PROPOLIS

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Building an authentic brand

DEFINING THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BRAND SUCCESS



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SECTION 1

Branding's journey from logo to message to authenticity



PETER O'NEILL,
lead analyst,
B2B Marketing

Even as B2B marketers become more precise and targeted up and down the funnel, brand strategy is still the starting point for many companies' overall go-to-market approach. Why? Well, B2B companies that do not take an active role in crafting their brand are leaving perception up to chance. Having a defined brand allows companies to guide their narrative and the public's opinion. Branding is much more than building awareness; it establishes and maintains credibility with prospects, customers, employees and partners.

I well remember leading a multi-year project back in 2002–2005 helping the software giant SAP to understand how they won, or lost, their more important deals. For each deal, we would interview the customers about how they came to their buying decision. Every deal involved partners like business consultants and/or system integrators, and it was clearly important to SAP that we record not only what their customers were thinking, but also how those partners were communicating SAP's values and offering. Although the word 'brand' wasn't used (B2B vendors did not talk about brand then; I am not even sure if the client worked in marketing), they were really checking on their brand consistency throughout their sales channel. Simply put, were the partners telling the same story as SAP?

Branding begins with consistency of presentation across all channels of communication, whether that's digital or human, direct sales force or business partners. But it's not just the messaging about the product or service being offered; branding should also reveal a consistent **value system** that a business wants to present to the world. Not only what a company offers, but also what it believes in.

Just as in the example described above, the brand value system must be maintained by a multitude of company employees and their business partners. While we marketing experts like to talk about brand, that is not usually the terminology used to guide non-marketers in their communication or behaviour. Usually, we now talk about the customer experience and ask our colleagues/partners to provide the best possible CX in their interactions. In ensuring that our brand is consistent and distributed, we are striving to build an authentic brand – one that delivers what is promised. That, therefore, is the title and focus of this report.

With that in mind, we held extensive interviews with several senior B2B marketers to help us obtain deep insight into the topic of brand authenticity – what it means to marketers, how they approach it, the value it can deliver, and the challenges they face. These interviews serve as the basis of this report.

We'd also like to thank Darren Coleman, Propolis Hive expert for Brand & Content Strategy, who helped shape this report. Darren specialises in helping organisations to drive growth and retain relevance through brand experiences, and has been doing this for 25+ years across Europe, the Middle East and Asia Pacific. Johnson & Johnson, Faurecia, Dubai Properties, Abbot, FUJIFILM, Nikon and Orange are just some of the brands he's helped, so he brings with him a wealth of experience.

SECTION 2

Building an authentic brand: Consistency is key



DARREN COLEMAN,
Propolis Hive expert for
Brand & Content Strategy

Over the past 24–36 months, a broad spectrum of social and macroenvironmental factors have brought the notion of brand authenticity into sharper focus. During the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, the slew of 'we're in this together' campaigns accompanied by piano chords was seen by many customers as opportunistic and insincere marketing at best. Powerful movements have gained traction with mainstream media. Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+, climate change, workplace equality and diversity come to mind with the sincerity of brand's altruistic intentions frequently being called into question. In parallel, the speed and scale which information, be it fake or genuine, can be shared on social media has exposed many brands in ways not experienced before.

Collectively, these developments can make for uncomfortable conversations in the c-suite.

They also challenge B2B marketers to think about brand authenticity in frank, honest and open ways which have direct implications for how B2B brands are built and managed. Helping B2B marketers address such challenges provided the inspiration for this report.

Calling on several in-depth qualitative interviews with senior B2B marketers, this report shares practical, best practice insights that will encourage you to think about your brand's authenticity in accessible and applied ways.

The importance of consistency lies at the core of this report. This relates to strategic consistency, but also delivering against your brand promise with ruthless consistency at scale. I'd encourage you to think about this point in the context of your brand, given that building consistent memory structures is a cornerstone of brand growth.

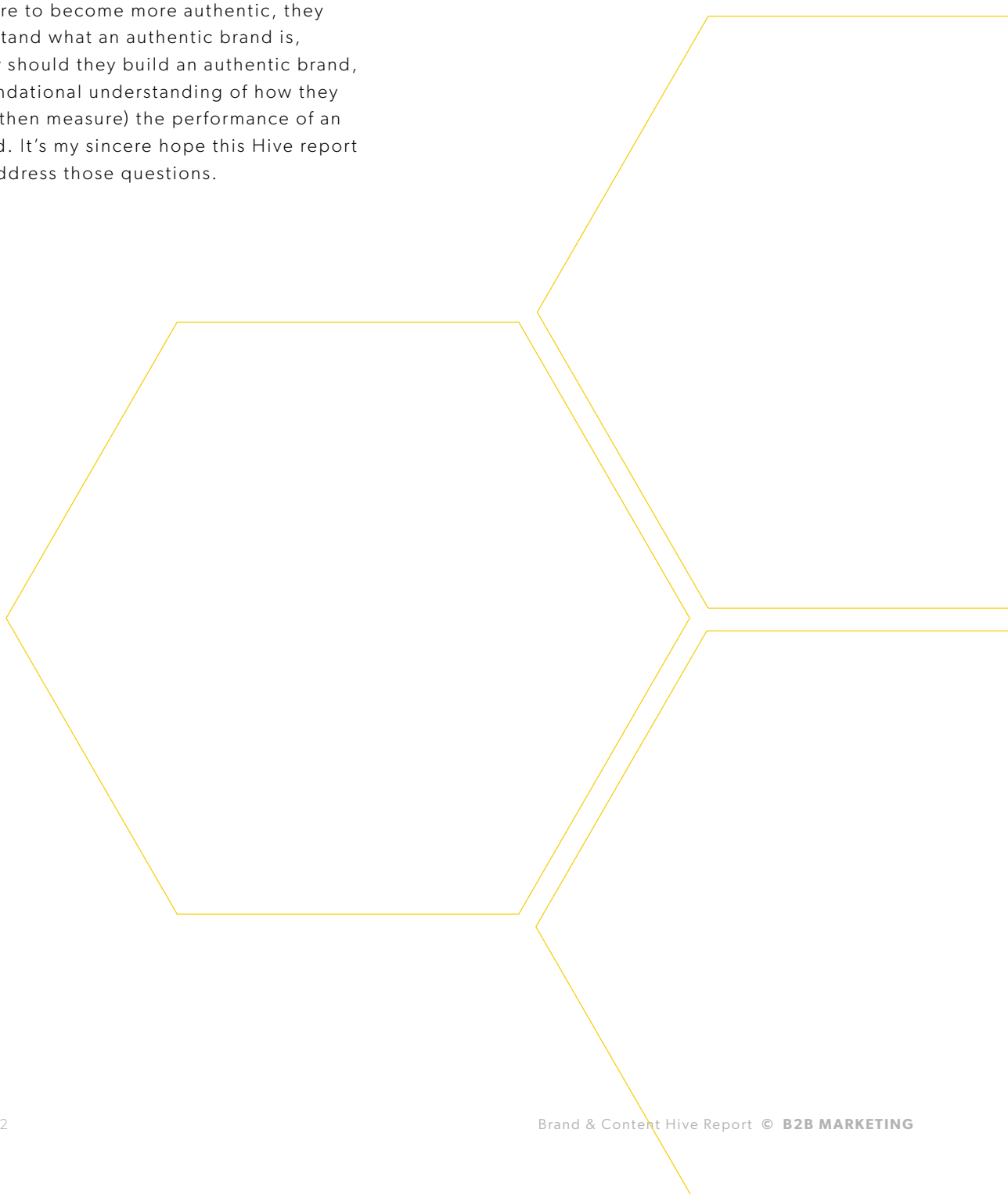
In our era of digital transformation and the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a simple brand truth often gets lost in the hullabaloo: great brands are built from within. Yes, external insight and evidence should underpin action, but the behavioural nature of B2B brands, especially B2B services brands, means the role employees play should not be underestimated. It's critical that your employees engage with, and then deliver against, your brand promise with consistency, clarity and conviction. The important role employees play in building an authentic brand is evident in this report.

As you read the report, try to reflect on how you proactively manage the authenticity of your brand. To help you get started, why not answer these questions, and then explore your answers with your teams to start or develop the conversation?

1. What is an authentic brand?
2. How would an authentic brand make our stakeholders (employees, customers, communities, investors, etc) feel?
3. How does our brand strategy and brand management work towards making our stakeholders feel this way (if at all)?

It's important to appreciate the true opportunity for you to show the authenticity of your brand lies in responding to unforeseen circumstances, challenges and even crises. Don't see these as negatives or moments to shy away from. Embrace them with full conviction. Why? It's these unplanned situations which will give your brand the chance to shine and convey a genuinely authentic feel, which cannot be planned for in a cliched or contrived way.

If B2B brands are to become more authentic, they need to understand what an authentic brand is, appreciate why should they build an authentic brand, and have a foundational understanding of how they can build (and then measure) the performance of an authentic brand. It's my sincere hope this Hive report will help you address those questions.



SECTION 3

Brand authenticity interpreted in practice

BY PETER O'NEILL

To organise the thoughts of the seven senior marketers we spoke with, we started with a question about what brand authenticity meant to them personally.

3.1. The definition varies

The definitions of 'brand authenticity' tended to reflect the most important business imperatives in the B2B sector that each executive was working in. This resulted in a variety of definitions that, at first, seem to be vastly different, or even conflicting. However, the sentiments in each definition are somewhat consistent.

As this was the opening question, all interviewees' responses are documented here. For some, brand authenticity is about ensuring an organisation delivers on its brand promise:

Annabel Rake, partner and CMO, Deloitte North & South Europe: *"Really simply put, I think brand authenticity is all about delivering on your brand promise – so your actions deliver against the words you use. This means identifying how your brand can deliver on expectations and promises, with a clear purpose at its core. A brand's purpose should be authentic – the reason that an organisation and, importantly, the people in it, switch on every morning."*

Simon Timmis, head of brand, digital and impact marketing, The IET: *"I think it's about reflecting outside what's inside. It's about being real, genuine and making sure that you're always checking that about your organisation – why you exist and who you are as a brand."*

Stefan Doering, brand strategy lead, PwC: *"What brand authenticity means to me is organisations doing what they say they'll do: walking the walk and not just talking the talk."*

> *"Brand authenticity is all about delivering on your brand promise."*
>
> **ANNABEL RAKE,**
> partner and CMO, Deloitte North & South Europe

Mike Wolfe, head of brand and marketing, Pension Insurance Corporation: *"Really understanding what your brand is, what it stands for, and being clear on how it helps your customer – that is being authentic."*

For others, their definition explores a broader meaning of brand authenticity:

Catherine Dutton, global CMO, Atos: *"To me, brand authenticity means an organisation that has consciously decided to be consistent, transparent and real across all of its messages, themes, branding programmes, campaigns and events. It also incorporates the responsibility we have to society as brands to contribute economically, socially and environmentally."*

As this report will demonstrate, brand authenticity has now begun to encompass economic, social and governance (ESG) interests, and this theme came up in several other answers.

Dave Hughes, head of marketing, Ideal: *"I think the core of a brand is around what your potential audience thinks of your offering and your company. Authenticity is probably always part of that. It has become more top-of-mind for marketers because of ESG and sustainability discussions over the last couple of years."*

Ruth Connor, VP global marketing, Kalibrate: *"I'm a massive believer in the author Simon Sinek's concept of 'Start With Why'. You then use that to guide all decisions, not just in marketing, but from a product development and even a business strategy point of view. I think, more recently, marketing teams are being given a broader remit around corporate governance and even social responsibility."*

Without trying to offer yet another definition to the above list, I will summarise this opening discussion by suggesting the following: brand authenticity is how a consumer/customer perceives a company to be faithful to what the brand is promising. Consumers, including B2B buyers, are intuitive. They notice and listen to a brand promise and set their expectations accordingly. However, if a brand contradicts itself, this could lead the customer looking elsewhere. Perceived brand authenticity, therefore, consists of the following four main elements:

- Continuity: a brand being faithful to itself.
- Credibility: a brand being true to its consumers.
- Integrity: a brand that is motivated by caring and responsibility.
- Symbolism: a brand that supports consumers in being true to themselves.



3.2. Brand authenticity is important and does bring benefits

The answers listed above demonstrate a level of enthusiasm for branding that is not necessarily found throughout their organisations. When asked if their definition was shared by everyone in their organisation, most of the senior marketers we interviewed explained that this was not really a topic of discussion in their company (for obvious reasons, the names have been left out):

- *"I'm not sure it's on people's radar."*
- *"I don't think if you asked my management team about authenticity and brand they would have thought about it at all so far."*
- *"We don't necessarily use the phrase 'brand authenticity' across the organisation."*
- *"Certainly, at a senior leadership team level, I think it's very unclear."*

Once again, despite the fact that all interviewees were convinced about the importance of brand authenticity, the reasoning for this importance differed according to organisation and sector.

Annabel Rake: *"Our brand has to be embodied by our people, the way that they deliver projects, the way that they interact with our clients, the way that they lead their teams. That's why attracting and retaining people that share our purpose and values is critical."*

Mike Wolfe: *"I think it's about the consistency. If our people internally are unclear about who we are and what we do, we risk externally confusing our customers."*

Simon Timmis: *"Somebody said to me the other day that a brand is really just the sum of its touchpoints. So, if we want to stand for something and be a consistent brand, we've got to make sure that all of our touchpoints are consistent and therefore they have to be authentic."*

When asked about the key benefits of brand authenticity, there were several clear points of view.

Some referred to the historic debate about demand generation and branding being short-term versus long-term marketing. The major benefit of brand authenticity being that you can maintain a relationship with buyers even when they are not buying at that moment.

Dave Hughes: *"The benefit of authenticity in your brand is consistency of messaging over the long-term. You need to invest in the brand over the long-term because probably only one or two percent of target buyers are ready to buy at any point in time."*

Catherine Dutton: *"Ultimately, it leads to greater loyalty, whether that's retention of core talent within your organisation, or delivering deeper relationships with customers to lead to an increase in purchases or shortening the buying cycle."*

Others stressed the risk of adverse impressions and perception. Brand authenticity, in all its facets, is needed to mitigate this risk.

Stefan Doering: *"Organisations are much more transparent than they used to be, and there's much more public scrutiny. There are more discussions, content and insights shared through social media and employee advocacy, which means it is even more important than ever to be authentic, to be real, and to have integrity."*

"The benefit of authenticity in your brand is consistency of messaging over the long-term."

DAVE HUGHES,
head of marketing, Ideal

3.3. Is it something that marketing is actively focused on?

The executives were asked about the degree of focus on this aspect of brand, both within marketing and across the wider organisation. After all, it could be taken seriously, but still seen as more of a peripheral aspect of marketing work. The answers were quite clear in this respect, reporting a strong focus in most cases.

Simon Timmis: *"It goes beyond the marketing department. We have a 2030 vision for our organisation, which is still a long way away, but it's very clear about what we stand for and on topics like sustainability. We want to help find sustainable solutions to some of the biggest challenges in the world, and we are going to align ourselves to make sure that we can do that."*

Stefan Doering: *"Authenticity is something that we aim to achieve and strive for in everything and anything that we do within marketing, but equally in all client-facing teams and all other business areas. There's no brand book saying you've got to be authentic, but inherently everything we do has that authenticity at its heart. It comes from being a purpose-led and values-driven organisation."*

Sometimes, it helps to be in a growth phase and communicate the brand objectives during the induction programmes.

Mike Wolfe: "Many new joiners have started in the last 18 months during lockdown. How we immerse them in the culture and our values has to stem from your brand."

As most of the executives have been saying, brand authenticity needs to be carried by all employees, but marketing has an explicit role in managing this process.

Catherine Dutton: *"It's something we are actively focused on across our organisation. We have a new movement across the organisation in relation to culture, which encourages the redefinition of our core values as a business and how we are authentic in everything we do. Within marketing, a big focus for us currently is our consistency in message and getting this right – so much so that we are investing in a new global marketing centre of excellence solely focused on content marketing to do this."*

3.4. Authenticity must be visible internally as well as externally

One important consideration that we explored with our interviewees is whether or not brand authenticity should be seen as purely an 'external' parameter – something that relates only to how customers and prospects perceive a business, implying that is based upon effective communication and behaviour by marketing and other customer-facing departments. Or does it need to be 'internal' as well – a brand mission that must affect all members of the organisation, not just when working with customers, but inherent in all aspects of work within the business? The overwhelming response to this choice was that it must be both. In fact, if it is not applied both externally and internally, then there is no way that the brand can be truly authentic.

Catherine Dutton: *"It absolutely needs to be internal as well. It's not something that you expose to the outside world and then do the complete opposite internally. This is not being authentic*

in approach at all. It must be embedded across your organisation, your values, your culture, your approach and ways of working."

Stefan Doering: *"Essentially, it has to start internally before you can then put it out to your client base, your other stakeholders and suppliers. You must live and breathe that authenticity internally before you can then extrapolate externally. I think it's absolutely critical that it comes from within."*

As well as being critical for ensuring brand authenticity, promoting and living the brand both internally and externally is important because the goals of brand authenticity are as much about employee recruitment and retention as they are about customer relationship.

Annabel Rake: *"If our people perceive our brand differently to our clients, then our brand purpose and mission is not truly authentic. Employees probably look at our intranet pages just as much as they look at our corporate social channels, which are more typically targeted at an external audience. We're really conscious of that as an organisation – of a kind of blurring of the lines – which makes consistency in tone and messaging critical across all of our channels."*

3.5. The clash of commercial and altruistic imperatives

Of course, B2B marketing (or even B2B business) is ultimately about return and profit – creating demand and maintaining paying customer relationships. However, the senior marketers we spoke to reported just how important ESG topics are now in brand authenticity. This might imply that that there could be a conflict between commercial and altruistic imperatives sometimes. In our interviews, therefore, we wanted to discover whether there this is challenge in their organisations when trying to maintain an authentic brand. Furthermore, if it is challenge, how are they attempting to overcome these challenges?

Fortunately, there was a consensus across the group that this problem has not appeared. A couple pointed out that having a brand authenticity strategy even helped to avoid this discussion, as the strategy made it much clearer as to why ethical imperatives are important.

Simon Timmis: *"The strong authenticity of our IET brand is exactly what makes us more attractive commercially. We go into schools and help young people excited about engineering; we've done quite a lot of work around digital poverty; and we help young people who might perhaps not have the opportunities. Those programmes are increasingly popular with our commercial partners, and they get involved and sponsor. So, having clear purpose and clear authenticity helps."*

Stefan Doering: *"The word 'altruistic' is interesting because I don't think the two things are mutually exclusive. You can be a successful commercial business which does the right thing and has a positive impact on society and in the communities that we live in."*

3.6. Has brand authenticity become more important because of Covid?

There have been many debates in marketing about the change in tone due to the pandemic. For many months, buyers were not in the mood for buying and marketers had to adjust their messaging and tone. Expectations of suppliers have changed, probably forever, in terms of communication channels and strategic considerations about a supplier. With that in mind, we asked specifically about the effect the pandemic has had on brand authenticity. The senior marketers we spoke to had the following to say on the matter:

Ruth Connor: *"Before Covid, business cultures were largely defined and reinforced by everybody being in the office together. There is that phrase 'culture eats strategy for breakfast.' Well, now 'location eats culture for breakfast' because now you've not got one, two or three offices; you've got 300 offices. If everybody is working from home and only coming in at certain times, you need to work harder than ever before to deliver that kind of employee engagement."*

Simon Timmis: *"I'm not sure change is solely down to the pandemic. There have been lots of things happening over the last three years, such as Black Lives Matter. The whole world has changed. Things like climate change visibility, protests and so on have led to people looking slightly differently at brands. Ethics is now really, really key. Generation Z are starting to become a customer base and I think they are a relatively authentic generation. Individuality is recognised and appreciated and encouraged. There's a focus on kindness a bit more than perhaps traditionally there has been."*

Annabel Rake: *"Change was happening anyway, but the pandemic accelerated it. The outbreak of the pandemic was a crisis that created a rush to safety – a rush to work with people that you trust and that you've known well over a long period of time. You are only likely to have held those relationships for a long period of time if you have confidence that the person will deliver against what they have promised – that their actions have delivered against their words."*

> *"The pandemic has brought back the importance and understanding of personal engagements and connections."*
>
> **CATHERINE DUTTON,**
> global CMO, Atos

Stefan Doering: *"Brand authenticity has always been important to us as a company. Well before the pandemic, we were purpose-led and values-driven, but I think the pandemic has thrown a major spotlight onto authenticity, on purpose, on doing the right thing, because the world was in such a crisis. Suddenly, brands and organisations were thrust into the spotlight to do their bit and help support their own people, clients and the wider community."*

Catherine Dutton: *"The pandemic has brought back the importance and understanding of personal engagements and connections. People want to work for, or work with, a brand that stands for something that's true in what they say and do, and supports others."*

3.7. The building blocks of brand authenticity

The next phase of the interviews concerned how the interviewees were able to define their brand authenticity strategy. We asked about the various aspects of building a brand, using the following stages of branding: defining its purpose and values; the value proposition; the messaging and tone; positioning; and design language.

Finally, after discussing the building blocks, we asked about how to measure brand authenticity.

3.8. Brand purpose and values

Curiously, although we are talking about brand authenticity and we have already discovered that, for most people, this includes ESG concepts, the overall concept of brand purpose remains controversial within the B2B environment. Some executives did not see the importance of brand purpose, with one saying that he is "not big on purpose." However, several did give examples of how they incorporated purpose and values into their brand authenticity strategy.

Annabel Rake: *"The breadth of our offering is one of our strengths, but it can be our Achilles Heel because there are so many themes, issues and topics we could possibly talk about. Ultimately then, it's important that we focus on the key issues that are priorities for our clients, as well as our business and teams: climate; technology for good; and inclusive growth. Those things have focused our brand purpose and value, ensuring that our purpose to make a positive impact on people, businesses and wider society, is focused on driving real change on the key issues that matter to our clients and teams."*

When it comes to your purpose and values, this is how you can ensure that your brand is authentic.

Mike Wolfe: *"I think having it clear and simple, so everyone understands it, is key. Our brand values have not changed since the firm started, and they were written by the employees, some of which still work here."*

Stefan Doering: *"You have to clearly define your purpose and ensure that purpose is true and meaningful – truly becoming part of your organisations' DNA. Once defined, it's important for every single person in the organisation to recognise that purpose and how their role and responsibilities bring that purpose to life. It can't just be a mission statement, words on a wall, or on a website. It must be felt meaningfully throughout all work that you do. That's how it becomes authentic."*

3.9. Value proposition

Again, not everybody was clear about the role of a brand value proposition. Marketers in the technology industry still tend to generate thought leadership content around the benefits of the technology itself, instead of articulating a unique value proposition which is customer-centric. The concept is more understood in the services sectors, where the following statements were made about the link between value proposition and brand authenticity.

Catherine Dutton: *"As with brand purpose and values, your value proposition needs to be a true reflection of your organisation, what you want to be known for, and how you then embed this across your organisation. Being reliable, credible and showing how you work with organisations to help them, really helps in cementing your value proposition externally and raising you brand authenticity."*

Annabel Rake: *"We have hundreds of services and each of those comes with its own value proposition, tailored to client need. However, while each might have their own particular story within its competitive set in those different service areas, at their core, they have to align to our brand. Otherwise, it isn't authentic."*

3.10. Messaging and tone of voice

Another important aspect of branding is the tone of messaging and voice chosen to represent the organisation. Consistency in language is key to ensuring brand authenticity. The interviewees agreed.

Simon Timmis: *"We want to be approachable and be the organisation that can take complicated topics and make them accessible to everybody. You don't do that by talking about yourself in the first person very formally, so it all starts there: visualising who you are and then making sure your guidelines and your structures address this."*

Ensuring consistency and the desired tone is particularly difficult if you are a channel partner for larger organisations and have to leverage their marketing work. Ideal (of which Dave Hughes is head of marketing) is an IT service provider selling and servicing products from several IT vendors.

Dave Hughes: *"We're doing a campaign being funded by a vendor, and going through their content and trying to make it reflect the way we would speak, rather than the IT sector style of very long, convoluted sentences and lots of acronyms. It kind of assumes that the customer knows nothing and that you're there to educate them. One thing we are quite big on is, when we do awareness type stuff, is that our job is not to educate the market."*

3.11. Positioning

There were not many answers specific to positioning – several executives said that this was no different than brand purpose and values. These were the most constructive comments.

Annabel Rake: *"Positioning in the market is made up of hundreds of thousands of different interactions. It becomes important to ingrain our positioning for everybody as a mindset. We had a recent meeting where we said: there'll be tips, guidance, all sorts of things that we'll talk about in the next hour and a half, but the most important thing I want you to take away is that this is a mindset and you have to reflect that before you do anything."*

Simon Timmis: *"It's about knowing where and what we are, what makes us special and what we stand for and then working out how that's best reflected in the market. And it's making sure that we have checks in place to make sure that we're being authentic in what we do and where we position ourselves."*

Catherine Dutton: *"For brand authenticity, consistency is key. Your brand should come to life through external promotion that positions your organisation in the market. The external promotion is a true reflection on your brand purpose and values, whether it be written content, social media posts, images, stories and spokespeople for your organisation. The human connection element here is paramount. Whether it's account teams working with clients, thought leaders sharing insight with journalists or our innovators delivering new R&D – being able to show the people behind our business really brings our brand authenticity through."*

3.12. Design language

Design language is the visual aspect of a brand – colours, logos, fonts and all the rest of it. Out of interest, we asked if it is possible to ensure any degree of brand authenticity when it comes to design language, but received few answers. However, the importance of accessibility came up in this context. If your brand promises to be inclusive, for instance, then perhaps this topic should be well noted.

Annabel Rake: *"If we are a brand that talks about inclusive growth and we want to drive inclusion, then we must think about the accessibility of what we're offering. For example, we need to be mindful of simple things like alt text on images. If we do a podcast, we must provide a script too, as we can't just expect all people to listen to it. Accessibility in all forms is key."*

Again, Dave Hughes, as head of marketing at Ideal, an IT service provider selling and servicing products from several IT vendors, also raised an issue in this context.

Dave Hughes: *"A constant problem for us is working with vendors who are US-based who assume that what's authentic in the US works the same for the rest of the world. We won an award recently, and the vendor's ceremony had a DJ involved of all things. It just came out of nowhere, and it's like: 'Look at us! Admire us, because we're fun! We're empathetic to your situation!' But that whole kind of very-coached stuff does not work in our sectors."*

> *"If we are a brand that talks about inclusive growth and we want to drive inclusion, then we must think about the accessibility of what we're offering"*
>
> **ANNABEL RAKE,**
> partner and CMO, Deloitte
> North & South Europe

3.13. Can brand authenticity be measured?

One important question to consider is whether brand authenticity is something that can be actively measure or optimised. Perhaps it is just a mindset. Also, if you can measure it, what metrics should or could be used? Most of the executives had something to say on this topic, and it seems there are many marketing metrics that can provide guidance on brand authenticity.

Ruth Connor: *"If you measure customer satisfaction through surveys like NPS, you can learn quite a lot about how well you customers believe you are delivering on your brand promise. Customer touchpoints such as regular account meetings, product user groups, client advisory boards and customer conferences all provide opportunities to gather qualitative feedback on brand authenticity."*

Simon Timmis: *"You can measure yourselves internally on how you are demonstrating the behaviours required for brand authenticity. We have those clear definitions of our behaviour, our brand personalities, who we are and other components of authenticity. So, we ask our members and customers every year how they would describe us based upon these things. One of the little things that is relevant is how you deal with complaints."*

Stefan Doering: *"Authenticity can be measured to some extent within your brand perception metrics, depending on the specific questions asked in your brand tracking studies. There are also some independent reports, such as brand trust barometers, with their own methodologies to measure how clients perceive brands and their trustworthiness. These are all proxies for authenticity to some extent. They are a helpful guide in terms of a pulse check, but I think if you're being authentic as a brand, you have to really self-evaluate and keep yourself in check. You should pretty much know if your brand is being authentic or not."*

Mike Wolfe: *"We don't have a brand authenticity measure, but we have a brand perception measure and we measure if that's positive or negative. Those metrics should all be going in the right direction if you're building your brand in a long-term and a sustainable way. At PIC, we strive to create social value by investing in the UK economy in areas such as social housing, renewable energy and now in the private rental sector."*

Annabel Rake: *"You can measure it in certain ways – as part of your brand tracking programme, for example. Asking questions such as 'do you think this brand is authentic?' may not yield tangible insights, but asking questions like 'do you trust this brand to deliver for you?' is eye-opening. In internal surveys, we also ask questions around 'do you understand the purpose that we have as an organisation?' and 'do you feel that you can live that every day?' to gauge the breadth of understanding for our brand authenticity among our teams. Even though it doesn't have the words 'brand authenticity' in it, we are getting valuable feedback on our brand authenticity."*

SECTION 4

Competency assessment framework

The following framework seeks to define the different stages of Brand & Content Strategy maturity, and map them against different criteria required for success. A framework such as this is being created for all eight Propolis Hives and competency areas.

This framework is a flat or static version of the interactive Competency Assessment Programme, which is part of your Propolis membership. This assessment is designed to help you determine your specific level of competency against these criteria, compare them against other Propolis members and highlight areas to focus on for improvement.

If you've not taken your Competency Assessment yet, please contact your account manager or Propolis customer success manager.



PROPOLIS

BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The following framework seeks to define the different stages of brand and content strategy maturity, and map them against different criteria required for success. A framework such as this is being created for all eight Propolis Hives and competency areas.

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BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

PART 1. BRAND AND PRODUCT MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION	1. BUILDING	2. DEVELOPING	3. PERFORMING	4. IMPROVING	5. EXCELLING
Is the messaging framework aligned with the brand vision, mission and values?	The messaging framework is separate, or there is confusion around what the vision, mission and values are.	Marketing understands and is implementing the vision, mission and values into its messaging framework.	Marketing is rolling out vision-aligned messaging across the customer journey.	The messaging framework is implemented across the organisation and engagement is measured and reviewed annually.	The messaging framework is continually communicated, implemented, measured and adapted by all internal and external stakeholders.
Is the product messaging aligned with the brand vision, mission and values?	Product messaging is managed outside of marketing, or marketing simply supports it in terms of brand identity.	The marketing and product teams collaborate on product branding and messaging.	Product branding and messaging are aligned to the brand vision, mission and values.	Marketing regularly reviews product messaging to ensure coherent portfolio and clear competitive differentiation.	Product messaging is fully integrated in the overall messaging framework.

BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

PART 2. BRAND AND CONTENT GOVERNANCE

BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION	1. BUILDING	2. DEVELOPING	3. PERFORMING	4. IMPROVING	5. EXCELLING
How is brand identity managed?	Marketing has a static set of guidelines on the use of logos/colours/ typography, but these are not shared across the company, so it is not widely followed.	Marketing has started to consolidate brand guidelines/assets into a central repository and to audit existing brand assets across the company.	The audit has been completed with guidelines and assets rolled out across internal and external stakeholders.	Templates for all types of content (marketing and other), which can be dynamically customised and go through a documented approval flow are being added to a central repository.	The central repository is being integrated with other internal systems (e.g. DAM, CRM, workflow), plus external systems if necessary.
How is content aligned with brand identity and messaging?	Marketing-created content usually follows brand guidelines, but not necessarily messaging. There is little control over content created elsewhere.	Template messaging (boilerplates) are being developed and existing content audited and edited to align.	Customisable content and templates are consolidated into a central repository opened to teams outside marketing. New content design goes through marketing approval.	Messaging framework, editorial guidelines and tone of voice are all documented and implemented. New content goes through approval flow for subject matter, as well as design.	Marketing is able to track and measure in real-time how and by whom content is consumed to inform continuous planning, compliance and internal stakeholder education.

BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

PART 3. BRAND CONTENT CREATION AND MAINTENANCE

BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION	1. BUILDING	2. DEVELOPING	3. PERFORMING	4. IMPROVING	5. EXCELLING
How is content planned?	Marketing has started to create a content calendar to coordinate internal and external authors, but is not yet sharing it outside of the team.	Planning is more structured with better coordination with the commercial teams. Marketing is working to include other teams' requests for content on an ad-hoc basis.	Marketing is working towards a shared editorial calendar aligned to core brand messaging and personas.	Content plans are mostly cross-functional and in line with company objectives, informed by customer/market research or past performance.	There is a cross-functional editorial team developing/deploying an over-arching annual plan in an agile methodology to ensure ability to pivot quickly if required.
How is content produced?	Content is mainly produced to support the sales effort and marketing is working to create a briefing/feedback loop with sales.	Marketing is working to align content with core brand messaging, or has introduced market/customer research to inform content production.	Marketing is producing content for other departments based on a documented process to ensure consistent message and design. There may be gaps (e.g. in some geographies or for some departments).	Content is produced cross-functionally and work is underway to repurpose content for multiple channels or personalise content (e.g. by region, persona or buying stage).	Plans and priorities are accessible centrally and all outside requests are assessed/prioritised/de-prioritised based on company objectives and resource availability.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

PART 3. BRAND CONTENT CREATION AND MAINTENANCE *(CONTINUED)*

BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION	1. BUILDING	2. DEVELOPING	3. PERFORMING	4. IMPROVING	5. EXCELLING
How is content distributed?	Still mainly a 'post and forget' process, with marketing building up channels, including: website, social media, blog, nurture or direct marketing programmes.	Content is posted on an increasing number of channels, including intranet. Marketing is trying to switch from emailing content ad-hoc towards a self-serve model.	Work has started to automate the distribution of content across channels and internal systems (e.g. sales enablement platform).	Marketing has automated distribution on most external and internal channels and is evaluating/testing new ones, as well as optimising current ones.	Marketing is integrating new channels and optimising internally-stored content with searchable repository and functionality, such as recommendations and flagging out-of-date content.
How is content evaluated?	The team is in the process of building baseline metrics, not necessarily linked to revenue or not widely shared.	Baseline metrics are regularly shared and work is underway on better alignment (to revenue or buying stage) and to evaluate content gaps/ outdated content.	Performance is measured for some campaigns and paid media, but not consistently or across all geographies. More work required on speeding up analysis and implementing tweaks.	Externally posted content is now audited, performance is tracked and metrics aligned to revenue are shared.	Marketing is working cross-functionally to ensure metrics are consistent and accessible in real-time by multiple teams through dashboards.

BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

PART 4. STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH AND VALIDATION

BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION	1. BUILDING	2. DEVELOPING	3. PERFORMING	4. IMPROVING	5. EXCELLING
How are target audiences defined and managed?	The target audiences are not defined, or they are roughly aligned to our sales target markets.	Marketing is working closely with sales, using a common definition of buying stages, base metrics and customer definitions.	Personas are developed to include behaviour, needs, buying stages and preferred channels, and are ranked by priority and alignment to objectives.	Marketing is beginning to work with stakeholders outside of sales to build additional audiences, e.g. customer service, channel partners, influencers, HR and talent recruitment.	With audiences continuously defined and reviewed, marketing prioritises engagement plans and co-creates with other departments (e.g. HR, CSR, training and development).

BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

PART 5. CONTENT MARKETING RESOURCES AND PROCESSES

BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION	1. BUILDING	2. DEVELOPING	3. PERFORMING	4. IMPROVING	5. EXCELLING
How is brand management resourced?	Marketing owns the brand assets and has a roster of specialist external agencies or freelancers to create/manage/distribute assets and fulfil requests from other departments, including regional marketing teams.	Brand management is taken increasingly in-house, relying on specialist team members to manage (e.g. designer), with HQ working to control assets creation and distribution centrally.	A central content team manages an increasing range of brand-specific requests and works to introduce more rigorous approval and governance processes shared with regional teams or supporting third-party agencies and software.	There is a dedicated resource for brand management and governance across the whole organisation and supporting systems are being introduced (e.g. workflow management, DAM systems).	The dedicated specialist brand management team has power to influence and direct core brand strategy and compliance at senior level, including in case of M&A or product development.
How is content management resourced?	The marketing team produces content on an ad-hoc basis using the resources available or by hiring external resources if necessary.	Specialist skills are identified in the marketing team (e.g. copywriting, design, social media) and there is a list of agencies/ freelancers for specialist work (e.g. video).	There is a central, dedicated content team with most specialisms, but regional teams can opt to hire satellite agencies to the central team's 'lead' agency.	Marketing has a separate, dedicated and adequately-funded (sometimes by multiple departments) content team, plus a separate brand/governance team with power of enforcement. Regional teams align with the central team.	The content team is a globally-distributed organsation with specialism across sub-brands, product lines, lines of business and channels, and is supported by a network of global lead agencies with regional presence.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

PART 5. CONTENT MARKETING RESOURCES AND PROCESSES *(CONTINUED)*

BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION	1. BUILDING	2. DEVELOPING	3. PERFORMING	4. IMPROVING	5. EXCELLING
What processes and workflows support brand and content management?	Marketing uses some workflows and processes, but they are neither documented nor shared.	There is some consolidation of assets and content across teams or regions. Some processes are documented, but still need to be shared more widely and consistently adopted.	Most workflows and process are now documented, published and shared with other teams. Work is starting on automating manual workflows or improving inconsistent or irregular reporting.	There are dedicated resources, and some automation, to keep pace with increasingly complex process and workflows (e.g. aligning taxonomies, meeting data governance requirements).	There are dashboards and reports which analyse performance and customer reports/data sets available. Workflows are automated, used by all teams and regularly reviewed.
What technology supports brand and content management?	Marketing has started to dedupe and consolidate content and assets stored on various servers or individual devices, but these are manual processes.	There are one, or more, off-the-shelf systems which host content and assets, and work is planned on integrating them.	Marketing and IT are collaborating to centralise and integrate the off-the-shelf systems with some customisation.	Work continues to build and integrate a multi-layered brand and content management stack, with some customisation as requirements scale or become more sophisticated.	A dedicated/specialist internal resource manages a fully-tailored and integrated brand and content management tech stack.

SECTION 5

Words of wisdom from Sue Mizera



SUE MIZERA,
co-founder, TorchFish, and Propolis Hive ambassador for Brand & Content Strategy

Peter: **There is a lot of discussion currently around the optimal spending mix between brand work and lead gen, or, as the Professors Field and Binet call it, activation work. Do you think this relationship is changing at the moment and, if so, why?**

Sue: Professors Field and Binet suggest a 50/50 balance (of unspecified criteria) between brand and activation in B2B (60/40 in B2C). It is very tempting – in fact, it's practically human nature – to want to direct marketing efforts towards activation as a primary 'sales trigger.' Activation is quick, arguably easier and more straightforward, immediate, and can be personalised, with ROI that is highly trackable and measurable. All the things brand is not.

At the same time, brand is 'sticky.' It is built in the heart, lives in the soul, and creates lasting memory structures in the minds of future buyers for when they focus on buying. Brands build "competitive moats filled with poisonous alligators," as Field and Binet add with dramatic flourish, because brands cannot be copied and trademarks are legally protected. Brands drive profitability from increased pricing, whereas activation and sales leads tend to reduce price. Indeed, your sales force is already focused on short-term sales to capture already-existing demand, whereas brand-building is what actually generates demand, both long and short-term. And what if Field and Binet are correct, and customers begin to take control of their own buying journeys, with activation reduced in purpose? Marketing will necessarily default to branding for differentiation and selling, they conclude, and for this reason encourage marketers to "switch sides even now" as they believe brand "will win by the end of the decade."

My question, marketers: why ever would you not build your brand? And, why ever would you choose one or the other, when brand and activation both have their place in a truly successful marketing programme? In my view, they are complementary 'tools in the kit' that address our human need for relationships, higher purpose, connections and community; and for timely reminders and prompts to act and engage with that relationship.

Peter: **In this report, we have focused on how to build an authentic brand. Are there other aspects of brand that will need particular attention from B2B marketers in 2022 and what are they?**

Sue: In my view, the critical stand-off for B2B in the near future is not so much 'brand versus activation', but rather 'brand versus CRM or martech.' Both brand and martech are pathways to the holy grail of marketing – customer intimacy. Both speak the same language of customer experiences, customer centricity and customer journeys. Both seek to know what the customer wants before they know it themselves. Yes, both have their own proponents and rare is the marketer who correlates findings across these disciplines, or who even sees the need to do so. in my view, however, the real juxtaposition

in the coming years is not even 'brand versus martech', or brand in lieu of martech, but rather brand and martech. I firmly believe brand and martech should become BFFs (and fast), although today this relationship is effectively absent.

Robustly building the brand – an authentic brand – has intrinsic values of its own, while a differentiated, authentic brand can help martech ensure direction, purpose and results. In my view, brand can even help martech excel! And this, not least, because martech and data analysis are so often cited for focusing on (sterile, robotic) technology rather than on the human elements, while great brands swim in humanity. And I would suggest it is a united front of brand and martech that will be the best approach when AI comes knocking at both their doors. Stay tuned!

Peter: **The name of this Hive is, of course, 'Brand & Content Strategy.' How would you describe the link between brand strategy and content strategy?**

Sue: Imagine circles or rings on the water. Brand strategy is the centre, while content strategy and enactments are all the ensuing rings that enhance, promote, articulate, support and emanate from that centre. There should be an elegance, an alignment, even a natural integration and mirrored reflection among all the rings. Truly authentic brand strategy, which drives vision, mission, core values, promises and positioning, is best served by a formal content marketing strategy that specifies how content will drive brand strategy; how it will support business goals; and, above all, how it will address customers' points of view. Superior content effectively brings to life the role and significance of the authentic brand in the customer's world. Typical content objectives include driving awareness, thought leadership, traffic and sales through a myriad of enactment and vehicle-types, from e-books to blogs to videos to social media marketing. A formalised content strategy ensures each enactment is strategic, not just one in a series of a unrelated tactics (a common failing).

SECTION 6

Recommendations

The last 12 months have shone a new light on what the somewhat amorphous concept of brand really means to a B2B organisation. Sure, we still need to be looking at how many people are aware of our company and how many people are considering our offering, and helping them along that process. But now we also need to consider the full customer experience that we provide – the brand authenticity.

As we have documented in this report, we now care about what we are doing to meaningfully help customers, or, perhaps, what we are doing for the greater good.

It is no longer enough to just have great products and services – you have to build an emotional connection with the brand, built upon trust and values. This means getting closer to the customer, through personalisation, bringing your brand to life, and making that emotional connection.

In a digital-first approach of buying and selling, trying to differentiate your brand is difficult. We anticipate that, in 2022, the majority of B2B organisations will take the time to conduct a comprehensive brand audit across their company and ecosystem. This will be seen as essential to assessing the future health of the business.

In managing their brands for the future, most B2B marketing organisations will need to consider the following:

- Extensive customer research to understand their brand impact and authenticity.
- New customer success metrics around engagement and loyalty.
- Introducing brand management technology to maintain authenticity in all content.
- Educating themselves, their colleagues and business partners about the power of brand authenticity.

SECTION 7

The importance of humanising B2B



PAUL CASH,
CEO and founder,
Rooster Punk

The subject of brand authenticity fascinates me. Although the term hasn't been widely used until recently, particularly in B2B circles, as a general principle it's been around forever. Some businesses have instinctively understood and lived by it without necessarily articulating it as a conscious objective. They offer experiences that build trust and loyalty, stay true to a clear purpose, and keep their people and their marketing on message.

Patagonia springs to mind as a shining example. But in B2B, brands have some catching up to do. It's long been our mission at Rooster Punk to 'humanise' B2B marketing, moving up the ladder from feature and benefit-led messaging to connect with prospects on an emotional level. B2B decision-makers don't just want to buy from you, they want to buy into you. And authenticity is absolutely crucial to that.

But what exactly does 'brand authenticity' mean? This report shows clearly that there are many ways to define this slightly nebulous term. To me, though, it's about being real – even if that means occasionally admitting to weaknesses or mistakes. It's about being likable – which isn't necessarily the same as being nice. It's about knowing your purpose, standing for something, and staying ruthlessly true to it. And, as this report describes, it's about being consistent.

"It's about being likeable – which isn't necessarily the same as being nice. It's about knowing your purpose, standing for something, and staying ruthlessly true to it. And, as this report describes, it's about being consistent."

That consistency must be systemic: delivered throughout your culture, your processes and your actions. An authentic brand can't be created by marketing teams and their agencies alone. What we can do, though, is work together to deliver messaging, campaigns and branding that help – in their content, style and tone – to build and protect perceptions of your brand authenticity. And you do need to put yourself out there if you want to be seen as authentic. We've all grown up in the information age, and we expect to be able to get a feel for a brand's point of view in a few clicks. You can't be seen as authentic if you're a closed book: it makes people mistrustful.

A good agency will always know the value of authenticity in marketing. When Rooster Punk works with clients, especially in helping them define and articulate their brand story, our job is to seek out the truth and tell it well (and by well, we mean in ways that resonate emotionally with the audience – because it's a fact that B2B buying decisions are made on emotion first, then backed up with facts). By telling the truth well, you're not only being authentic in a literal sense, you're also creating branding and campaigns that connect seamlessly to your purpose. And that makes it far easier to deliver that all-important consistency: keeping your people on message and the other elements of authenticity – culture, processes and actions – on point.

One piece of advice I'd offer is to keep things as simple as possible. Authenticity could be boiled down to having a purpose and sticking to it. But unless you are a smallish, founder-led business, the chances are your purpose isn't crystal clear and easily actionable to everyone in your organisation. So your main job – either internally, or with help from outside – is to define your purpose and get it firmly embedded throughout your business and your agency partners. Once everyone's telling the same story, living by the same principles, and working towards the same purpose in everything they do – the battle for brand authenticity is already won.



About B2B Marketing and Rooster Punk

Powered by the community, for the community.

Established in 2004, B2B Marketing is now the number one go-to resource for B2B marketers across the globe.

Right from the start, we had a clear mission that remains as strong and clear today: to provide marketers at business brands with the tools, insight and inspiration they need to grow and succeed – as both individuals and businesses.

To do this, we need to continually evolve to make sure we are delivering what you need.

This is why Propolis was born – our community for B2B marketers.

We're proud to serve as the focal point for the B2B marketing sector, and to be a force for greater connectivity, enabling marketers and leaders to share experiences and learn from one another.

Rooster Punk is an award-winning B2B agency that delivers transformational growth through emotionally resonant branding, content and campaigns. Simply put, people don't just want to buy from companies anymore, they want to buy into them. It's this human truth that helped us create an agency that pushes B2B marketing somewhere new, and recognises the human being in all of us. We call it #HumanizingB2B. Behind our logo, you will find a passionate bunch of storytellers, creatives, strategists and technologists. We're all fired up by the same purpose: to help humanize B2B marketing.

Find out more at **roosterpunk.com**

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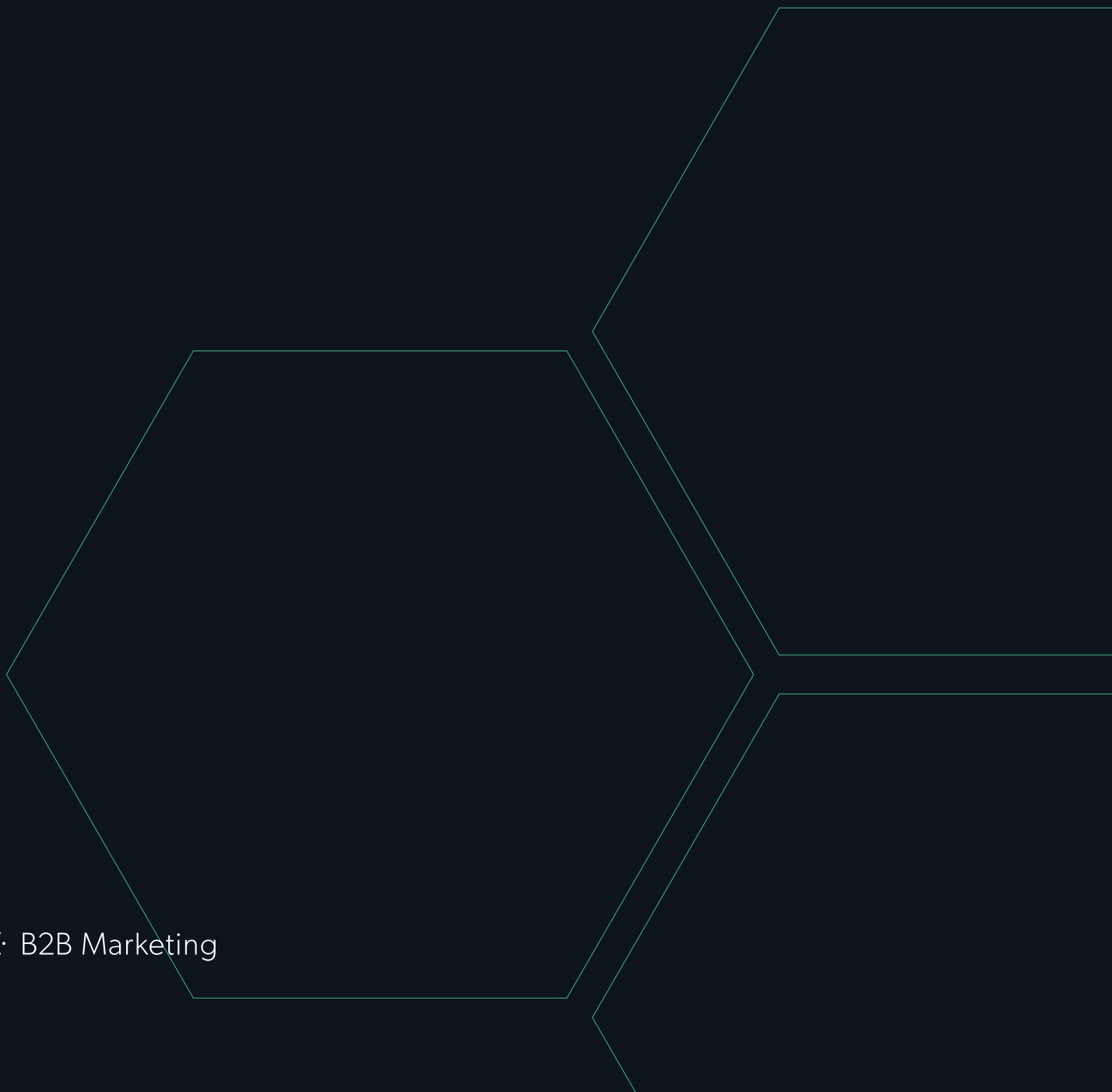
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