as well.

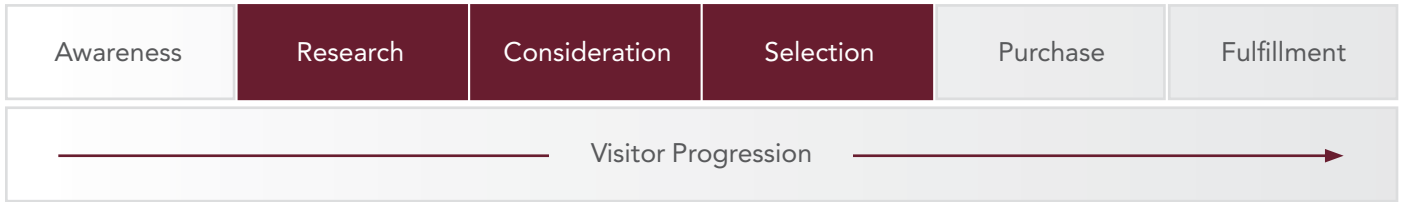
Keep an open mind, however. The most effective approach is to evaluate your site from the point of view of your visitors. Even if you do not materially support specific stages in the sales cycle, it’s important to know if your visitors EXPECT you to – and assess your site accordingly. A missing step in the sales cycle on your site will translate to visitors abandoning the site.

Once you know the stages in your sales cycle that should be supported by your site, you are ready to assess how well your specific sales cycle is supported by your site. Follow these steps to map your sales cycle to your website:

### 1. BEGIN THE MAPPING EXERCISE WITH A DIAGRAM OF THE IDEAL SALES CYCLE:



2. HIGHLIGHT THE STAGES IN THE SALES CYCLE YOU INTEND TO DIRECTLY SUPPORT ON YOUR SITE:

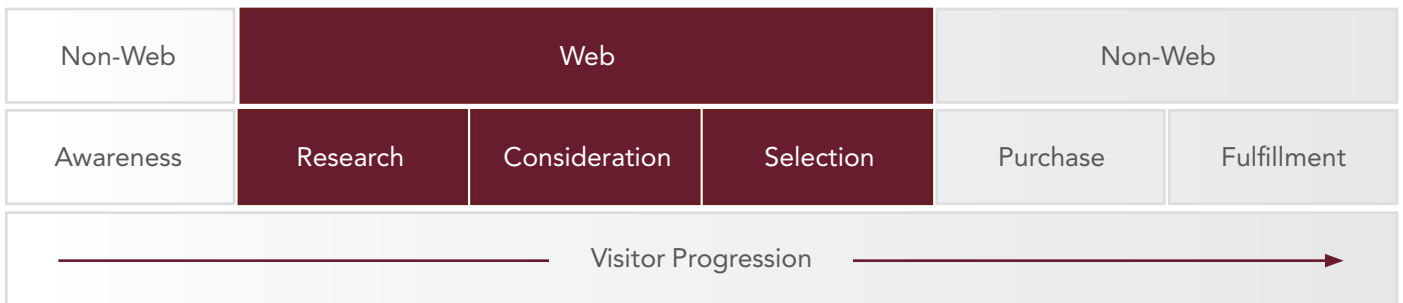


In the example above, your company may rely on extensive brand and product marketing via other media, rather than your site. Banner advertising, Search Engine advertising, radio/TV advertising, and other forms of media may be the most effective way to reach your prospects. If that is the case for your company, optimizing your site for awareness may not be an effective strategy.

The example also suggests that Purchase and Fulfillment stages are not directly supported on the site. This would be the case if you did not offer product or service purchases on the site.

You may wish to expand the diagram to clearly show the role of the site in the sales cycle:

3. ADDRESS TRANSITIONS



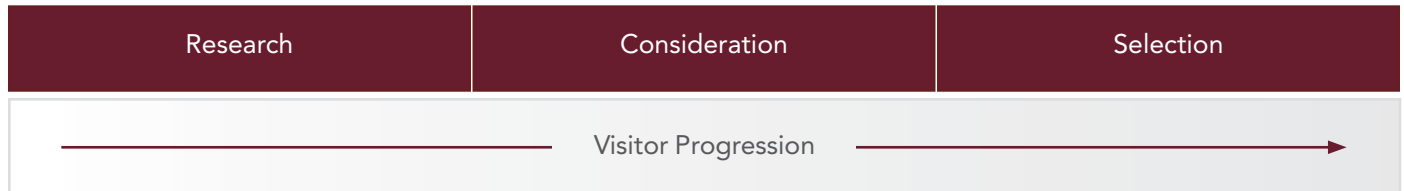
The burgundy-shaded areas represent transitions between your site and other media and experiences. This is an important area of sales cycle progression that is often overlooked. An entire TechNote could be dedicated just to the topic of addressing such transitions. For now, it's important to understand that visitors will progress through the sales cycle via a series of transitions, and the burgundy-shaded areas are simply two special cases of this. The next section provides insight into this topic.

You have now mapped the relevant stages in your company's sales cycle to your website. This simple exercise can bring structure to both online and offline strategies, highlight overlaps and gaps in overall sales cycle coverage, and establish a framework for designing effective visitor experiences for your site.

While this approach is simple and straightforward, many companies have not achieved this level of clarity with respect to their own sales cycle and website goals. It's an approach every company should consider.

## PROGRESSING THROUGH THE SALES CYCLE

With your sales cycle mapped to your website, you are ready to assess how effective your site is at moving visitors from one step to the next. Focus your efforts on the relevant portion of the sales cycle – the stages that take place on your website:



The “Visitor Progression” arrow is an attractive part of the diagram. The arrow implies that visitors will simply begin at the left part of the diagram and spontaneously arrive at the right end of the diagram. Surprisingly, on a well designed site, that is likely to be exactly what they do.

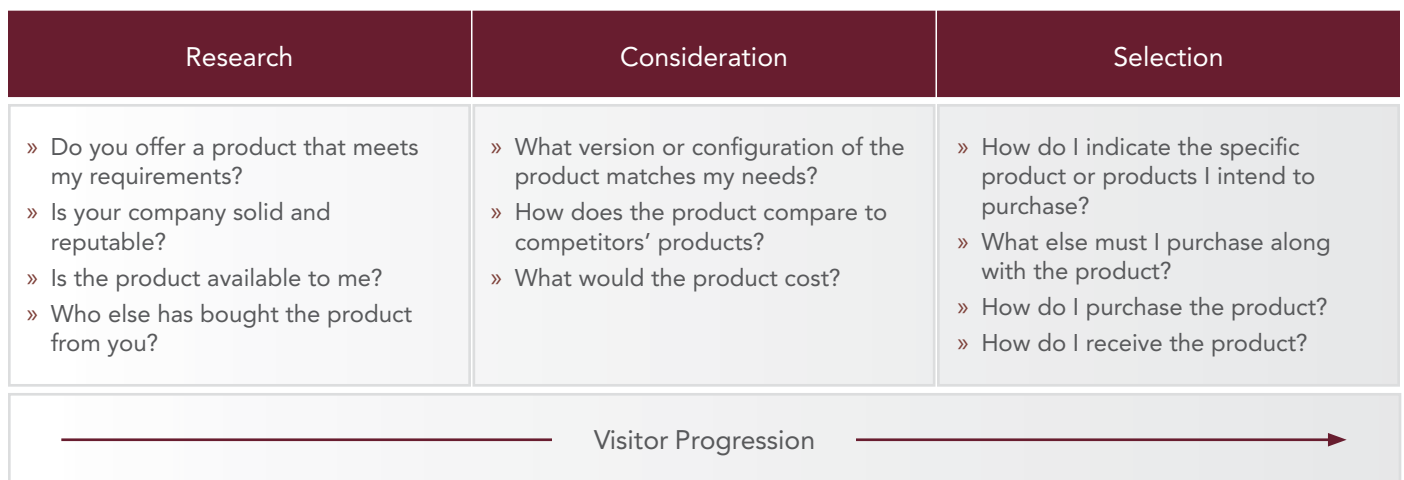
## WHAT CAUSES THIS PROGRESSION?

Your company is likely to have an answer to that question that is specific to your particular markets and products. For example, let’s consider a simple cause and effect answer that can be used to illustrate general concepts:

1. Visitors are driven into the sales cycle by “needs”
2. Visitors progress through the sales cycle through incremental satisfaction of needs

With this simple, yet general approach, you can review the sales cycle mapped to your site and look for ways to improve the alignment between the two. Here is an example of one approach:

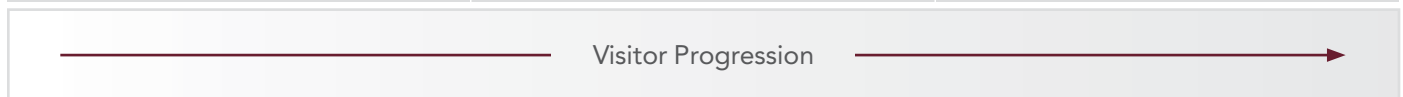
### 1. IDENTIFY VISITOR NEEDS FOR EACH STEP IN THE SALES CYCLE YOU HAVE MAPPED TO YOUR SITE.



2. IDENTIFY CONTENT AND EXPERIENCES AVAILABLE ON YOUR SITE THAT SATISFY THE VISITOR'S NEEDS.

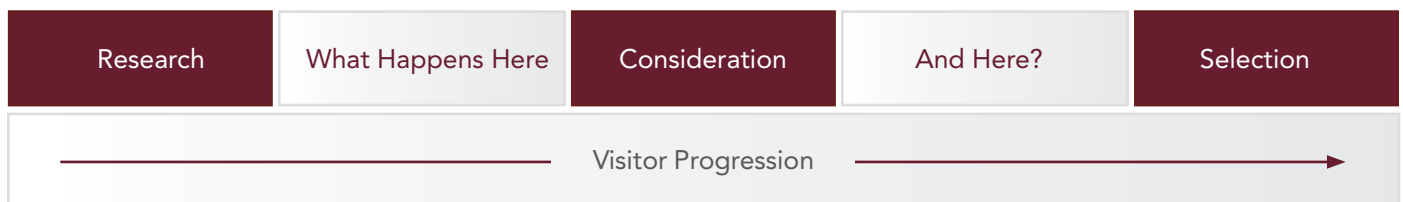
Research	Consideration	Selection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Do you offer a product that meets my requirements?</li> <li>» Is your company solid and reputable?</li> <li>» Is the product available to me?</li> <li>» Who else has bought the product from you?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What version or configuration of the product matches my needs?</li> <li>» How does the product compare to competitors' products?</li> <li>» What would the product cost?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» How do I indicate the specific product or products I intend to purchase?</li> <li>» What else must I purchase along with the product?</li> <li>» How do I purchase the product?</li> <li>» How do I receive the product?</li> </ul>

Site Content that Satisfies Needs		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Complete product list</li> <li>» Company information, financial information, company history</li> <li>» Product export restrictions, geographic availability</li> <li>» Reference Customer list, Customer testimonials, quotes, Case Studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Product requirements</li> <li>» Product configuration details</li> <li>» Case Studies</li> <li>» Product documentation</li> <li>» Third party product reviews</li> <li>» Product price lists – or pathways to submit inquiries about pricing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Product ordering information</li> <li>» Maintenance, Support, Accessories and Related Product information</li> <li>» "How To Buy" information or immediate purchase capability</li> <li>» Shipping and delivery information; download instructions</li> </ul>



3. ADDRESS TRANSITIONS

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the assessment, due to the number of variables involved. While the diagrams show neatly organized boxes holding visitor needs and the content that would satisfy those needs, your website is likely to present a much richer and more complex experience than the diagrams suggest. In this final step of the assessment, the overall visitor experience must be evaluated to determine whether the satisfaction of needs relevant to one step in the sales cycle will result in the visitor progressing to the next step. Consider the Transitions diagram below:



The questions above illustrates the challenge both you and your visitors face. After you have anticipated the visitor's needs in relevant sales cycle stages, and addressed those needs with content, images, and applications, the final ingredients needed to support the sales cycle are calls to action (CTA).

## **It is the offer of a CTA, and the subsequent action taken by the visitor, that results in the visitor's progression through the sales cycle.**

Your success at moving visitors through the sales cycle on your site will depend on your ability to build effective transitions between stages in the sales cycle. If a visitor achieves their immediate goal on your site (satisfies their current needs) and cannot determine what to do next, or where to go to address their new needs, they may simply abandon the site.

Frequently, transitions are achieved through obvious CTAs such as a "Buy Now" button on a product page. With a single click, the visitor moves from the consideration step to the selection step, or even the purchase step, if there are no further choices to make. While obvious, this is an example of a critical transition in the sales cycle. Ask yourself: "What would the visitor do if the 'Buy Now' button was NOT present at that moment in the visitor's experience?" At best, the visitor would muddle through your site until they discovered an alternate pathway to the product purchase experience. At worst, they would give up and abandon the sales cycle. No Sale.

It's more challenging to facilitate transitions in less obvious contexts. However, if the alternative is having visitors abandon your site, it's worth the extra effort to ensure that visitors can easily, confidently progress through the sales cycle on your site. For each key asset or experience on your site, "test drive" the visitor's experience using the Transitions diagram above. (These activity simulations may be described as "Use Cases"). Answer the questions "What happens here? And Here?" by describing the CTAs the visitor would respond to and what the outcomes would be.

Successful transition strategies will anticipate visitors' needs as they progress through the sales cycle by delivering a range of opportunities within each stage. This approach will ensure that visitors never feel they have reached a "dead end." Don't assume all transitions lead "forward" through the sales cycle. Search engine drop-ins, visitors who need further background information and research, and visitors considering multiple products or solutions may all need a way to move "backwards" to meet their needs. A "Learn More" pathway on a product page may be as valuable as a "Buy Now" button for your site, products, and audiences.

Websites may be extraordinarily complex, and you may be serving multiple audiences with interests spanning all of the stages in the sales cycle. Don't be overwhelmed by such complexity. Focus on your highest-value audiences and your highest-value experiences first. Don't invest time in trivial cases that do not include your target audiences or rarely take place.

Your web metrics system can be a useful tool to gain insight into how effectively your site supports your sales cycle. Astute readers will have already recognized the correlation between sales cycle transitions, CTAs, and the information needed to construct a "sales funnel" report within a web analytics system.

## SUMMARY

You should now have a sense of the approach needed to optimize your site to support the sales cycle. The step-by-step approach presented in this TechNote may be just the foundation you need to guide a methodical assessment of your site. After you are armed with facts, you will be prepared to take action. An agency partner, like AtrNet, with experience in optimizing sites for sales cycles can bring proven methodology, best practices, and state-of-the-art web experience design expertise to your project. Whether you plan your own project to optimize your site for your sales cycle, or work with a trusted partner, the results will be worth the effort invested.

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Find out how AtrNet can apply our design experience and insight to your Web project.

**Contact: Tushar Atre, office: 831.464.0120 | mobile: 831.419.9050 | [tushar@atre.net](mailto:tushar@atre.net)**