

PROPOLIS
FROM B2B MARKETING

Demand Gen & ABM Practitioners Edition

Realise your potential:

Your guide to becoming the commercial marketer your business needs, and your future demands

b2bmarketing.net/propolis

SECTION ONE

Your moment to take the wheel (or get in the backseat)

SECTION TWO

What is a commercial marketer?

SECTION THREE

So, how do I become a commercial marketer?

3.1. The five key areas you must be close to

3.2. The six skills you need

3.3. Quick tips for putting these skills into action

SECTION FOUR

The core competencies you need to be a strong B2B marketing leader

4.1. What stops us from becoming better leaders?

4.2. What can make us better leaders?

4.3. Core competencies matter for everyone

4.4. Ok, but how does this drive results?

SECTION FIVE

Conclusion? We **have** to become commercial marketers

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the contributions of our Propolis Experts: Shane Redding; Scott Stockwell; and Georgie Gilmore.







Foreword

If you're a Head of Demand Gen, ABM Manager, or Digital Marketing Manager at a tech company, you already know the pressure. You're expected to fill the pipeline, run multi-channel programs, orchestrate buying group engagement across 20 or more stakeholders, and still find time to prove that every dollar you spend is moving the commercial needle, usually to a senior stakeholder who wants cleaner attribution and faster results.

The challenge isn't a lack of execution capability. It's a commercial credibility problem. Demand gen and ABM teams speak in MQLs, intent signals, and influenced pipeline. The board speaks in revenue, margin, and growth. And in complex enterprise sales cycles that stretch 9, 12, sometimes 18 months, making that connection clearly enough to protect your budget and grow your programs is no easy task.

This guide is written for you. The commercial marketer framework won't just help you become a more effective practitioner, it will give you the tools to demonstrate ROI in terms that matter to the business, build programs that hold up under scrutiny, and earn your place in the strategic conversation, not just the tactical one.

Your moment to take the wheel (or get in the backseat)

"In these uncertain times…"

In 2020, every blog and whitepaper seemed to start with these words – and for good reason. That said, it wasn't long until they became a meme.

Starting a blog with the words "In these uncertain times" became an instant giveaway that you were in for the mildest of takes – a blog adding nothing new to the conversation and just repeating the same old thing you'd already seen five times that morning.

Unfortunately, I've been left with no choice but to use these forbidden words once more.

In these uncertain times, the world of business has been shaken to its core. You might not feel the effects immediately. In fact, by the time you *do* feel the economic effects, the initial cause may have been lost to the endless stream of new *news*. Make no mistake, however, these past six months have seen disruption to a geopolitical system that has created the markets we have all operated within since the mid-20th Century.

Regardless of your political position, it would be hard to argue that the alliances and guarantees that have tied nations and markets together have been shaken this past six months. Now, has this disruption caused irreparable damage to the system? I don't know. That in itself is not the problem. The problem is: *no one knows*. That sows uncertainty, which, as any economics student will tell you, is bad for business.

We believe there's a more sophisticated approach to driving value for your business and, in the process, proving your own value as a marketer – one that doesn't ignore the greater, long-term value we can bring as B2B marketers, and one that will help you not just ride out this latest economic storm, but also set you up for a long, secure and fulfilling career.



David Rowlands,
Head of Product,
Propolis

The solution is to become what we've defined as a *commercial marketer.*

By bringing the B2B marketing community together through our Propolis membership and working with our independent Experts, we've created a model of what a commercial marketer looks like; the areas you need to be close to; the skills you need; the challenges you're likely to face; how to overcome those challenges; and the tools you need.

The commercial marketer is more than a role – it's a movement redefining the impact of marketing. These are strategic change agents who fuse insight, financial acumen, and agile thinking to unlock business growth. They put customer understanding at the core, break out of traditional silos, and elevate marketing from a function to a force. By aligning strategy with commercial outcomes, they don't just drive results – they shape the future of business.

So, let's get into it.

PROPOLIS
FROM B2B MARKETING

COMMERCIAL MARKETER MANIFESTO

We believe that...

The time is now for B2B Marketers

...to step up as strategic leaders, reclaim their time, exert their influence, and irrefutably prove their impact!

We are committed to helping B2B marketers achieve this by helping them become commercial marketers – marketers who can build and execute commercially effective strategies through their mastery of **six key skills:**

- **Market insight**
- **Strategic thinking**
- **Financial acumen**
- **Agile decision-making**
- **Analytical thinking**
- **Communication & influence**

What is a commercial marketer?

Let's get straight to the point. A commercial marketer:

- Thinks strategically and has the marketing skills to drive measurable business growth.
- Thinks about the wider business objectives first and foremost, and marketing tactics and specialisms second.
- Is not primarily occupied by achieving tactical wins, or results in one isolated metric.



To many, this may be self-evident. Of course B2B marketers are there to drive measurable growth. If we're not, why are we here in the first place!?

Self-evident though this may be, the fact is that B2B marketers struggle to operate as commercial marketers. To prove the point, we analysed the results of hundreds of hours of conversations with members of our B2B marketing community, Propolis, using AI. The single biggest overarching challenge B2B marketing leaders are facing? According to Propolis AI:



Proving and communicating the commercial impact of marketing to non-marketing stakeholders – especially in large or complex organisations. Across the conversations, B2B marketing leaders all mentioned pressure to demonstrate marketing's value to the business, shift perceptions from a 'service function' to a 'business driver' and directly link marketing investments to outcomes like revenue, growth or pipeline.

The challenge connects to several root causes:

- *Attribution is difficult in complex, long-cycle sales environments.*
- *There's often a knowledge or skill gap between commercial expectations and actual marketing activity, especially after acquisitions or internal restructuring.*
- *Marketing leaders have to 'do more with less' and justify every spend amid economic uncertainty.*
- *Many marketers still face uneven capability with teams, uneven adoption of key frameworks like ABM, and pressure to modernise while maintaining proven results.*

Essentially, the CMO and senior marketers are consistently fighting to make marketing's impact visible and respected at the top table, while managing rapid changes in technology, resourcing and skills. Everything else – alignment, tech, skills and tactics – feeds into or stems from that business value conversation.



Couldn't have said it better myself.

So, how do I become a commercial marketer?

Let's be clear, every region, sector and organisation is going to have its own specific issues, which may require more tailored support. However, we believe there are five key market and business areas that a commercial marketer should be close to, and six key skills that they should possess. If you're on top of both of these sets, you should be in good shape to be a commercial marketer.

3.1. The five key areas you must be close to

As you work through the questions in each area below, think about where you stand as a demand gen or ABM practitioner. How closely are your programs tied to revenue targets? Do you have visibility of the full buying group, or are you optimizing for a handful of contacts while the real decision-makers remain dark? Are you setting the account engagement strategy, or reacting to what sales drops in your lap? The gaps you identify will show you where to sharpen your focus, and where to start having more commercially grounded conversations with your leadership team.

These areas are as follows:



Business and strategy
(why you're trading)



Product and portfolio
(what you're trading)



Customers, community and team
(who you're serving)



Market, industry and profession
(where you're trading)

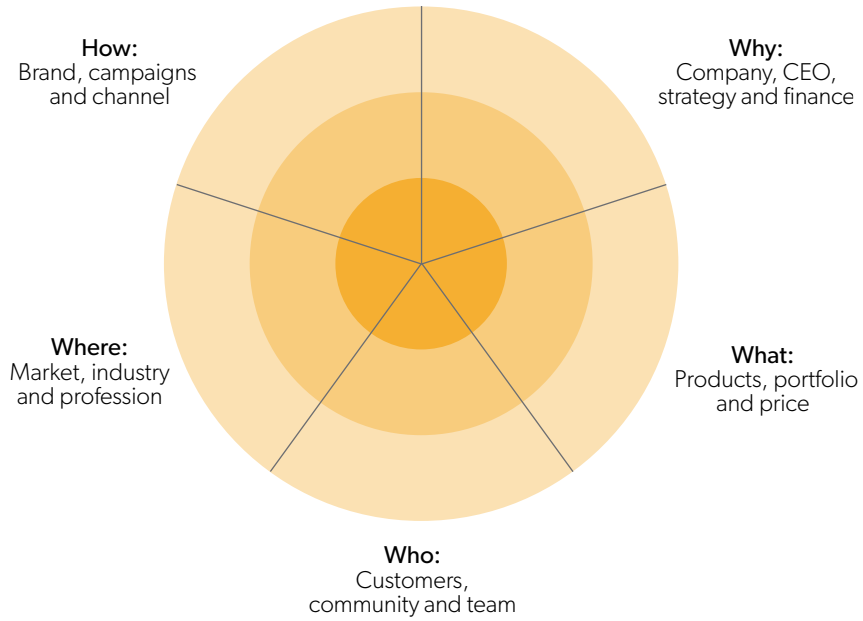


Brand, campaigns and channels
(how you're trading)

As a quick exercise to establish how close you are to these areas as a marketing leader, ask yourself the following questions, and map your results onto the chart on page 10.

Business strategy (why you're trading)	1 (inner ring)	2 (middle ring)	3 (outer ring)
How closely do you work with your CEO and CFO?	Closely	Moderately	Not at all
Does marketing have a seat at the board table?	Always	By invite/request	Never
What degree of control do you have for the marketing strategy?	70–100%	40–69%	Less than 39%
Product and portfolio (what you're selling)			
Do you formally input into product/service development?	Yes	Only informally	Not at all
Do you input into product pricing?	Yes	Only informally	Not at all
Do you formally inform your company portfolio?	Yes	Only informally	Not at all
Customers, community and team (who you're serving)			
How frequently do you spend time with customers?	Frequently	Infrequently	Not at all
How connected are you with customer communities?	Very	Somewhat	Not at all
How skilled/capable is your marketing team?	Strong	Average	Poor
Market, industry and profession (where you're trading)			
How much insight do you have on your market?	Outstanding	Adequate	Inadequate
How much insight do you have on your industry(ies)?	Outstanding	Adequate	Inadequate
How engaged are you with your profession?	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all
Brand, campaigns and channel (how you're trading)			
Do you set the brand and campaign strategy and balance?	Yes, 100%	Partially, others involved	Not at all
How closely do you work with sales / ABM?	Very	Moderately	Not at all
How involved are you with channel strategy?	Very	Moderately	Not at all

Proximity



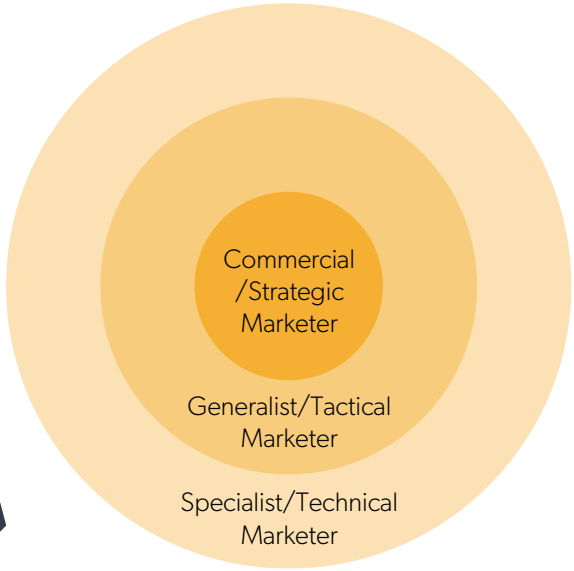
Credit: Shane Redding, Scott Stockwell and Georgie Gilmore, *Propolis Experts*

If you're mostly scoring in the outer ring, you're a technical/specialist marketer.

If you're mostly scoring in the middle ring, you're a generalist/tactical marketer.

If you're mostly scoring in the centre ring, you've very close to the C-suite and you're a commercial marketer.

Profile



Propolis is here to support you in getting into the centre ring in each of the marketing areas.

3.2. The six skills you need

If you're in touch with those five areas, you should be in a great place to start thinking about what's going to serve the business first and foremost. However, in order to actually put a plan in place, you'll also need the ability to execute. With that in mind, these are the skills we believe commercial marketers need to act. They're the skills that will get you into the centre circle in the model on the previous page – where commercial marketers live.

These six skills are as critical for demand gen and ABM practitioners as they are for any B2B marketer, but at this level, the stakes are tangible and immediate. Market insight means knowing which accounts are genuinely in-market and why, not just who's clicked an ad. Financial acumen means understanding the pipeline contribution and cost-per-opportunity behind every program, so you can defend your spend and make the case for more. Strategic thinking means building an ABM or demand gen strategy that maps directly to the accounts, personas, and buying stages that matter most to the business. And communication & influence means translating campaign performance into commercial language that gets buy-in from sales, leadership, and the CFO alike.

The skills breakdown below applies to all B2B marketers, but the questions below each skill are particularly relevant for those running demand gen and ABM programs. As you read through each one, consider where you're genuinely strong, and where closing the gap could have the biggest impact on your ability to demonstrate ROI and influence pipeline in long, complex buying cycles.

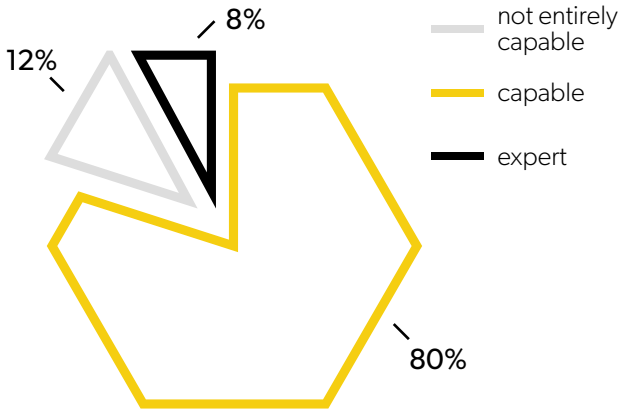
Skill number 1: Market Insight

By 'market insight', we mean understanding how your market works, and staying informed about industry trends and influences, whether those are regulatory, economic, social, technological, cultural or geographic.

Essentially, this means having a deep understanding of your target market, including market sizing, addressable market opportunity and customer insights/profiles. It also means having the ability to analyse customer strategies, strengths, weaknesses, market share and positioning to help understand the competitive landscape, in order to inform your strategy. In short? It's critical that you know about the given world you're operating within.

In a poll of Propolis members, we discovered that just 8% of our community feel they're 'an expert' in this area. The vast majority (80%) claim that they're 'capable', with the remaining 12% rather worryingly saying that they're either 'not entirely capable' or that they 'don't know how to do this at all'. Clearly, most marketers are at least 'OK' in this area, but there remains work to be done (for some more than others).

How good are you at researching and understanding your market to ensure your campaigns and strategies are hitting commerical objectives

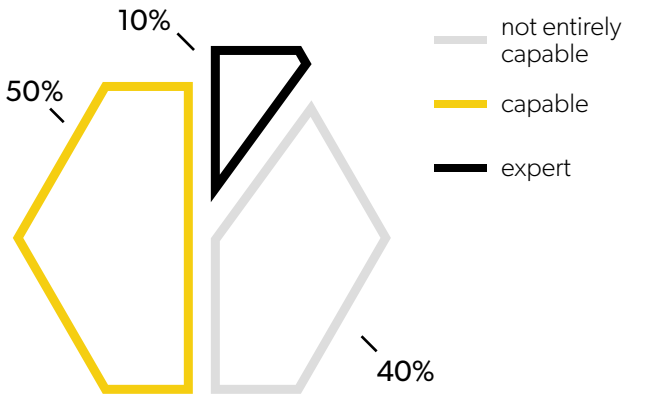


Skill number 2:
Analytical thinking

With new technologies and the digitisation of world business, marketers now have access to an overwhelming amount of data to work with. The skill, of course, is having the ability to actually make sense of what it's saying. Once we can do this, then we can start using our analytical skills to make commercially sensible decisions.

As we can see from the poll data, 40% of B2B marketers feel that they are 'not entirely capable' when it comes to collecting, analysing and acting upon data in a way that has a clear impact on revenue. 50% claimed they are 'capable' and 10% felt they were 'experts', but it's clear that a large portion of marketers do not feel entirely comfortable in this world.

How good are you at collecting, analysing and acting upon data in a way that has a clear impact on revenue?



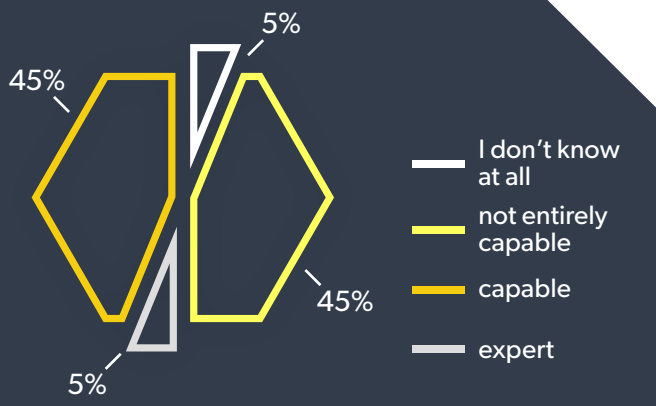
Skill number 3:
Financial acumen

As we discussed earlier in this report, it's absolutely critical that B2B marketers are able to speak the language of the business they operate in. To a CEO or a CFO, clickthrough rates, likes and shares may sound vaguely positive, but they have no clear link to the only thing that matters: revenue. After all, what good is a 100 million likes, if not a single one of those 'likes' can demonstrably be connected to a sale?

Of course, that's not to say that tracking marketing-specific metrics isn't important, and it's clear that lots of these metrics do demonstrate whether or not our campaigns are working or not. The critical thing to keep in mind, however, is that, when speaking to the board, we must be able to show 'here is how we are creating revenue' and not 'here is how many likes we have generated'. Admittedly, this is a gross simplification, but the sentiment remains the same.

So, what exactly do we mean by financial acumen? Well, in the view of Propolis Expert, Georgie Gilmore, B2B marketers must be able to understand business terminology in order to interpret financial reports (such as profit and loss, balance sheets, and cash flow statements). Marketers must also have the ability to

How good are you at understanding financial terminology and goals, and demonstrating the connection with your marketing campaigns and strategies?



accurately plan and manage marketing budget, as well as have SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) marketing KPIs that are measurable, meaningful and aligned to business goals. Lastly, marketers must also be able to understand and communicate the correlation and financial impact of changes in go-to-market strategy (i.e. pricing strategies or sales channels).

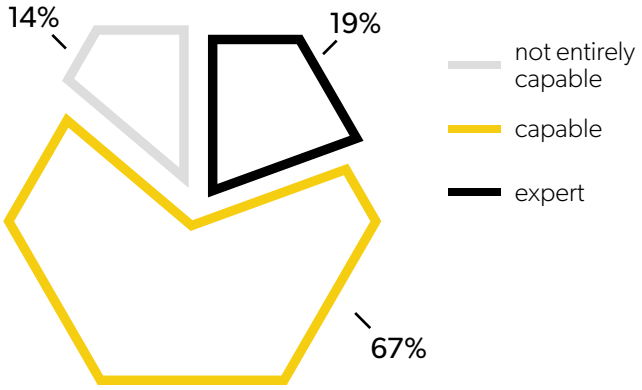
In our poll, just 5% of B2B marketers felt that they were 'an expert' in this area. 45% felt they were 'capable' at least, but a further 45% claimed they are 'not entirely capable' and 5% said 'I don't know how to do this at all'. So, clearly, there's a lot of work to be done here.

Skill number 4:
Strategic thinking

This is all about thinking, planning and making decisions that truly align with your business' goals for both the short and long-term. In order to do this, B2B marketers need to be able to identify and develop go-to-market strategies that support business growth opportunities. They also need strong planning skills with clear and actionable goals, determining how achievable they are and in what timeframe, considering possible outcomes, setbacks and opportunities. Lastly, they need to be problem solvers – marketers that are able to adapt to changing circumstances, and to think and operate holistically for the good of the business.

When asked 'how good are you at developing marketing campaigns and strategies that deliver against your business' overall goals?' just 19% said 'I'm an expert', with 67% saying that they're 'capable' and 14% claiming they're 'not entirely capable'.

How good are you at developing marketing campaigns and strategies that deliver against your business' overall goals?



Skill number 5:
Agile decision-making

Put simply, agile decision-making is the ability to leverage real-time analytics and the latest market insights, in order to make rapid adjustments and improvements where and when needed. Lose this, and you could end up delivering plans that were doomed to fall flat just two weeks into their run-time.

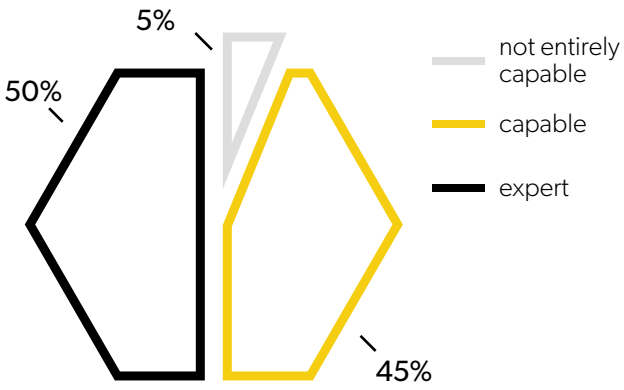
Skill number 6:
Communication and influence

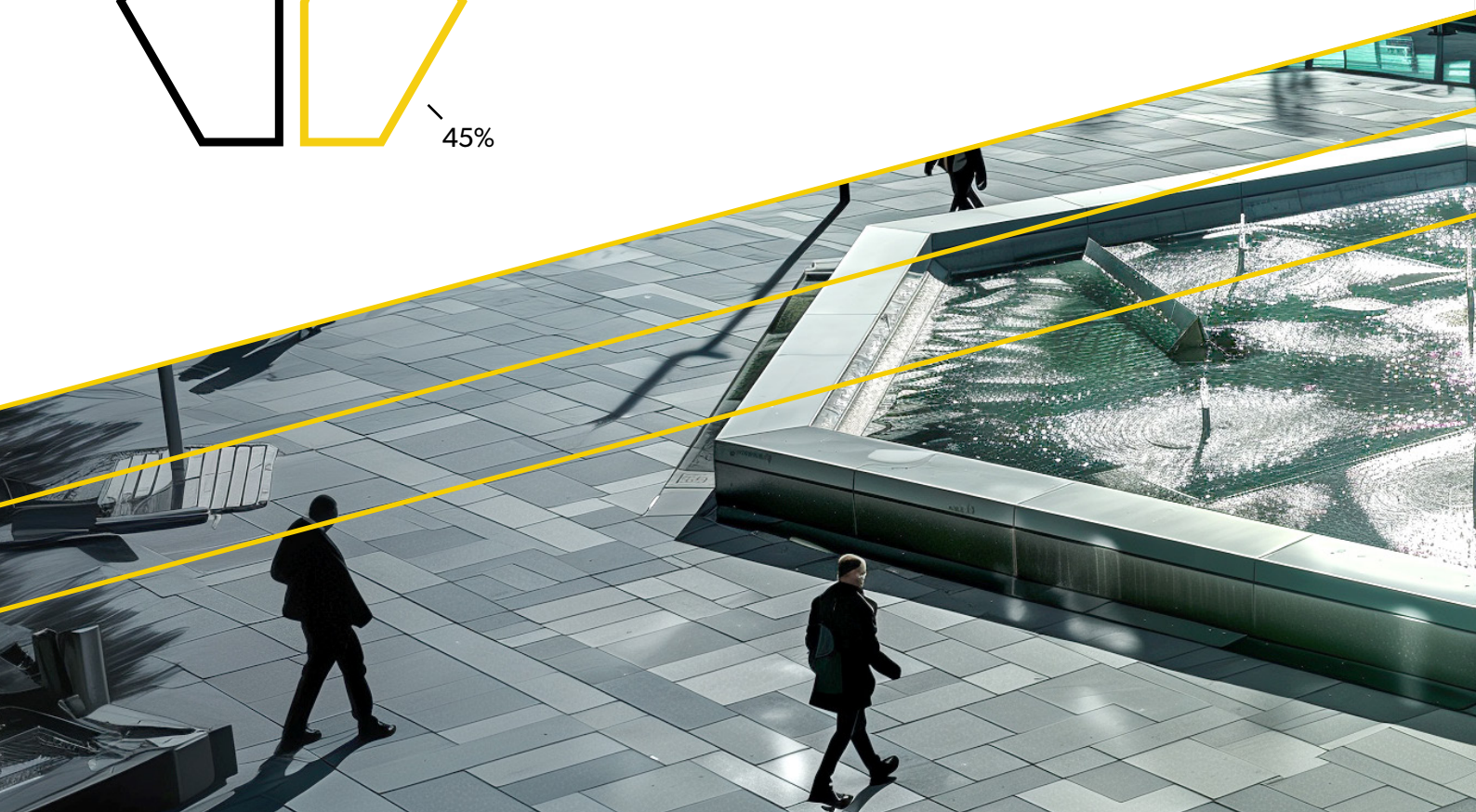
The final skill needed to operate as a successful commercial marketer? Communication and influence. This means building sustainable relationships with both your internal and external stakeholders, having the ability to communicate complex ideas in easy-to-understand ways, and spending time listening to key stakeholders and sharing ideas with them, asking for input where necessary.

It also means fostering open communication and collaboration, and building strategic partnerships with other departments, working towards a common goal of delivering business objectives.

When asked 'how good are you at working closely with other departments to create marketing campaigns and strategies that are aligned to overall business objectives', we can see that 50% said 'I'm an expert', 45% said 'I'm capable', and just 5% said 'I'm not entirely capable'. Fortunately, therefore, it appears that the majority of B2B marketers are already doing fairly well in this area.

How good are you at working closely with other departments to create marketing campaigns and strategies that are aligned to overall business objectives?





3.2. Quick tips for putting these skills into action

Each of these skills encompasses a number of even more specific skills. That's why when B2B marketers join Propolis, we run a skills analysis on the entire marketing team, consisting of 89 questions. The aim? To get a comprehensive understanding of exactly where a team is already strong, and where they need support.

Using a combination of consultancy with our Propolis Experts, training courses, content and events, we then then help the whole marketing team get to where they need to be to start acting as one big, happy commercial-marketing family.

For those of you who aren't already members of Propolis, we'd recommend that you scan the QR code to access our 'Strategy Pack': a taster of Propolis resources designed to get you started on your journey to obtaining the skills needed to act as a commercial marketer.



We know B2B marketers are busy people, so here's a checklist of things Georgie recommends you start doing today to get better in each of these skill areas:

Market insight

- Develop an outside-in approach to your marketing strategy.
- Use external intelligence to discover trends in PESTEL (academia, analysts and media are great sources, and you can use AI to synthesise these).
- Ask yourself: what does this insight tell me? What are the opportunities and threats? Is our business strategy fit for purpose?
- What are your buyers (and non-buyers) saying? Beyond formal qualitative research, use industry events, listen to customer calls and visit clients.
- Map your competitive landscape – current and future. Use social media listening, industry trade bodies and AI to uncover 'hidden' information.
- Where are the best growth opportunities by market, channel and customer type? Link your external intelligence to your internal customer database to unlock new profit pockets.

Analytical thinking

- Develop a clear dashboard aligned to business (not marketing) goals.
- Communicate results as a narrative that is easy to understand and links to commercial outcomes.
- Include your qualitative (customer insights, etc) with your quantitative data to create your narrative.
- Be honest with your analysis. Don't just present the good news.

Financial acumen

- Invest time and build relationships with finance. Ask for their expertise!
- Invite finance to run 'lunch and learn' sessions for your team.
- Invite finance to your monthly marketing meetings, with regular slots to cover budgets, planning cycles and business performance.
- Ask finance to help you set KPIs that matter.

Strategic thinking

- Know your business' long-term strategy (five-year goals) and the role marketing has to play to help deliver these.
- Adopt an 'outside-in' approach.
- Understand how your business operates and the different function roles.
- Develop your marketing strategy and plans aligned to business goals.

Agile decision-making

- Know when there is enough data and ideas to take action, and when you need to dig a bit more before making a decision.
- Set a short timeframe for your decision.
- Don't look for the perfect solution. Perfect solutions are the enemy of innovation and progress.
- Ask experts for their opinion (but not everyone!).
- Don't revert to the path of the least resistance, or just doing something because 'we've always done it this way.'
- Find someone who disagrees with you. Let them pick holes in your decision to provide a different perspective (not to provide an alternative solution!).

Communication and influence

- Communicate marketing's progress towards a business goal (demonstrating effectiveness), and not marketing performance.
- Ensure that metrics can be easily interpreted and aligned to business goals.
- Create metrics for a specific audience to ensure that your stakeholder finds value in them (finance, legal, IT, sales, etc).
- Make it immediately obvious (without needing additional content or comparison to another metric) whether something is succeeding or failing.
- Ensure that metrics contribute to a clear 'so what?'.

How Propolis supports you and your team

Getting To Know You	Supporting Your Strategy	Helping You Get The Most From Your Resource	Inspiring Your Team and Giving Them The Skills To Deliver

Face-to-face time with the Experts

Expert Kick-Off & Skills Survey

We discuss your commercial and strategic objectives, and run our *Skills Survey* on your entire team, designed to understand their capability to act as commercial marketers.

Strategy Session

Your Propolis Expert provides insight and strategic recommendations designed to help you achieve your commercial objectives.

Team Planning Session

Using the results of the *Skills Survey*, your Propolis Expert helps you identify the key areas your team needs to upskill in, in order to operate as commercial marketers.

Power Hours

Our roster of independent Propolis Experts provide your team with the skills they need to achieve your strategic and commercial objectives.

Build your strategies and skills with Propolis events and exclusive resources

Secure AI listening technology continues to build a profile of what you need, ensuring we continue to provide relevant content and resources.

- *Leaders Forum*
- Roundtables and Workshops
- Mentoring and Coaching
- Ask a Question feature
- Regular marketing intelligence

- The Community Index
- Find an Agency feature

- B2B Marketing conference access
- Best practices, models and on-demand training
- Award-winning case studies
- Live and on-demand training courses

The core competencies you need to be a strong B2B marketing leader

As we developed Propolis to help marketers become commercial marketers, it became evident that something was missing – something altogether more human.

Yes, in order to be a commercial marketer, you need certain skills and knowledge, but you also need what have traditionally been called the 'soft skills'. At this point, it's worth saying that we have now decided to refer to these as 'core competencies'. The term 'soft skills' suggests that they are somehow easy, lightweight or of secondary importance. The truth, of course, is that these core competencies are absolutely central to everything you do as a marketer.

After all, you could have all the technical skill in the world (and be close to those five key areas we listed), but, if you don't have the ability to get the most out of your team, or to influence the board, as well as stakeholders or colleagues in other departments, you're going to struggle to get out of the tactical, day-to-day tasks that have come to dominate our profession.

With that in mind, we ran a workshop for B2B marketing leaders in Propolis to surface the core competencies needed to become great B2B marketing leaders, and how to put these core competencies in place.

Although this event was exclusively for B2B marketing leaders in Propolis (CMOs, Marketing Directors and the like), we'd urge every marketer to read this section. These core competencies are critical for those leading teams today, but also for those who want to lead a team tomorrow.

In the first part of our event, our Propolis Expert hosts, Shane Redding and Georgie Gilmore, led a workshop co-created with Propolis Expert Scott Stockwell, designed to surface the core competencies needed to be a strong B2B marketing leader, all through the age-old medium of Post-It notes.

For Heads of Demand Gen, ABM Managers, and Digital Marketing Managers in tech, the leadership and influence challenge is particularly real. You're being asked to deliver measurable pipeline impact at a time when buying cycles are getting longer, buying groups are getting bigger, and the pressure to prove ROI is more acute than ever. You need to influence a sales team that wants volume and speed, a senior leadership team that wants clear revenue attribution, and a marketing function that is increasingly expected to own more of the commercial journey.

The frameworks in this section apply to marketers across all disciplines and levels. As you read through them, consider which competencies feel most relevant to your specific role, and which barriers are getting in the way of you operating at the commercial level you know you're capable of.

In order to help categorise and make sense of the suggestions made by our attendees, each competency was placed in one of the following three competency areas:

- **Self-efficacy:** A leader's understanding of their own persona and of their ability to execute the behaviours necessary to achieve specific goals and exert control over their own motivation, behaviour and environment.
- **Cognitive:** Mental processes your brain uses to think, learn, remember and process information, encompassing abilities like attention, memory, reasoning and problem solving.
- **Collaborative and communicative:** The ability to effectively share and receive information, and the ability to effectively lead other towards achieving a common goal.

These areas were carefully selected, based on The Future of Jobs Report 2025, recently published by the *World Economic Forum* [1]

As Shane explained in a recent digital event specifically for Propolis members, these skills have stood out as being critical for leaders to master over the coming years.

So, which competencies came under each area? Summarising the 186 Post-It notes collected (yes, we counted), here's what B2B marketing leaders think matters when it comes to being a strong leader.

Self-efficacy:
- Adaptability, flexibility and resilience.
- Cultural sensitivity.
- Curiosity and life-long learning.
- Empathy and active listening.
- Growth mindset.
- Integrity, authenticity and consistency.
- Purpose and motivation.
- Self-awareness and consistency.

Cognitive:
- Agile decision-making.
- Creativity.
- Perspective/perception.
- Problem solving.
- Thinking (strategic, critical, systems, expert and lateral).

Communicative & collaborative:
- Collaboration.
- Communication/stakeholder management/pitching.
- Humility and vulnerability.
- Inclusivity.
- Persuasion, leadership and social influence.
- Radical candour / constructive critique.
- Recognition and celebration.
- Storytelling.

[1] The Future of Jobs Report 2025', World Economic Forum, 7 January 2025, https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/in-full/3-skills-outlook/

4.1. What stops us from becoming better leaders?

So, those are the core competencies that B2B marketing leaders have identified as being important to being a marketing leader, but what barriers or challenges do we face? Well, the most commonly cited challenges include the following:

The rate of change:

Difficulty keeping up with rapid shifts in market conditions, strategic direction or technological advancements (to provide just some examples). Some delegates felt that this can become overwhelming, and make having the vision required to be a strong leader hard to maintain.

A lack of self-belief or imposter syndrome:

The feeling that we're not good enough for the role, and are going to be exposed.

Short-termism:

A demand to focus on immediate results at the expense of long-term strategy and growth.

Structural barriers:

Organizational structures and cultures that hinder our ability to make strategic decisions or collaborate meaningfully with relevant departments. Includes challenges around where a given marketing team sits within an organisation (i.e. a global HQ, or hub, having greater autonomy than a regional team, or spoke).

Having to do more with less:

Being increasingly squeezed, and lacking the bandwidth to manage teams or projects as effectively as they could be.

Having the strength to provide honest feedback:

The ability to have difficult conversations and being honest with team members, i.e. if work isn't being delivered to the standard required.

Remote working culture:

Difficulty engaging and motivating the team (especially in virtual meetings when cameras are off!).

Needing to be in control:

As a leader, it's simply impossible to do everything. Being able to delegate effectively and empower your team is critical, but some attendees felt they sometimes had to fight an urge to command and control, or get lost in the detail.



4.2. What can make us better leaders?

Ok, so those are the challenges we collectively face on our journey to becoming better leaders, but what about the enablers – the things that can help us overcome those challenges? Well, given the sheer scope of these challenges, there's not one or two simple answers here. Some solutions ranged from the hyper specific (tactics used in their businesses), whilst others landed more in the realm of lifestyle changes.

With that in mind, we've collected a list of 'enablers' – things that our participants felt have helped – or are helping – them become better marketing leaders. These are as follows:

Welcoming anonymous feedback:

Some participants felt that providing a channel for receiving honest, unfiltered feedback from employees has allowed them to continue adjusting their style to leadership and management. One participant even mentioned an 'always on' feedback tool that has allowed them to significantly increase their employee NPS since it was first rolled-out.

Welcoming non-anonymous feedback:

Whilst some leaders felt anonymity was the way to go, others argued that facilitating identifiable feedback ensures accountability and a more constructive dialogue with employees.

Rewarding positive behaviour:

One attendee mentioned that their business uses quick, in-the-moment 'gems' (small financial rewards) for a job well-done. Although small, they demonstrate gratitude and reflect appreciation for a job well done. Ultimately, it's about showing gratitude.

Using mentors:

Many attendees referenced the fact that they use mentors on a regular basis – usually once every few months. By regularly speaking with someone who has worked in your industry or role, you can access a wealth of insight and advice around how you can progress and get better as a leader.

As Georgie herself says: "Early on in my career I was given a great piece of advice (by one of my mentors), which is to lead your team with the respect, support, and vision you'd want to receive in return."

Reverse mentoring:

Whilst traditional mentoring still absolutely has its place, some attendees felt a 'reverse' approach could be just as useful, if not more so. This is where a more junior member of staff mentors the leader, sharing their views on what they think they should be doing more or less of, etc. Not only does this help the leader continue to improve their own leadership style and resonate more with their team, but it's also helping to demonstrate that all members of the team have an important voice.

Using coaches:

Whilst mentors provide their expertise and views to help you grow as a leader, coaches work quite differently. Coaches use techniques designed to help you surface the answers you are looking for. Many attendees referenced using a combination of both coaches and mentors, so it's not simply a case of using one or the other.

Retaining a good work-life balance:

Interestingly, many attendees claimed that maintaining a good work-life balance was critical to being a strong leader. Maintaining this balance, attendees claimed, gives you the breathing space needed to be a happier, healthier person. In turn, this can help you be more relaxed and positive in your attitude at the workplace, and create a psychologically safe culture, in which all team members can thrive. All that being said, many leaders did acknowledge just how difficult this can be – especially when their own bosses occasionally call or email late in the evening.

Sitting on the boards of other organisations:

If possible, sitting on the boards of other businesses or organisations can help you gain wider experience of how businesses are run, and what 'good' looks like. Getting out into the world can help you become a more well-rounded leader as you know what good (or bad) leadership looks like.

Building trust with the team by supporting them to create a 'sh*tty first draft':

In essence, this means supporting your team to try and fail and learn, without judgement. This approach ensures work can be done quickly, and then be reviewed and improved. Essentially, it's a 'fail fast' approach to work that gives people licence to fail, learn and adapt.

Using support networks:

Using groups of likeminded individuals to share frustrations, check in, and provide peer-to-peer support. Many attendees felt groups such as these – often built specifically for women or under-represented groups – were extremely valuable in their own journeys to becoming better leaders. It's important to keep in mind that Propolis provides one such space to share and check-in, so, if you're a member, make the most of it!

Getting junior managers involved in recruitment:

What better way to build the leaders of tomorrow than by getting them involved in finding what makes a great team member? This can also help to create buy-in for those junior members, as they're having an active, rather than a passive, role in the formation of the team.

Carving out time for learning:

Marketers of all levels are busy, but the marketers that get ahead are the ones that take the time to better themselves by attending workshops, reading books, or working with coaches, etc. Ultimately, a commitment to self-improvement is key, as no one is a perfect leader from day one.

Running team building exercises:

Team building exercises can help to get away from the day-to-day, and ensure you're connecting with your team and colleagues on a personal level. If every conversation you've ever had revolves around campaigns, deliverables or strategies, how can you possibly communicate to that person on a more personal level!?

Meeting other teams/offices:

Just as it's important to carve out time for your own learning, many leaders felt it is important to get face-to-face with other teams, departments, or other offices. Getting out of the bubble of your own team is critical to having a wider understanding of how your business works and who its people are. Ultimately, this can aid your ability to be more strategic and get less bogged down in the day-to-day.

Setting objective and key results (OKRs):

Using OKRs (or any similar device) to ensure your team members are focused on business results and can see how they're impacting these results can be a powerful tool for leaders. Not only does it focus the team, but it also frees up the leader's time, because they're not having to micromanage. OKRs set the expectation and empower the individual to drive results for the business.

Running personality tests:

Enneagrams, Myers Briggs… the list goes on. Taking the time out to understand each other's personalities on a more psychological level can help you understand how your team members think and what they do or don't respond to. Not everyone is the same, so why lead everyone in the same way? One attendee mentioned how they took the Enneagram approach, and it's helped create a culture of shared vulnerability and a psychologically safe environment. Teams have started to understand each other better, leading to a direct improvement on the quality of work being delivered.

Listening to 'hear', not to 'speak':

How many times have you had a conversation in which the person sitting across from you isn't really taking in what you're saying, but itching to jump in with their next point? Having the self-awareness to stop yourself from interjecting, truly taking in the information from the person you're speaking with, and then responding, is a much healthier way to have a conversation. By proxy, it's also a better way to lead. No one wants to have a boss who doesn't listen to them.

Focus on the 'how' as well as the 'what':

Being a high performing team member doesn't just mean getting the job done. It means getting it done professionally, and doing things in a way that encapsulates the values of your business. Great marketing leaders, therefore, don't just focus on the end result – but the culture too.

4.3. Core competencies matter for everyone

Let's be fair. Being a commercial marketer is not easy. Ultimately, it requires expertise in certain skills, being close to all different departments, and being absolutely laser-focused on business objectives. Just as importantly, it means being a great collaborator and leader – someone who can take all of that insight and strategic thinking, and ensure it turns into tangible, effective plans, with teams and colleagues who are clear on responsibilities and deliverables, and feel empowered.

And this isn't just important for those leading marketing teams – the CMOs or Marketing Directors of the world. It's just as important for those of you who are earlier on in your careers. The core competencies that leaders raised in our recent roundtable and workshop are critical for being a great senior leader, but they're also critical for that marketing manager trying to run better meetings, or for that marketing executive trying to build closer relationships with their colleagues in sales.

Ultimately, having both the core competencies and the technical skills will ensure you not only know what it means to be a commercial marketer, but that you have the ability to act as one. With that in mind, we urge anyone who has read this report to take stock of the core competencies needed to be a great marketing leader, and start taking more time out of your day to think about how you can get the best out of yourself.



Shane Redding

"To know yourself and to try to be the best you can be is perhaps one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself. Understanding that we can choose the type of leader we want to be and invest in achieving it is a lesson I wish I had learnt much earlier in my career."

4.4. Ok, but how does this drive results?

As this report demonstrates, our mission at Propolis is to help our members to become commercial marketers – marketers who are laser-focused on business results and how they can help achieve those results through marketing.

Although the value of being an effective leader should be self-evident, you could reasonably ask: "how does spending time developing these core competencies impact the financial results we need to deliver?"

As ever, the answer is not a simple one, but Propolis Expert Scott Stockwell has created the model below which demonstrates just how critical the competencies discussed in this report are to the bottom line:





Scott Stockwell

Scott explains: *"Inspired by design thinking, this 'Leadership Loop' is a constantly repeating cycle. Start in the top right with the business (blue) where the society/culture where you operate influences how you work. The business has a purpose, creates a strategy and delegates delivery to the employees. It also sets the corporate environment and 'how we work around here'. Leaders interpret that strategy into a vision and mission for their teams (bottom left - green). They create their group environment, and the way they behave sets the tone and expectation for their team. In a team (top left - yellow), employees have their own sense of purpose and motivations and align that with that set by their leaders. Done well, there's a high degree of psychological safety where team members feel they can test and learn. This is where creativity and innovation live that enable the team to deliver value to the business (bottom right - orange). And the cycle repeats by adapting to results and customer feedback and the ever-changing environment the business works in."*

Conclusion? We have to become commercial marketers

No doubt, at some point in the last five years, you will have listened to a podcast, seen a keynote session, or read a report on the topic of changing buyer behaviour. If you haven't, the key takeaway goes something like this: today's buyer doesn't want to be sold to. They want to conduct their own research at their own pace. They want to do it silently online. They want peer recommendations. Then, when they're ready – and only when they're ready – do they want to buy.

And let's be clear, this isn't going to change any time soon. As demonstrated by a **2024 study by Uswitch**[2] nearly a quarter of people between the ages of 18 and 34 *never* answer the phone. The same study goes on to say that nearly 70% of individuals in that age bracket prefer a text to a phone call. Obviously, not all B2B buyers fit into that age bracket, but these individuals will increasingly be the ones making decisions around B2B purchases.

Ultimately, this means that if we want to be successful in winning new business, we need to play in the areas that our buyers want to find us in. Then, when they do find us, we need to provide them with the right content or resources that solve their problem. Gone are the days where a cold call would suffice!

Fortunately, this is fantastic news for B2B marketers. We are the masters of the digital channels our buyers use to find solutions, meaning we are increasingly responsible for the commercial success of our businesses. However, there's a problem – ironically, it's a branding problem. Despite the fact we're in pole position to act as the commercial hub of our businesses, all too often, marketing is seen as a department responsible purely for promotion. Sales are trusted at the top level, but marketers struggle to simplify the complexity of the value we bring, meaning we often find ourselves on the fringes of commercial conversations.

So, what do we do about it?

We become commercial marketers.

[2] Uswitch, 'Call Me Maybe (Not): A Quarter of Young People Never Answer The Phone' (30 April 2024)]

Enough theory. Time to lead.

Becoming a commercial marketer means stepping up—and staying there. Propolis helps you get to that place, with the tools, insight and support to lead with confidence and prove marketing's value where it counts.

Make the shift with Propolis.

Scan the QR code to explore our membership brochure and see how Propolis can support your next move.

b2bmarketing.net/propolis



B2B Marketing
Westgate House
9 Holborn
London
EC1N 2LL

info@b2bmarketing.net
b2bmarketing.net

B2B MARKETING