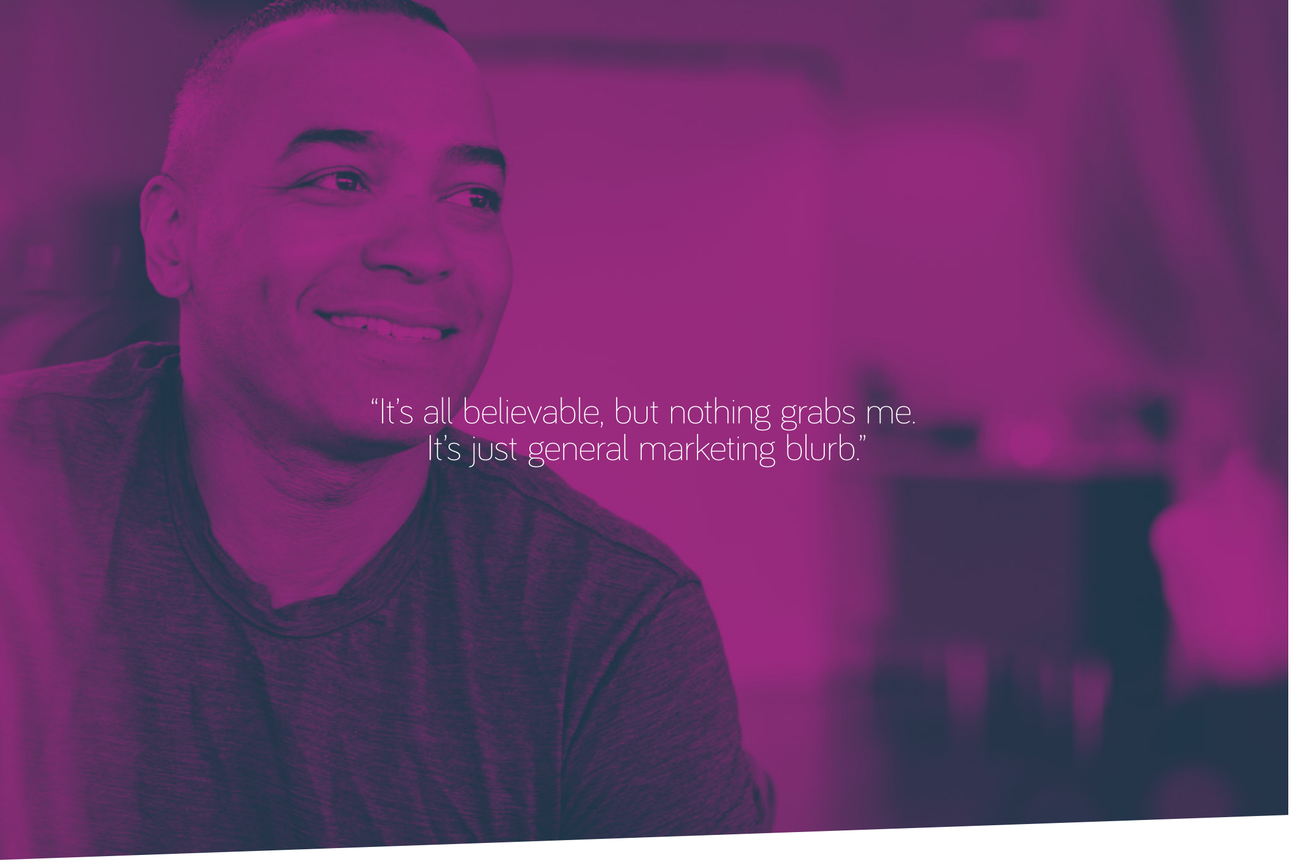
What your prospects want to hear

B2B decision-makers give their verdicts on where marketing (and sales) need to sharpen up – and what they really appreciate.

kindle RESEARCH



Introduction

How well do we really understand the B2B audience? This is a serious challenge facing sales and marketing today.

Despite considerable efforts, many businesses are failing to put the value of what they do and how they do it into a clear, convincing proposition for their audience. As a result, they’re all starting to look a bit the same, leading to damning statistics where 86% of B2B buyers say they see “no real difference between supplier propositions”[1].

This was no great shock to us, and I’m sure many large B2B organisations would recognise the challenge of looking and sounding different in a sometimes apparently homogeneous market.

Rather than just add to this pool of gloomy data, we worked with Kindle Research to capture some more detailed opinions and illuminating conversations from decision-makers. These are the people we all spend so much time and effort trying to reach and persuade and they have plenty to say for themselves.

We want these conversations to serve as a practical resource for B2B sales and marketing professionals – a useful starting point or sense-check for audience persona work.

We also see them as proof of our view that B2B marketing needs to do far more to sharpen its propositions for campaigning. Articulating the value and relevance of a proposition or partnership requires us all to go the extra mile. To get beyond generic top-line benefits and platitudes about the importance of ‘our people’, we need to get stuck into the detail.

As these opinions show, the audience will thank us for it. Despite all their misgivings, they still feel marketing has a valuable role to play.



Allyson Bancroft
Head of Planning, The Marketing Practice

“Articulating the value and relevance of a proposition or partnership requires us all to go the extra mile.”

[1] Garnter Report

Background: who did we speak to and how?

We partnered with **Kindle Research** – specialists in uncovering insight on the enterprise technology audience. Here's a summary of the project.

10 in-depth interviews with senior IT decision-makers.

Sectors: Legal, Retail, Leisure, Financial Services, Media, Healthcare.

Job roles: IT Architects, IT Directors, IT Managers, Infrastructure Managers, Group IT Directors.

What they have in common:

- Occupy a key position in their company.
- Need to pitch to and convince the non-IT specialist audience.
- And then deliver projects or implement solutions for large numbers of non-expert users.
- Need to show measurable success on high-profile, extensive projects.
- All this makes them risk-averse and information-hungry.

kindle RESEARCH

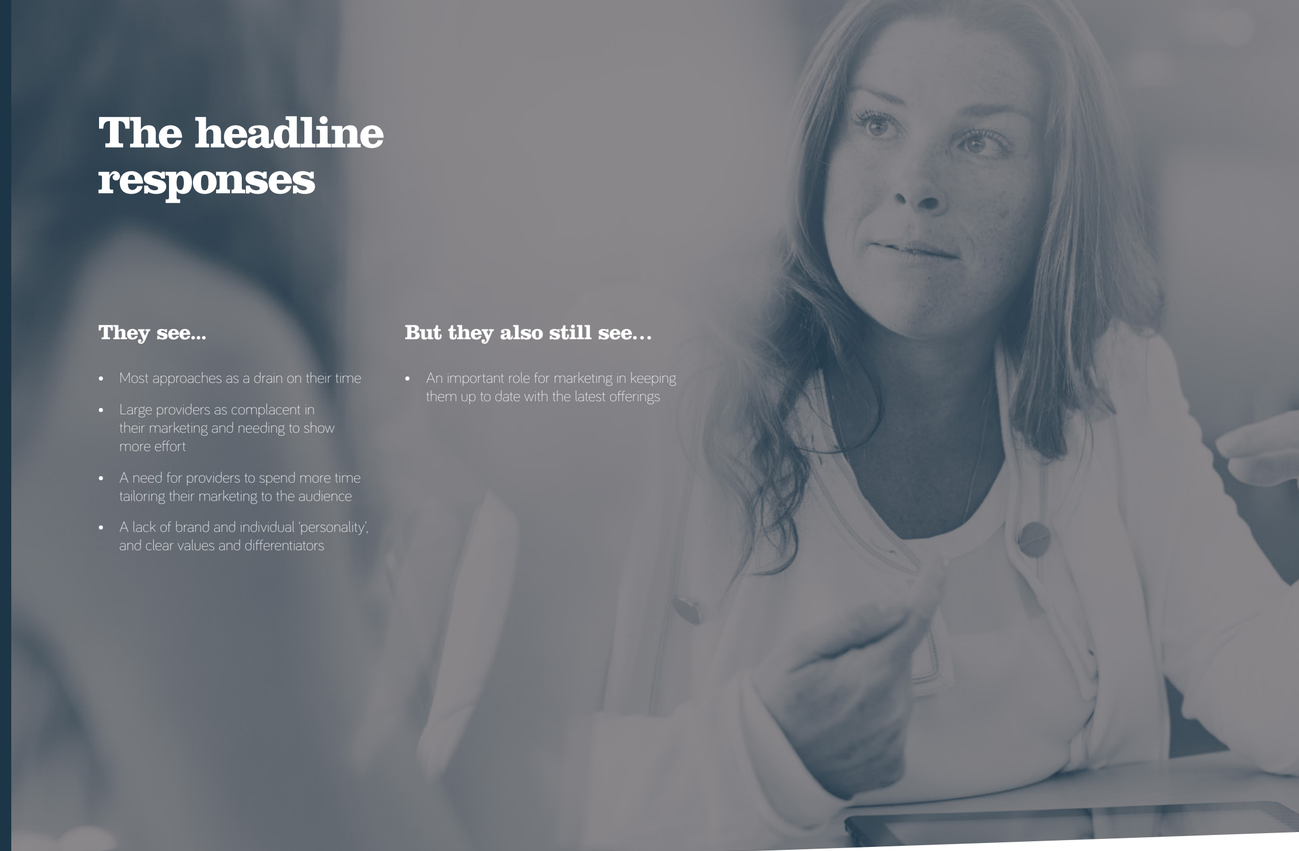
The headline responses

They see...

- Most approaches as a drain on their time
- Large providers as complacent in their marketing and needing to show more effort
- A need for providers to spend more time tailoring their marketing to the audience
- A lack of brand and individual 'personality', and clear values and differentiators

But they also still see...

- An important role for marketing in keeping them up to date with the latest offerings



A drain on their time

The volume of cold calls with "random" and "generic" information is described as tremendous.

They're often offered ready-configured "generic" presentations: offers to demo products, share their road map, present their upgraded product or service proposition, join breakfast meetings and webinars.

They're very wary of accepting these offers as they can't tell before engaging with them if they'll be worth their time and effort. But they're also reluctant to refuse, as there are 2 or 3 approaches in a week which will be worth their time.

They much prefer to control their engagement – through visits to EXPOs/exhibitions, or having exploratory conversations before allowing companies access to their diary or office.

When it comes to taking action and selecting a product or service, they typically run tight shortlists because time is at such a premium.

Any engagement process will necessarily demand their time and consideration – so they favour:

- An approach which demonstrates a vendor has established how a product/service is both appropriate and valuable to the customer and their company, and in doing so, show their credentials
- Approaches from existing suppliers who have demonstrated that they understand what the customer is trying to achieve, and how their aims and challenges spring from this
- Access to information to reinforce the relevance and value to their specific company (e.g. via conversations with the vendor's customers in their sector who have similar issues, etc.)
- If it's a service offering, clarity on how this will add value to (and is not intended to replace) their internal teams.



"Historically we all had lots of time to put together solutions, but there's a lot more pressure to make those solutions have a measurable return on investment. And they need to be hassle free, because the majority of what we're doing nowadays is having to show impact on productivity."

IT DIRECTOR, CORPORATE TRAVEL/LEISURE, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

In their own words

"A lot of the vendors don't get the idea that if we had one company who could deliver everything at a reasonable price, we would get everything from them because it's easier. They still seem a bit product-focussed."

GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"We will constantly look at and review current systems and procedures, and look for something better from a current supplier, or if we're not happy with it we'll look at a competitor, IT forum, or EXPO and look at what the marketplace is doing. Or we'll look at a feature in one of the blogs or tech pages, and we'll keep an eye on it before we can introduce it."

TECHNICAL ARCHITECT, LEISURE/RETAIL, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"Technology is moving so quickly that some of the smaller start-ups can be very nimble and they can move depending on the way the industry's going, and some of the more established players take a bit longer. It just makes a difference whether you're happy to opt-in to something quite innovative with a new company."

ASSISTANT IT MANAGER, FINANCIAL SERVICES, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

Vendor complacency

Larger vendors are in potentially powerful positions, particularly where a customers' needs are large-scale, complex, high-profile or expensive:

- They are much better known to management and end users
- Their track record should increase customers' confidence in their expertise
- They are ('probably') less likely to disappear compared with newer entrants

However, they were heavily criticised by customers for marketing which was consistently "generic", "random" and undifferentiated:

- It's perceived as arrogant, passive, or even uninterested – this is what we have or do, "take it or leave it"
- There's a lack of clarity about their products/services and their use in specific verticals, and to specific organisations
- For existing customers, there's a problem with high staff turnover, with new managers uninterested in finding out about the customers' specific context, needs, or aims
- They criticise a mechanised sales process from lead-generation to pitch – not a conversation, not a process where relationships are established
- They also single out lazy, generic, jargon-filled communications, where the customer has to act as translator, and to build the business case themselves for management and end users – setting 'product x in context y'
- As a result, customers are more likely to pick the products or services offered by a vendor they're already using to minimise their risk. It feels more like a stress purchase rather than an active choice, so they may attempt to minimise their risk exposure (by implementing in smaller steps, limiting the number of products within a particular suite, or buying the product rather than the additional added value components).

Some felt that large vendors were beginning to realise that they had to improve their relationships with their customers – however, they hadn't seen much evidence of this in initial marketing approaches.

- More often it was felt that smaller vendors have the approach which customers need and want.

In their own words

"I just throw it in the bin 'cos I don't have time to look at all this marketing bumph. I need it tailored to my needs, configured to what I'm trying to do – streamlining the processes within my company. I have to search out what I'm looking for and then invite them to come in and have a look at what we're doing on site and then identify what they think might suit our needs."

IT DIRECTOR, HEALTHCARE, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"They're more realistic about the shortcomings of their product, which is a big turnaround from a few years ago."

GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"They have a limited view of how their product is used and how it could be used." They should sell the product and do an after-sales engagement (for free) to understand how it is being used to understand business needs and challenges."

INFRASTRUCTURE MANAGER, RETAIL, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"They don't understand that renewals also need budgeting and forecasting."

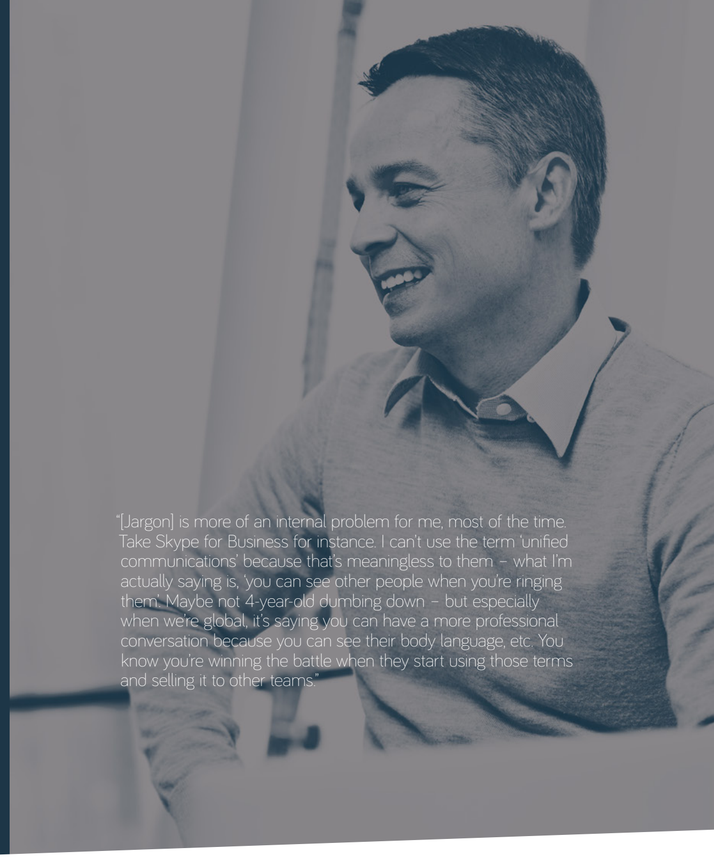
GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"They're seeing that coming to see us is beneficial to them because we get more of a rapport and a better feel for the company."

GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

Some are excellent – they tend to be the smaller ones, they tend to be more flexible because they want the business, and then there's the bigger ones that don't care if you take it or not."

IT DIRECTOR, LEGAL, <1000 EMPLOYEES



"[Jargon] is more of an internal problem for me, most of the time. Take Skype for Business for instance. I can't use the term 'unified communications' because that's meaningless to them – what I'm actually saying is, 'you can see other people when you're ringing them'. Maybe not 4-year-old dumbing down – but especially when we're global, it's saying you can have a more professional conversation because you can see their body language, etc. You know you're winning the battle when they start using those terms and selling it to other teams."

The need for tailored approaches

In an ideal world the respondents felt vendors would:

- Be able to demonstrate the positive impact they can have on the customer's business
- Show potential for flexibility in product or service configuration
- Have invested time and budget in finding out about and understanding their potential customers' vertical, their specific organisation, and what they, as IT decision-makers and implementers, are trying to achieve, i.e. their context and business strategy, not just their RfP
- Share views on trends in the market, and what that practically means for the customer in the medium to long term (so they can start planning and preparing now), as well as what commercially relevant improvements they can make to their current systems
- Listen and ask questions first, then demonstrate how and why their product or service is right for that specific company convincingly
- Bring the best from projects they've worked on within their industry vertical, facilitating contact with the customers' peers (who customers expect/know will be frank and objective)
- Customise all their communications with the company and limit the information they send/deliver to what is relevant
- Try to understand their culture and share the pressures, opportunities and challenges faced by customers (security issues, budget pressures, measurable results, risk aversion, etc.)



"If it's direct marketing I probably won't pay too much attention to it unless it's within the first quarter of the email where it says something around the fact like a compelling reason, if it understood my business, the company I'm in and the things that are important to me..."

In their own words

"I do find it a bit frustrating getting these emails which are fairly obviously mass mailshots, but with a kind of 'trying to personalise it', the 'hi David, I'm in the city next week, can I buy you a coffee' or something like that. If they can come and get me a coffee at my desk, fine. But for me to take 30 minutes out of my day I need to see some value in it, and quite often I'm unconvinced."

"In terms of their marketing it is all very similar. They are all very standard. XXXX may be a bit more specialist but they are all doing standard tech marketing material. They are all pretty much the same. They all say they can service our needs, they can provide the best of everything, they are better than their competitors, they are value for money, got the best technology, all of that. It's all believable, but nothing grabs me. It's just general marketing blurb."

IT MANAGER, MEDIA, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"I get lots of those 'this product' without the *why* for us, they don't get any attention... The vast majority don't understand why that product would be good for me personally or not."

TECHNICAL ARCHITECT, LEISURE/RETAIL, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"We've used XXXX and they are different. They come in with a new-age approach. They don't have loads of marketing material, they come in, talking, more conversations, meetings."

IT MANAGER, MEDIA, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"They'll generalise: 'we can save you 20%' or 'we're better than the rest' but they haven't actually identified the opportunity – they're simply providing a more generalised consulting service in the hope that we can help them determine what they could actually sell us – but as we're going through a growing up process, we generally don't know what we need."

IT DIRECTOR, CORPORATE TRAVEL/LEISURE, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

Lack of brand personality or values

- Although customers are under great pressure to justify their choices as rational and evidence-based, they were also very clear that part of their personal evaluation of products and services was their confidence in the people in the vendor.
- This can mean how well they believe individuals understand their world. However it also involves evaluating the 'fit' between the two organisations' cultures – their ambitions, business strategies, future plans, etc.
- They used surprisingly emotive language in describing their ideal vendor. "passionate" about their product, "caring" about the customers' business, "eager" for their business, "trustworthy" and "reliable" – and most often used was the requirement that they value a "relationship" over time.
- There were some exceptions – companies who had grown over time and who hadn't become acquiescent in their eyes, as evidenced by the MD or Regional Manager staying in touch.



"We talk about our mission and values but I can't tell you what XXXX brand stands for other than it works quite well and it is pretty cheap. Which is probably not what their core message is."

GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

In their own words

"If they did [communicate their brand and company values], you'd consider them in the first place… If there was a better brand awareness and better overall idea of, this is what we do and this is why we do it, we would have known that would have been a place to start."

GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"It's 70/80% about the people. The written material, white papers, insight guides, Gartner – all of that is there, but for me personally, andprobably for most of my peers, you'd want something to spark aninterest, then you go to that as reference, as supporting material. If it was something new to me, if it was someone sending me a white paper, which I get phone calls about quite frequently, saying 'oh you know we think you'd be interested in this, can we send it to you' – well, to be honest, I spend a lot of my day reading bits of materials, and I'm unlikely to just want to pick up something that's new. However, if it's from someone whose opinion I value and they'd want a conversation about whether that's of interest to me in the company and then they say 'can we send you some materials about that', then I might be happy to spend some time on that."

HEAD OF GLOBAL INFRASTRUCTURE, LEGAL, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"For us it's a lot more about making sure we can work well with them and that we can drive the business with a partner who's acting as an extension of our business. So, I would say that there's a lot more about the soft elements of what a business brings rather than ticking 15 boxes of an RfP. It's a lot more about their flexibility, their ability to work in our vertical, other work they've done, any value they can bring from that, and actually if they're a good cultural fit with us."

"Nowadays it can even be quite consumer-driven. They'll be Facetiming from their yacht or third house in the Alps and come back and say, 'why haven't we got this in the office?'"

But marketing still has an important role

Marketing was at times heavily criticised in its execution. However all of the participants felt it still had an important role to play, particularly when done well.

- They felt it supported their need to keep up with industry trends and changes in the market. They also welcomed interactions that informed their efforts to refine and improve what they're doing for their company right now.
- Some marketing approaches were more welcome than others; however, even cold calls were felt to have a role: how else would they ensure that they hadn't ignored a company, product or development which had emerged to be essential for their business?
- Overall, they strongly preferred independently supported insight, with a strong sector-specific content angle. The more bespoke it was to their own organisation, the better.

The most fundamental point was that marketing approaches also reassures buyers they're of interest to vendors. None of the participants wanted to see an end to marketing.



"XXXX used to have a really big presence and used to position themselves in the business space and they seem to have disappeared… we thought they might have pulled out of the UK market (they hadn't). We hadn't seen anything from them so we just went to another supplier."

GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

In their own words

"I think in that period when I'm really reviewing something, if something comes up into my mailbox and it's relevant at that time, I'd definitely read it and pay attention to it. I think marketing does work, but it just needs to be a bit more specific and understood about why that would work for you. Effectively just doing some of the work that I would do, for me."

TECHNICAL ARCHITECT, LEISURE/RETAIL, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"We do look at some of it. I prefer supplier marketing than reseller marketing because I'm more interested in the product than the consultancy… the direct marketing from suppliers makes you aware of things. XXXX wireless system shoved a load of marketing our way and we ended up buying a load of it. We didn't know about it beforehand, the reseller didn't know about it and it was only when XXXX threw a load of marketing at us about the product that we thought that is easy, can get it from existing vendors, and looks like it can do better than other suppliers"

GROUP IT DIRECTOR, LEISURE/ENTERTAINMENT, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"What makes a difference is if they're fielding the right people to talk to us, with case studies, others who've gone through similar challenges. Other companies that have gone through that transition."

IT DIRECTOR, HEALTHCARE, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

"Because I'm always mindful of competition and needing to see if perhaps they can provide a better service, or a lower cost than my current providers."

IT MANAGER, FINANCIAL SERVICES, 1000+ EMPLOYEES

So what should marketers do?



Take advantage of brand personality and emotional engagement

It's something of a truism to say that B2B decision-makers are still people. Raising a smile, tugging at heart strings and appealing to their own personal sense of ambition does work. As long as there is substance behind it.



Don't forget the importance of staying mentally and physically available

There's so much value in simply being present regularly in their world. So avoid periods of inactivity, remind people you are present and effective in their market, keep thinking of (valid!) new reasons to talk or engage with you.

Be simple and easy to access when the time is right for them – whether that's the product itself or simply the content and next steps down the funnel towards purchase.



Clearly sell the value of the next steps and the people they will meet or talk to

Think in detail about what they will get from their time or effort engaging with your people or your material and strike the right balance between straight talking and dumbing down.

If you have great expertise and enthusiasm within your team or certain high-profile individuals, you can highlight this and use it as a differentiator.

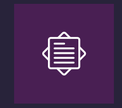


Always have a clear business case in mind

This is important even if you're building towards it in the early stages of engagement or 'Top of Funnel' content.

It's easy to fall into the trap of creating interesting or emotionally engaging content at the top of the funnel that has a weak link to the final case for change.

You should be able to clearly contextualise the case for change for their industry, organisation, job role and even personality type.



Make sure the proposition has firm foundations

Be clear about why your offering is the way it is and what's in it for the customer. Get the best out of the knowledge-holders and solution or service architects in your own organisation to sharpen your proposition for campaigning.

Further reading





The Challenger Sale & The Challenger Customer

Matthew Dixon, Brent Adamson, et al at CEB Inc.

Two of the most influential sales books of recent years with direct implications for marketers, including practical considerations for framing your proposition and reframing your prospects' world view. Also really helpful for considering the kind of personas that are most likely to drive change in their organisation and the kind of content they need.



How Brands Grow

Byron Sharp

This B2C-focused research is built from vast quantities of data on purchasing decisions. It argues strongly that in many cases, ideas of emotional connection and loyalty are secondary to the fundamentals of mental and physical availability.



Start With Why

Simon Sinek

This is based on the premise that every business, business unit or product has an interesting story at its heart. Finding that story, whether it's about the product, the methodology, the people, the culture, or anything else, can be the key to a sharper, more powerful proposition.



The Marketing Practice Proposition Playbook

As a response to this research and a review of the critical success factors in our best-performing campaigns in recent years, we've summarised our proposition refinement and optimisation (**PRO**) methodology here. It includes a basic proposition health-check, a step-by-step guide to our workings and some great examples of highly successful tactics that have resulted from this approach.

To get your copy, or talk through the approach with one of our Principal Planners, please contact our Head of Planning, **abancroft@themarketingpractice.com** or call Allyson Bancroft on **+44(0) 1235 433 498**.

About The Marketing Practice

Around 120 B2B marketers.

Across London, Munich, Seattle and our Oxfordshire HQ.

A fully integrated agency since our beginning in 2002.

Deep integration with a small number of global clients.

Balancing the needs of brand reputation and awareness with the commercial hard edge of demand generation.

Providing a unique perspective on what really works in B2B marketing.

