# Performative ABM vs. Performance ABM

by Scott Stedman

The Imaginarium

# Musée des Beaux Arts (excerpted)

By W. H. Auden

December 1938

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.


W.H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts* captures a truth every B2B marketer eventually learns: attention is never guaranteed. In Brueghel's painting, Icarus falls from the sky, yet the ploughman keeps ploughing and the ship sails calmly on. Something extraordinary happens. Nobody stops.

Our buyers are no different. They are busy solving problems, managing budgets, and navigating competing priorities. They don't take notice just because something is attention-grabbing; they care because it is relevant.

That is the challenge of modern marketing. Success requires more than campaigns. It requires coordinated, measurable relevance.

It's why The Imaginarium coined the term **Performance ABM**.

It requires Performance ABM.



# ABM is dead. Long live ABM

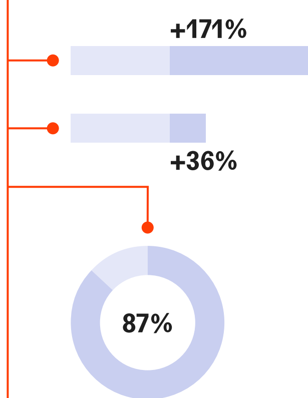
Account-Based Marketing is having a good run. What began as a niche methodology practiced by a handful of enterprise technology marketers has become the dominant strategic framework in B2B.

ABM vocabulary has spread to nearly every serious marketing organization. The acronym itself now appears in board presentations, job descriptions, agency briefs, and vendor pitches with a frequency that would have astonished even its most enthusiastic early adopters.

This adoption is worth celebrating!

The underlying principles of ABM represent a genuine advancement in how B2B companies think about growth. We've seen organizations wisely shift from chasing leads to engaging buying committees. The recognition that complex purchases involve multiple stakeholders across multiple functions is now commonplace, and the insistence that sales and marketing alignment be treated as more than just a cultural aspiration is broadly accepted.

Gartner reports that companies implementing ABM have seen a **171% increase in average contract value.** Forrester found a **36% increase in closed deals.** ITSMA notes that **87%** of marketers credit ABM with **improving customer lifetime value.** The methodology not only works. When executed with discipline, it works significantly better than what preceded it.




Reader, this is not a story about organizations doing ABM wrong. It is a story about a powerful methodology that has outpaced the operational infrastructure that most businesses have built to support it.

The challenge, as is often the case with good ideas that spread quickly, is that adoption and mastery move at different speeds. **Many organizations have understood the name of the game, but few know how to play it well.**

On top of that, ABM is complex to operationalize. The pressure to demonstrate early momentum often works against the slower, more deliberate process of building programs that compound over time.

What you get, whether purposefully or not, is show. Missing from among that show is a unified performance strategy that connects what each team does every day to the outcomes the business is actually trying to achieve. Without that connection, ABM becomes a collection of well-intentioned activities that are difficult to evaluate, nearly impossible to optimize, and ultimately unconvincing to the leadership teams whose continued investment they depend on.

This is the distinction that matters: **the difference between Performative ABM and Performance ABM.**

# Performative vs. performance

Performative ABM is not a failure of effort.
It is a failure of architecture.

On the surface, Performative ABM looks like the real deal. It uses the right platforms, runs known plays, and has ABM lingo down pat.

Companies with Performative ABM can readily demonstrate that their campaigns are targeted to account lists, that content is personalized by segment, and that SDRs follow up on intent signals. You may even spot newfangled titles, such as ABM Manager, Account-Based Marketing Director, and Head of ABM.

With the right architecture, there's nothing wrong with any of it. Without architecture, it's not ABM.

Say marketing measures impressions and engagement rates. At the same time, SDRs measure meetings booked, sales measures pipeline and revenue, and customer success measures retention and expansion. By their own metrics, each team is doing its job and doing it well. But is it moving the business forward? Is it delivering results needed to satisfy your board?

In short, Performative ABM is not a failure of effort. It is, however, a failure of architecture, and a remarkably common one at that. The challenge is that good architecture requires alignment across functions that have historically operated independently. It also requires agreement on shared definitions of success, and the organizational patience to let a connected system build momentum before declaring it a win or a loss. Architecture establishes how the jobs of individual teams connect, what they are collectively in service of, and **whether the program as a whole is delivering what it was designed to deliver.**

**For that reason, Performance ABM, unlike Performative ABM, begins with questions, not campaigns. Those questions are:**

- What is the business actually trying to achieve?
- What does success look like at the pipeline and revenue level?
- Which accounts, if moved, would create the most meaningful impact?
- What plays, across which teams, would move them?
- How will we know if any of it is working?

**All other parts of an ABM program follow from the answers to these questions. In turn, you get:**

- KPIs that cascade from goals rather than accumulate from activities
- Plays that serve defined outcomes rather than fill calendar space
- Measurement that creates a feedback loop rather than just producing a report
- A program with the diagnostic clarity to understand why a play is underperforming and the structural permission to respond quickly and effectively



The table below summarizes what we're talking about. It outlines the difference between a marketing function that earns its seat at the revenue table and one that struggles to explain why it's there.

| Area | Performative ABM | Performance ABM |
|---|---|---|
| **Starting point** | Channel plans and campaign calendars | Enterprise revenue and pipeline goals |
| **KPI ownership** | Separate metrics per team, rarely reconciled | Shared account-level KPIs across all teams |
| **Play design** | Bottom-up: available channels and ad hoc strategy drive play selection by each team | Top-down: goals enable play selection by each team |
| **Measurement** | Channel-level, campaign-by-campaign | Account-level, omni-channel, aligned to established KPIs |
| **Team coordination** | Informal coordination, ad hoc handoffs | Defined operating model with formal handoffs |
| **ICP/TAL ownership** | Siloed; sales maintains a separate list | Jointly developed; reviewed quarterly |
| **Success signal** | Campaign metrics: impressions, CTR, MQLs | Account progression and pipeline influence |

Good architecture requires alignment across functions that have historically operated independently.

# From theatre to performance in five steps

1. Define goals at the enterprise level
2. Develop a unified KPI framework
3. Design your play architecture
4. Build a measurement framework
5. Activate across teams within a shared scaffold

Moving from performative to performance requires more than just a new measurement tool and a revised campaign strategy. Try this sequence instead: start with enterprise goals, work downward through KPIs and plays, and only then activate across teams. Programs that struggle often do so because they get this order wrong. The key is building a system unified against the gravity that pulls teams apart.

## Step 1: Define goals at the enterprise level

Performance ABM begins above the marketing function. That means long before a single campaign brief is written, a target account list is assembled, or a channel is selected. Step one is always for leadership to define what success looks like in the language of the business. Sales leadership, revenue operations, and in many cases, the CEO or business leader all need to join the discussion.

**Here's what they should be asking:**

- Which segments of the market represent the greatest growth opportunity?
- What pipeline numbers are required to hit revenue targets?
- What is the right mix of new logo acquisition versus expansion in existing accounts?
- What timeframe governs the program?
- This is your foundation, or rather, a fixed point around which the rest of your strategy is oriented. Remember that the goal is to move accounts deliberately through the pipeline. ABM is how you do it, but revenue remains the purpose.



## Step 2: Develop a unified KPI framework

Once goals are defined at the enterprise level, the next task is translating them into KPIs for every team to share. Many programs fall apart here, often without anyone noticing. The reality only comes to haunt leaders during quarterly reviews, in the middle of negotiations between functions that have each been winning by their own accounting, but haven't moved the business along one bit.

Think again of marketing running on engagement metrics, SDRs meeting metrics, sales pipeline metrics, and customer success retention metrics. Does it all make sense in isolation? Absolutely. But together, these teams are playing different games on the same field, and that's a problem no amount of good creative or targeting can fix.

**The answer, as befits an ABM program, is to use account-level metrics as a common, agreed-upon currency:**

- Account engagement score
- Progression rate from awareness to active pipeline
- ABM-influenced pipeline
- Conversion rates at each stage of the account journey
- Revenue generated from target accounts

These KPIs give every team a way to see how their work connects to the outcomes that matter most. They also enable marketing to report at the board level in a language every stakeholder understands: the language of growth.

This doesn't mean abandoning team-specific metrics. SDRs can rightfully still care about meetings booked, while marketing tracks engagement, etc. The difference is that those metrics should become inputs of a shared account-level view rather than the final measure of success.

Drucker said that what gets measured gets managed. Case in point,when measurement unifies around the account, the entire organization can align and stay on the attack.

## Step 3: Design your play architecture

With goals and KPIs established, the program can begin designing its play architecture. A play is a defined, repeatable sequence of actions across one or more functions, built to move a specific type of account toward a specific goal.

This is more precise than a campaign. Plays should be built from the goal down, not from the channel up. The question is not "What can LinkedIn do for us?" The questions are: "What does this account need to experience to progress from awareness to consideration? Which combination of channels and touchpoints will create that experience most efficiently?" When you start with the channel, you tend to let the channel become the answer to every question, which is its own kind of problem.

**A mature play library will include plays for several distinct purposes:**

- Awareness plays for accounts that fit the ICP but have no meaningful engagement history
- Consideration plays for accounts that have shown intent signals or initial engagement
- Pipeline-acceleration plays for accounts in active sales cycles
- Expansion plays for existing customers being targeted for upsell or cross-sell
- Renewal plays for accounts approaching contract renewal, where retention is the priority

Each play should have a defined objective, trigger, sequence of actions across the relevant teams, and a measure of success. A play without a defined outcome is not a play.

## The Account-Based sales play matrix

Use the matrix below to understand common plays and their core components.

| Intent Based | Behavioral Trigger | Profile Targeted | Unique Situations |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Actively Researching** | **Brand Unengaged** | **Vertical Programs** | **Deal Acceleration** |
| Deliver targeted messages aligned to an account's displayed intent and active research signals. | Re-introduce the brand to accounts that have not recently visited the site or searched branded terms. | Target specific industry verticals with messaging that connects the solution to their unique business context. | Surround open opportunities with coordinated multi-channel engagement to maintain momentum and compress deal cycles. |
| **Channels:** Account-Based CTV, LinkedIn Sponsored Content, Programmatic Display (iABM), Intent-Triggered Email | **Channels:** Account-Based CTV (AccountCast), LinkedIn Brand Awareness, Programmatic Display, Content Syndication | **Channels:** LinkedIn (Industry Targeting), Vertical Trade Media, Sponsored Events, Personalized Landing Pages | **Channels:** Executive CTV + LinkedIn, Direct Mail (1-to-1), Sales Sequences, Deal-Specific Microsites |
| **Competitive Takeout** | **Highly Engaged** | **Segment Programs** | **Stalled Deals** |
| Reach accounts performing competitive research or currently using a competitor's solution. | Accelerate accounts that are already showing high engagement levels with the brand toward a sales conversation. | Run plays tailored to defined sales segments, ensuring messaging reflects the specific needs of each account group. | Re-engage buying committees on deals that have gone quiet, surfacing new contacts and refreshing the value narrative. |
| **Channels:** Competitive Keyword SEM, LinkedIn (Competitor Audience Targeting), Programmatic Display, SDR Outbound Sequences | **Channels:** LinkedIn Conversation Ads, Retargeting (CTV + Display), SDR Triggered Outreach, Gated Content Offers | **Channels:** LinkedIn (Segment Targeting), Field Marketing Events, Account-Specific Nurture Sequences, Sales Enablement Content | **Channels:** LinkedIn (Multi-Thread Targeting), Executive Outreach, Direct Mail, SDR Re-Engagement Sequences |
| **Brand Aware, Low Engagement** | **Media Re-Engage** | **Customer Base Programs** | **Churn Risk** |
| Deepen engagement with accounts that know the brand but have not acted, converting passive awareness into active consideration. | Bring back accounts reached by prior programs that did not convert using next-best-action sequencing. | Target existing customers to drive product adoption, cross-sell, upsell, and event participation. | Identify and respond to accounts showing early churn signals with targeted retention plays before the renewal window. |
| **Channels:** LinkedIn Thought Leadership Ads, Webinars, Account-Based CTV Retargeting, Gated Content & Nurture | **Channels:** Programmatic Retargeting, LinkedIn Retargeting, Email Nurture Reactivation, SDR Follow-Up Sequences | **Channels:** Customer Email Cadences, LinkedIn (Customer Matched Audiences), CS-Led Outreach, Executive Briefings | **Channels:** CS Intervention Sequences, Executive Re-Engagement, LinkedIn (Decision-Maker Targeting), QBR Content |

**All plays are journey-aligned: each is triggered by an account signal, owned by a defined team, and measured at the account level.**



### Brand vs. demand: why Account-Based CTV belongs in your play architecture

B2B marketers have long treated brand and demand as separate budgets with separate mandates. Brand builds awareness eventually. Demand generates pipeline immediately. The two rarely speak, and measurement frameworks are designed to keep it that way.

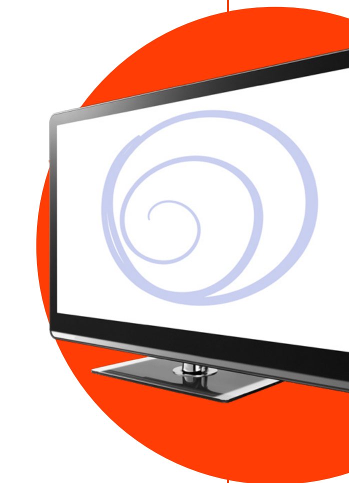
Account-based CTV does away with that distinction. By mapping your Target Account List to streaming households, CTV delivers full-screen, unmuted, unskippable brand creative to the precise buying committee members you are already targeting with every other play in your marketing mix.

The CFO who has been receiving LinkedIn ads all week is now also watching your brand story on Hulu on a Thursday evening. But this is not brand in the old sense of reaching everyone and hoping for the best. It is targeted brand that drives measurable performance, i.e., reaching the right accounts at the moment they are most receptive, with creative designed to create mental availability.

The channel that was once the exclusive property of consumer marketers is now, through account-based measurement, a fully accountable part of the B2B play architecture.

The result is a play that does something the rest of the matrix cannot do on its own: it builds the mental availability that makes every other play perform better. Accounts that have seen your brand on CTV engage more readily on LinkedIn, SDR outreach lands with greater recognition, and sales conversations start further along. CTV, in short, does not replace demand generation, but makes it considerably more effective.

Check out solutions like **AccountCast.tv** and ABX Platforms like **Demandbase** to unlock the power of Account-Based CTV yourself.



## Understanding the strategic value of a defined play library

One of the most underappreciated benefits of a well-designed play library is what it does for the teams beneath the CMO.

When plays are defined at the strategic level, teams gain agency on top of instructions. It means everyone has a selection of plays they can draw on to deliver results, approved solutions at their fingertips that enable smart decisions and ladder up to unified outcomes. Additionally, everyone owns their plays. They execute with their own expertise and market knowledge, doing so with the confidence that their work is part of something coherent rather than an isolated effort.

This is what meaningful agility in a B2B organization is built on. With an agreed plan to reference, teams can respond to signals, adapt to account context, and move quickly because the strategic scaffold for next moves is already in place. And it saves you from rebuilding your architecture every quarter.

The laddering effect is the structural backbone of this approach. Each team's goals are distinct, but they are designed to connect. Every play a team runs moves an account forward in a way that serves the unified goals of the marketing leader above them. The CMO, looking across all of it, sees a coherent revenue motion and has the data to describe it in terms the board finds useful: account progression, pipeline influence, stage velocity, and retention performance against defined cohorts.

Most importantly, when a program understands which plays move which account types at which rates, it can begin to model outcomes. For CMOs, that is a fundamentally different conversation to have with the powers that be. Think of presenting what you expect to produce next year, rather than just the numbers from last quarter.

You see, progress, not just activity. That's the move from Performative ABM to Performance ABM.

## Step 4: Build a measurement framework

Your measurement framework defines what will be tracked, at what level of granularity, with what frequency, and in what format.

Measurement in a Performance ABM program is part of its infrastructure and something that gets built before activation begins. Your measurement framework defines what will be tracked, at what level of granularity, with what frequency, and in what format. Making these decisions in advance spares you considerable confusion later and saves time.

The account is once more the foundation. This means ingesting data into a single account-level view so that, for each target account, the program can see which plays are moving which account types and at what rate. Without this, optimization is guesswork with a dashboard attached.

Your measurement framework should also define the review cadence. For starters, a monthly channel performance review is insufficient for a live ABM program. A weekly or bi-weekly cross-functional account review, where the relevant teams examine account-level data together, is a requirement for a program intending to learn and improve rather than simply continue.

Omni-channel, account-based measurement resolves the historic tension between sales and marketing. It gives the CMO a view of marketing's contribution in the language the sales organization already speaks: the account.

**Remember**

As hinted, the path from Performative to Performance ABM is not primarily a technological question. The most common mistake organizations make when they recognize a performance gap is reaching for a new tool.

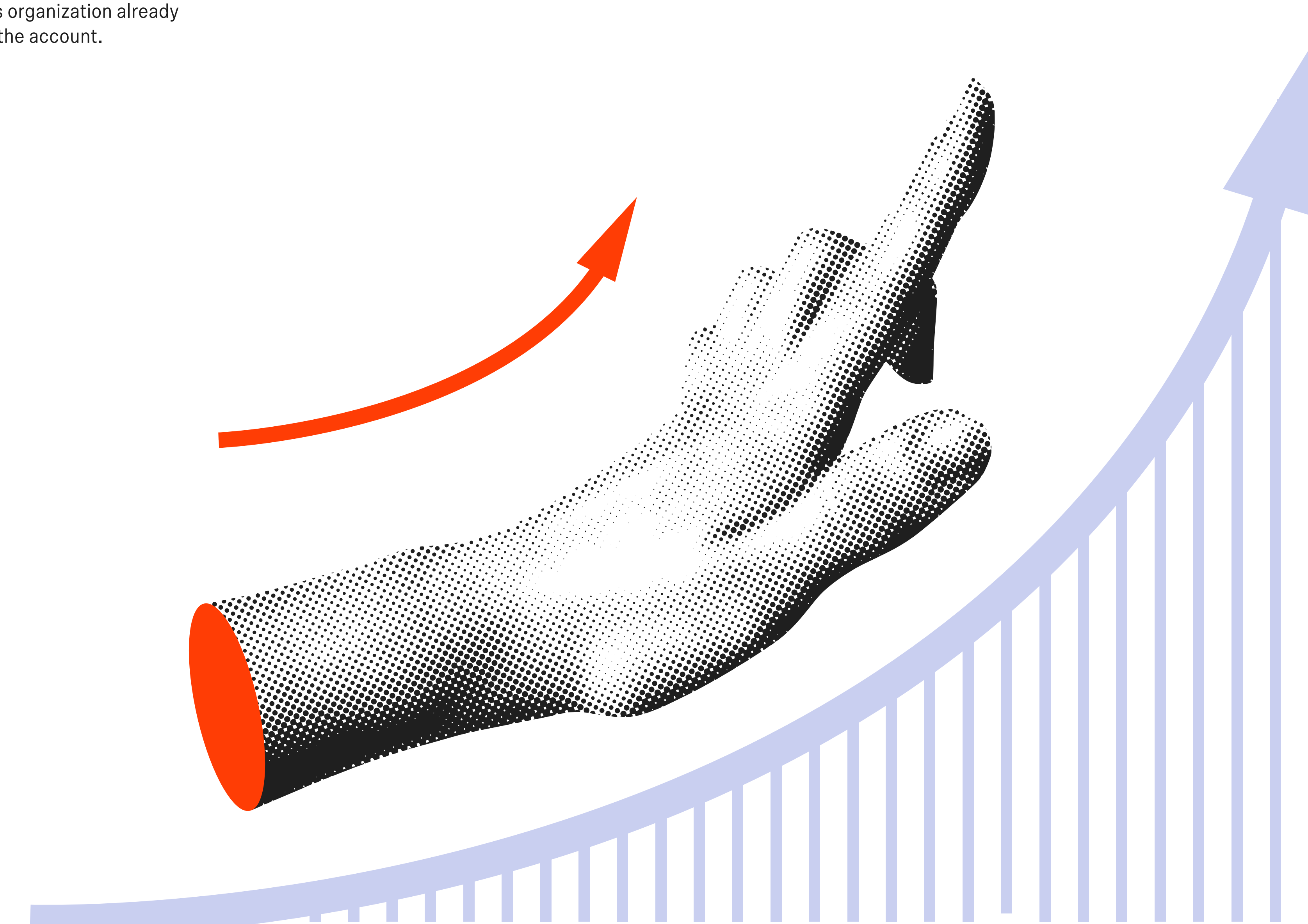
A better intent data provider or a more sophisticated attribution platform is valuable, but neither fixes a broken system. Your bottleneck to growth, if you sense having one, is almost always found at the level of your goals, KPIs, and operating model.

## Step 5: Activate across teams within a shared scaffold

With a strategic architecture in place, your program can activate across teams. Having done a thorough job with the previous steps, you can now give your individual functions the gifts of focus and freedom.

Handoff protocols between teams become critical at this stage. When does marketing hand an account to an SDR? When does an SDR hand it to an account executive? These are defined, documented, and measured, not soft agreements made over lunch. SLAs govern transitions while account engagement scores trigger escalations. The system is designed to move accounts forward rather than keep them comfortable in any single team's queue.

Each team executes with its own expertise and market knowledge, now confident that its work connects to something larger. With this, Performance ABM gives B2B organizations something that they have historically struggled to find: central strategic coherence without the operational rigidity that impedes agility or teams' freedom to perform at their best.



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# The Performance ABM scorecard


The following test is designed to help CMOs assess where their program currently sits on the spectrum from performative to performance. Score each dimension from 0 to 2 using the criteria provided. A total score out of 20 gives you a classification and an actionable indication of where to focus next.

Approach this honestly. The value is not in the number itself, but in the clarity it gives you about where your strengths lie and where you still have structural gaps. Room to do even better, that is!

Grab a pen and get to scoring

| | Diagnostic Question | Performance ABM | Performative ABM | Score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strategic Foundation | Does your ABM program begin with enterprise-level goals defined by leadership, not channel objectives defined by individual teams? | Goals are set at revenue/pipeline level and cascade into team KPIs | Teams set their own targets independently | 0 No shared goals<br>1 Partial<br>2 Fully cascaded |
| Unified KPI Framework | Do all functions (Marketing, SDR, Sales, CS) share a common set of account-level KPIs? | Single source of truth: account engagement, pipeline influence, revenue impact | Each team tracks its own metrics in its own system | 0 Siloed metrics<br>1 Partial overlap<br>2 Unified framework |
| Play Architecture | Are your ABM plays defined strategically before channels are selected, with each play mapped to a specific goal? | Plays are designed top-down, matched to account journey stage and goal | Campaigns are built by channel teams without a governing play library | 0 No play architecture<br>1 Some plays defined<br>2 Full play library |
| Measurement Infrastructure | Do you have a measurement framework that captures account-level performance across all channels? | Account-based measurement across paid media, SDR, sales, and CS | Measurement lives in channel dashboards with no account-level rollup | 0 Channel-only measurement<br>1 Partial<br>2 Full ABM measurement |
| Cross-Team Activation | Do individual teams execute their own plays within a shared strategic scaffold, with clear handoffs? | Each team has autonomy within a defined operating model and handoff protocol | Teams execute independently with no formal coordination model | 0 No coordination<br>1 Ad hoc<br>2 Structured operating model |
| ICP and TAL Discipline | Are your Ideal Customer Profiles and Target Account Lists developed jointly by marketing, sales, and leadership? | ICP is owned enterprise-wide; TALs are jointly built and reviewed quarterly | Marketing owns ICP; sales has a separate target account list | 0 Misaligned<br>1 Partially shared<br>2 Jointly owned |
| Signal-Driven Prioritization | Does your program use intent data and account signals to dynamically prioritize plays and outreach? | Intent signals and engagement data feed prioritization in real time | Account lists are static; campaigns run on a fixed schedule | 0 No signal use<br>1 Occasional<br>2 Systematically integrated |
| Sales and Marketing Handoff | Is there a defined, documented, and consistently followed protocol for when and how marketing hands accounts to sales? | SLAs govern handoffs; account engagement score triggers transition | MQL thresholds trigger handoffs with no account context shared | 0 Ad hoc<br>1 Defined but inconsistent<br>2 Consistent SLA-governed |
| Executive Visibility | Does your C-suite have real-time visibility into ABM performance at the account and program level? | Live dashboards give leadership account-level pipeline and engagement view | CMO receives a monthly channel performance deck | 0 No visibility<br>1 Periodic reporting<br>2 Live dashboards |
| Optimization Cadence | Is there a formal, recurring process for reviewing ABM performance and adjusting plays, KPIs, or targeting? | Weekly or bi-weekly cross-functional review; plays are updated based on data | Campaigns are reviewed quarterly, if at all | 0 No cadence<br>1 Quarterly<br>2 Weekly/bi-weekly structured review |

# Your Score

| Score | Classification | What it means |
|---|---|---|
| 16 to 20 | **Performance ABM** | You have a genuine operating model. Focus shifts to optimization and scale. |
| 10 to 15 | **Transitional ABM** | Solid foundations exist, but key gaps remain. Prioritize measurement and play architecture. |
| 5 to 9 | **Performative ABM** | Campaigns are running, but strategy is fragmented. Rebuild top-down before adding more channels. |
| 0 to 4 | **Lead Gen with ABM Language** | The terminology has arrived before the transformation. Start with goal alignment and ICP. |

Two notes on interpreting your results:

1. The dimensions listed here are not equally urgent to address. A strategic foundation and unified KPI framework are foundational. If they are weak, the other eight areas cannot fully compensate, no matter how proficiently they are executed.

2. A high score in technology and tooling does not substitute for low scores in strategy and measurement. A surprising number of organizations with sophisticated ABM platforms score rather poorly on this scorecard. Though a platform enables performance, it does not, on its own, create it.



# Achieving maturity with an ABX platform

For organizations with a strategic foundation in place and ready to bring their ABM operating model into a single space, an ABX platform like Demandbase is worth serious consideration; just not too soon! An ABX platform built on a weak foundation of goals and KPIs will produce sophisticated-looking confusion. But for a team that has done the earlier work, it can become a powerful unifying layer.

What Demandbase does particularly well is reduce the operational friction between teams. Intent signals, account engagement scores, journey stage, sales activity, and advertising performance all become visible in one place, organized by account. Plays can be triggered automatically based on signal thresholds, and handoffs between teams can be governed by data rather than by whoever remembered to send the email. This account-level view, otherwise assembled from several systems and a fair amount of manual effort, becomes a native feature in Demandbase.

Demandbase is excellent in this respect. The real question is whether your organization has the strategic clarity and cross-functional alignment to use it properly. If the answer is yes, or soon to become yes, this is a tool that can considerably accelerate the Performance ABM operating model. If the answer is not yet, the earlier steps in this sequence are the more productive place to begin.

# One final word

(And then we leave you to the humble truth of your scorecard.)

There's an elephant in the room. Knowing what to do and actually doing it is, in practice, worlds apart.

Any organization attempting transformation without experienced guidance can find itself at a disadvantage. In the world of Performance ABM, that may look like a cross-functional goal alignment session that turns into a pleasant conversation and a slide deck rather than a decision. It could also look like a KPI audit that identifies seventeen metrics that no one can agree to retire, or a play library that grows to forty-three entries, none of which have defined triggers. Or maybe it's a measurement framework built by the analytics team in a vacuum and subsequently ignored by sales.

This is, after all, what happens when a complex organization makes a big change. Even more so when the teams trying to run the programs are also expected to be the ones doing the transforming.

**This is also, as it happens, exactly the kind of situation The Imaginarium was built for.**

We are the home of Performance ABM. We have built these frameworks, designed these play libraries, stood up these measurement models, and led the goal-alignment conversations that others find difficult to navigate. We have done it across organizations of all sizes, industries, and various stages of ABM maturity, and we know what works and how to bring your stakeholders along for the ride.

If you want to move from performative to performance and want to have a team behind you that has done it before, done it well, and loves the whole shebang, well…

**You know where to find us.**


## The Imaginarium

**The Home of Performance ABM**

We are a B2B agency that helps marketing leaders build ABM programs that perform.

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