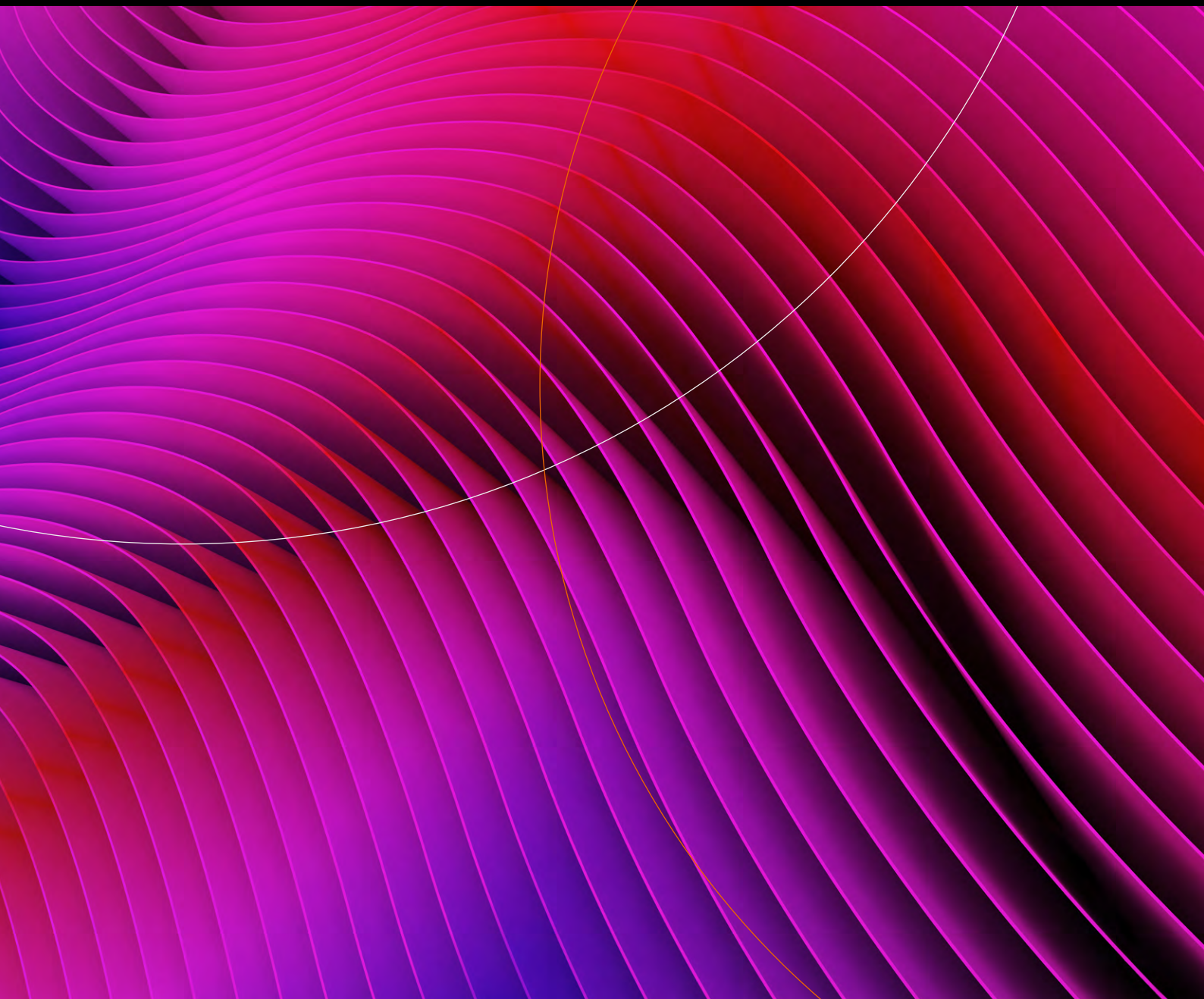
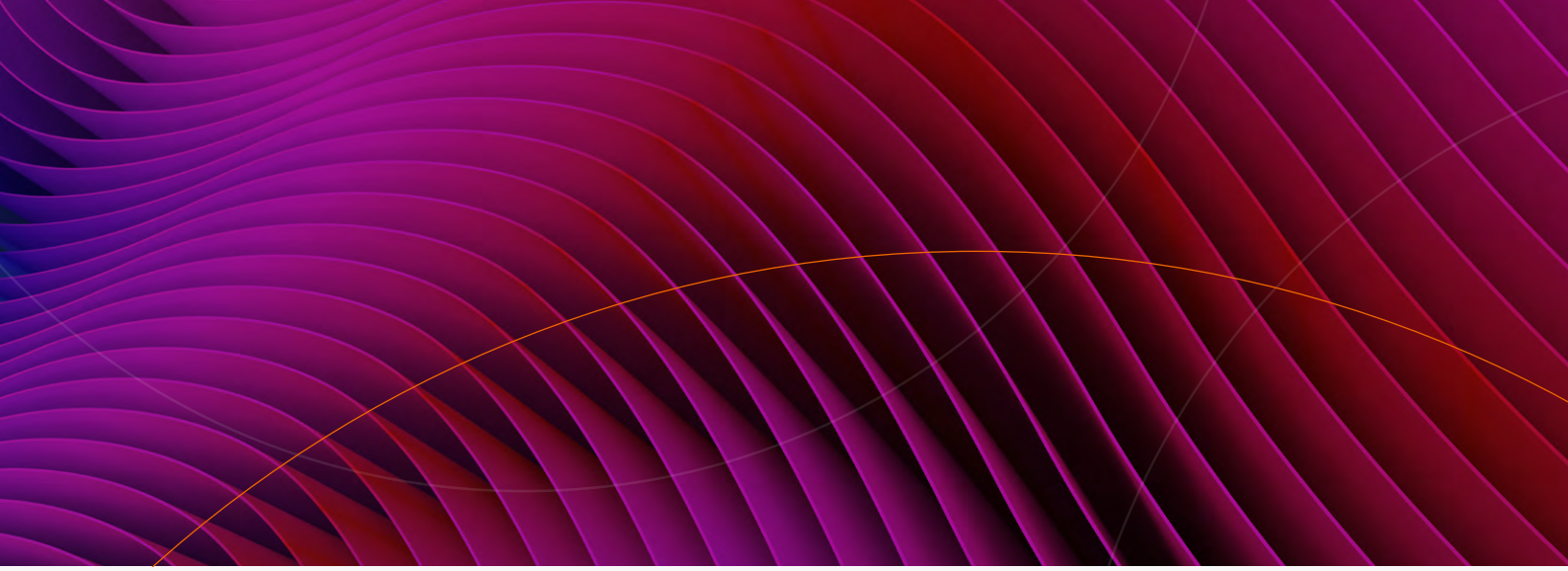
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Dare to be different:
The state of B2B content marketing differentiation in 2017

B2B Marketing
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Tomorrow People
Digital Marketing Agency





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A new survey highlighting the importance of differentiation in B2B content marketing



Alistair Norman
Managing director,
Tomorrow People

B2B Marketing and Tomorrow People commissioned research among 172 B2B marketers. The report revealed there's strong agreement that differentiation and consistency are essential to effective B2B content marketing, but most were struggling to achieve real differentiation.

Only half thought they were achieving any sort of differentiation and 38% thought they were on par with their rivals. This report is essential reading for anyone involved in B2B content marketing campaigns.

The report highlights the critical role of differentiation and how consistency, customer experience and data can contribute. And it reveals the reasons marketers give for not achieving the differentiation they know is vital for winning new business and retaining existing customers.

Key takeaways:

- The report encourages marketers to create less content for fewer channels, arguing quality over quantity will deliver better results.
- Few marketers are using data to either influence their differentiation strategy at the outset, or to review their strategy based upon insights gleaned from data gathered.
- The value of great customer experience comes not only from winning new customers, but also retaining the loyalty of existing customers.
- The report puts significant emphasis on measuring results: including why you should establish success measures from the outset, track the impact of each campaign and most importantly, use this data to continuously improve strategy.

"This report is essential reading for anyone involved in B2B content marketing campaigns"

Introduction

Wanna know why your B2B content marketing is such a steaming pile of mediocrity? Read our differentiation report that surveyed your marketing peers about their differentiation efforts, where it went wrong, and what they can do to, well, be a bit different.

Your content doesn't stand out from the competition, it's not right for the people you're sending it to, and you don't know how well it's working. Most importantly, you don't have time to do it any better.

Who says so? You do. We interviewed you (or at least 172 of your peers).

This report spells out the challenges faced by many B2B marketers and the ways you can use content more effectively to retain existing customers and win new ones. The key things we cover are differentiation, consistency, customer experience and data.

Bottom line, you can give yourself more time by creating less content and making sure it's better and more relevant to the people who matter. This'll deliver better results. Let's take a look at what B2B marketers said when we interviewed them.

This is what your peers told us:

We surveyed 172 B2B marketers globally, in association with Tomorrow People, and we asked:

- Why marketers need to differentiate the content they produce.
- The top challenges marketers face when differentiating their content.
- How they tailor content to their audience.
- How data influences differentiation strategy.
- Why marketers think a lack of consistency is such a bad thing.

"You can't look at the competition and say you're going to do it better. You have to look at the competition and say you're going to do it differently"

Steve Jobs

What exactly do we mean by differentiation?

If you're not trying to be different, you're in the wrong job.

Differentiation is about several things. Firstly, it's about what you're saying. You need to talk about the competitive edge you have over the competition, why your customers came to you in the first place and why they stay with you. And it depends how you say it: if you publish dreary copy, dull videos or pointless infographics, you won't stand out.

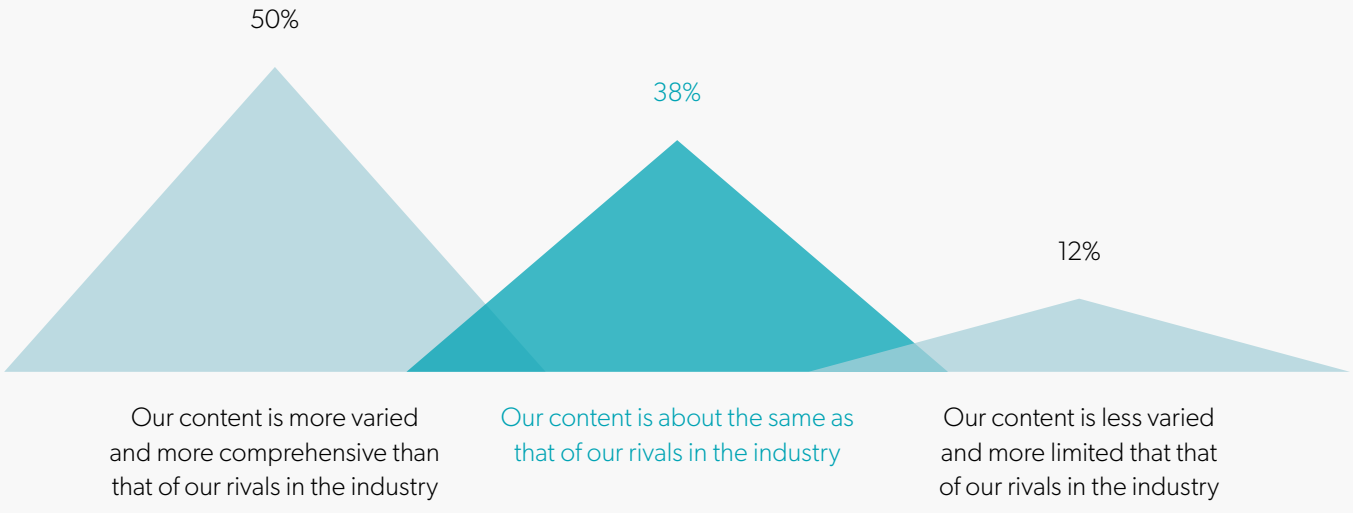
Then you have to differentiate by audience. To sell to your customer, you need to understand the needs of everyone in the buying group and that applies equally to marketing.

Every significant B2B purchase is influenced by several people who make up the buying group. Each person has specific needs that must be met by the vendor before the sale is agreed. Content that helps them understand exactly how your product or service will meet their needs, even needs they may not be entirely aware of yet, is what you need to deliver.

You should also differentiate by channel. The same message should be tailored for email, LinkedIn and blog posts or any other channel you use. Ideally, you should differentiate by more sophisticated and effective measures, like propensity to buy or frequency of purchase.

Bearing in mind that a lot people think they're doing a better job than they actually are, only half of those interviewed believe their content stands out. That's shocking. Worse still, 38% believe their content is on par with that of their rivals. How do these marketers expect customers and prospects to engage with and believe in their content, if they don't believe in it themselves?

Figure 1.
How would you rate the content you produce compared with your competitors in your industry?

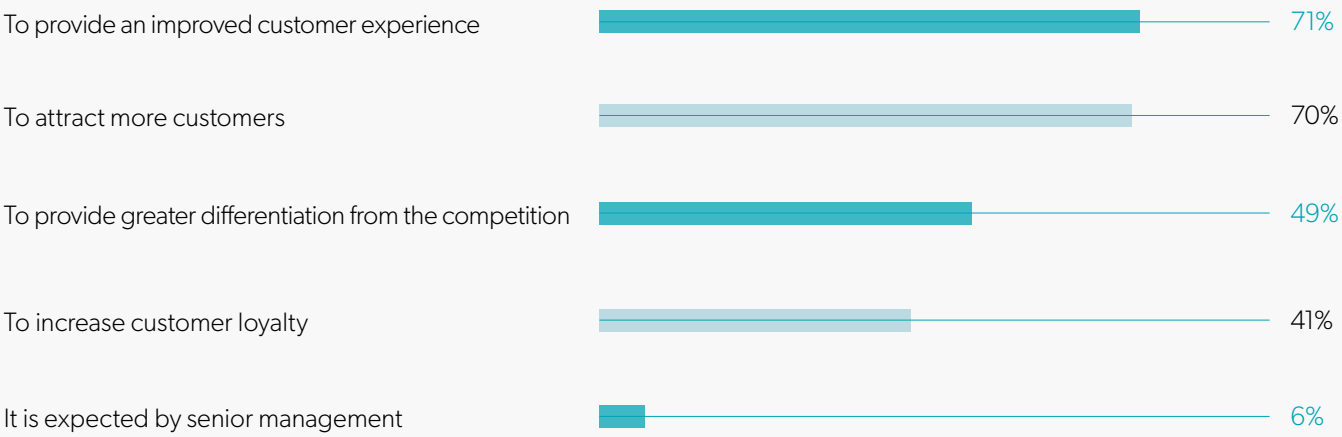


The people we interviewed clearly understood the value of differentiation in terms of customer experience and winning more customers, but strangely not for retaining existing customers or to show a clear difference to the competitor's offering. If you're not different from the competition, why should customers buy from you?

Only 16% of B2B marketers have a formal, documented strategy for differentiation. Around half (48%) have a strategy but it isn't documented. Having no strategy usually results in a confused and inconsistent approach and it makes it hard to measure results.

"If you're not different from the competition, why should customers buy from you?"

Figure 2.
What are the primary reasons for differentiating the content you produce by channel or audience?



Most marketers know this and have done the work to segment their audience, create personas and identify the channels they use and the messages they need to see. Then they ignore their own research! Just 60% tailor their content to audience segments or buyer personas they've created.

One in five brands have carried out segmentation, and a quarter use personas, but then don't use these to influence their content differentiation. Only 23% personalise right down to the level of the individual.

So, many marketers know what customers and prospects want, they also know how important customer experience (CX) is, but they don't deliver it.

When it comes to the tailoring itself, industry (77%), the content formats popular with their audience (50%) and location (49%) are the three main differentiators most marketers use. Hardly surprising, these are relatively easy to access and understand.

"They also know how important CX is, but they don't deliver it"

Figure 3.
Does your organisation tailor its content by audience?

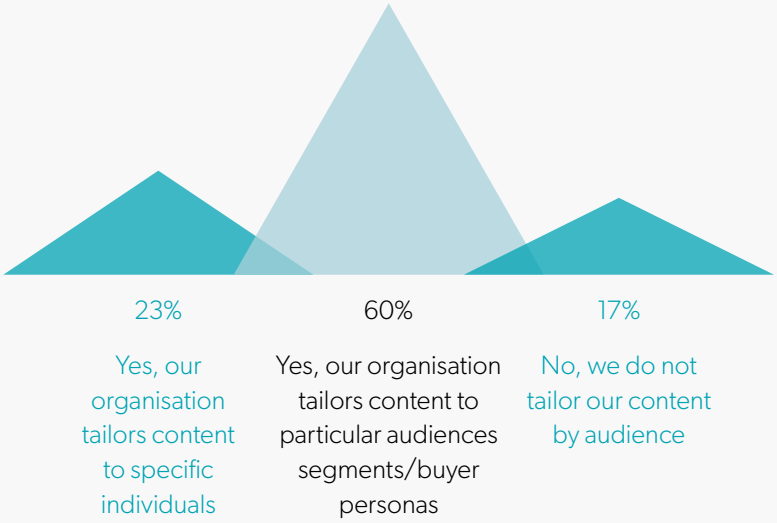
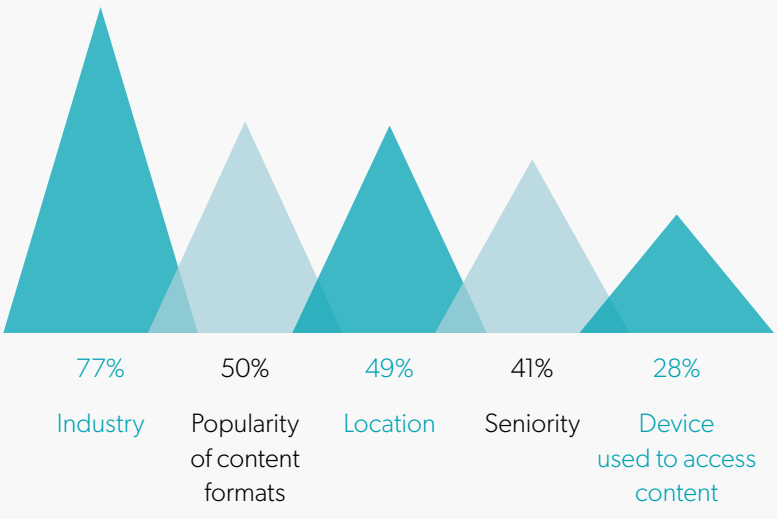


Figure 4.
The top five most common differentiators B2B marketers use to tailor content by audience



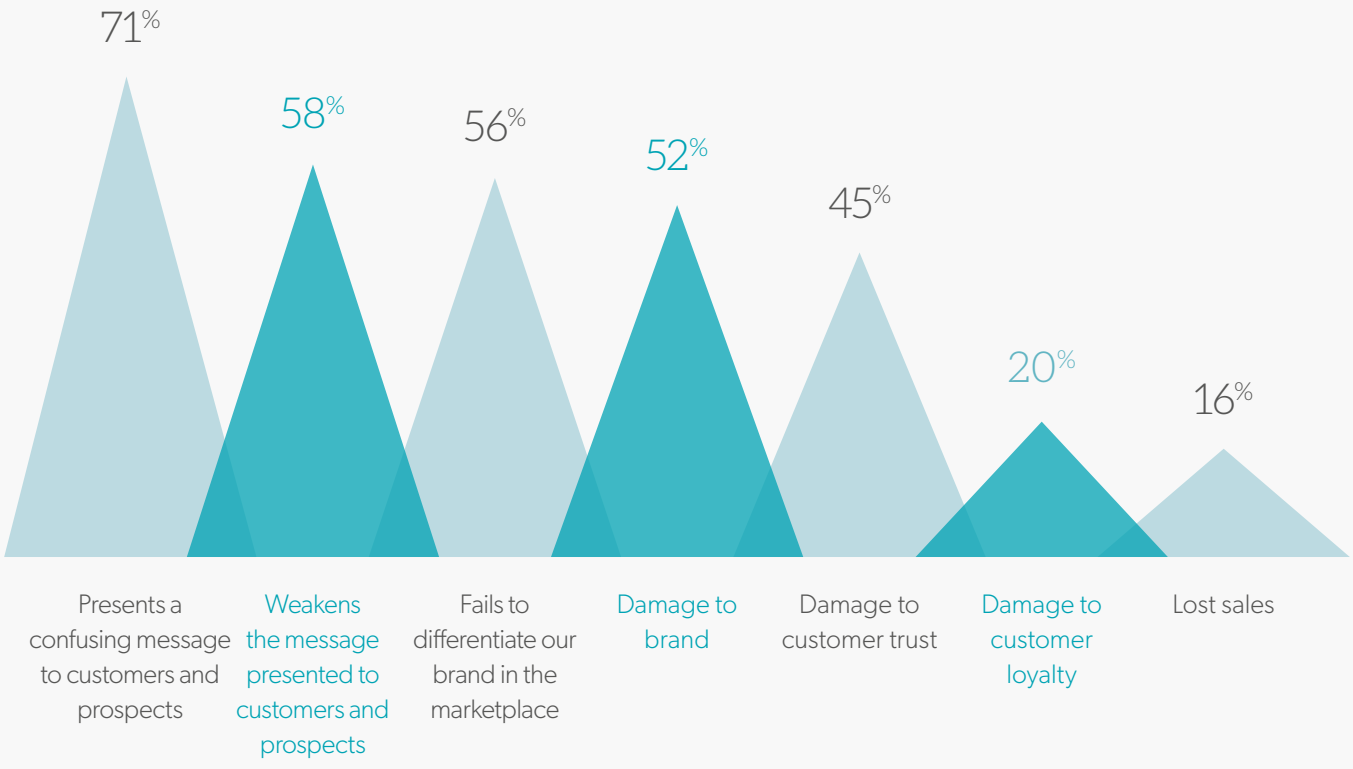
The importance of consistency

Around four out of five organisations have formal guidelines in place governing the look and feel of their brand, but only 60% have tone of voice guidelines. This is despite 71% of our respondents thinking presenting a confusing message to customers and prospects is the most harmful thing you can do to your brand.

Overall, just 7% of those canvassed rated their brand consistency as excellent, with the majority considering theirs to be either good or average. Marketers must prioritise quality over quantity if they don't have time for both.

The single biggest challenge to consistency, according to the research, was the number of different marketing messages, cited by just under a third of respondents. But it's not the number of messages that are the problem (or indeed the volume of communications, cited by 29%) – these are within the control of the marketer. As with any marketing, the messaging should remain consistent.

Figure 5.
What do you see as the top three consequences of a lack of consistency on a brand's content?



Not only these, but there's also the challenge of both meeting your deadlines and replicating that consistency of both message and tone across everything you produce, day in, day out. All content has to be in the same tone of voice. There's no single tone of voice that works for every organisation and it would be even harder to differentiate if there was. But it has to be consistent across all your content. This means creating a style guide that not only talks about how and when you use active language, first or third person and UK or US English, but also informs consistent use of abbreviations, numbers and date protocols.

This may seem to be beyond the remit of some marketers, but wherever possible this consistency should be present across all communication with customers, from first contact to sales and customer support to financing. This is how you create a positive, consistent customer experience (CX).

Marketers talk about the importance of CX, but in many cases they don't appear to link it to business critical outcomes. More than 50% of respondents thought a poor CX would damage the brand, present a confusing message, or contribute to a failure to differentiate the brand. But only 20% thought damage to customer loyalty was a big negative and 16% throught sales lost because of inconsistent messaging was a major negative. It's unlikely that senior management would agree.

Clear, consistent messaging improves the customer experience and that in turn means more sales to existing customers and more new customers.

"More than 50% of respondents thought a poor CX would damage the brand, present a confusing message, or contribute to a failure to differentiate the brand"

Data is the key to defining success

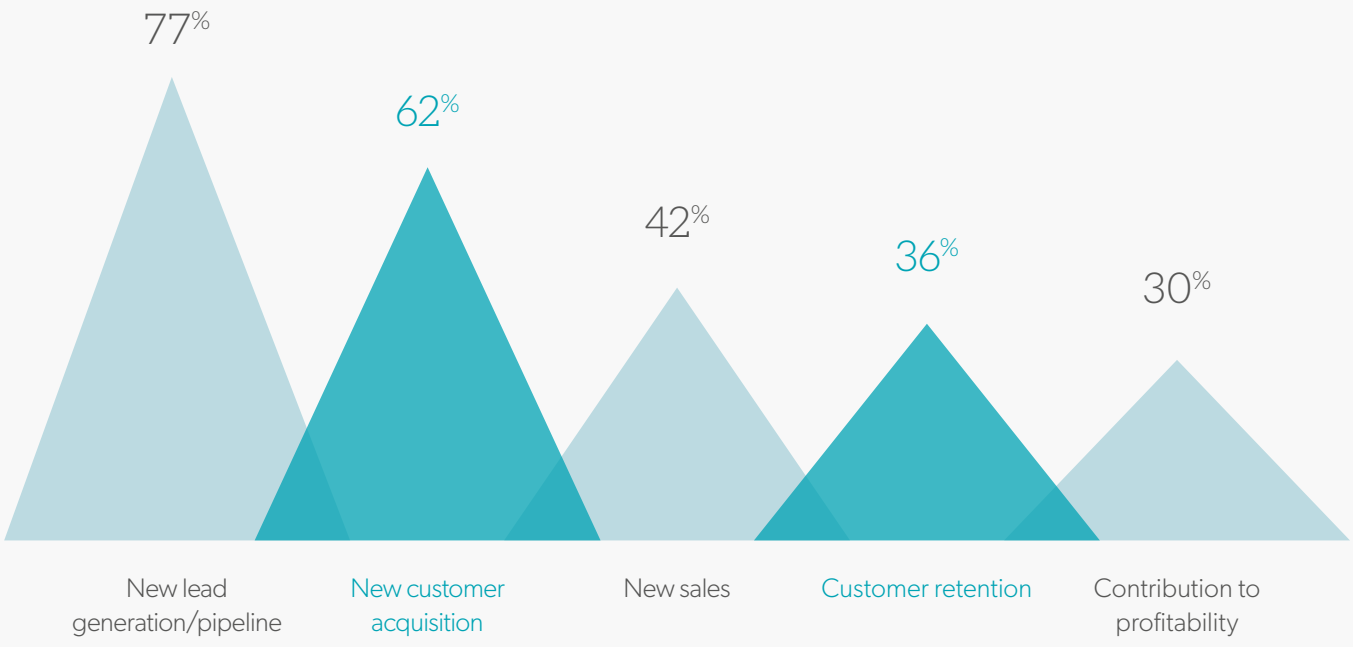
Only 52% of respondents say data influences their strategy and a further 31% say they're collecting data but are not using it for differentiation. If the data's there, why not take advantage of it?

Maybe they can't get hold of it? More than a third (34%) claim it's difficult, and a further 6% say it's very difficult to access. But an additional third say it's neither easy nor difficult. Perhaps this group hasn't even tried to get hold of the data to give it a try?

The focus on acquiring new customers (62%) is almost twice as high as the interest on retaining existing ones (36%). Around 42% measure the success of their differentiation efforts through new sales and more than three quarters (77%) use lead generation or new pipeline. But despite knowing that customer loyalty and customer acquisition depend on distinctive and consistent messaging, this is often lost.

When it comes to measurement, around half (54%) of B2B marketers track the success of their strategy, and a similar proportion, (only 52%), review their strategy based on the insights they gather from their data. Both these figures are too low – what's the point of all these differentiation efforts if the outcome is not recorded and compared, or nothing is done with the results?

Figure 6.
Which of the following measures do you use to calculate the value of your differentiation efforts?



What's stopping you doing a better job?

When asked about their biggest obstacles, most marketers (69%) cited time to plan as their primary hurdle. Other challenges included their ability to create thought leadership (52%), lack of insight or data (44%) and buy-in from the business to be brave and creative (41%).

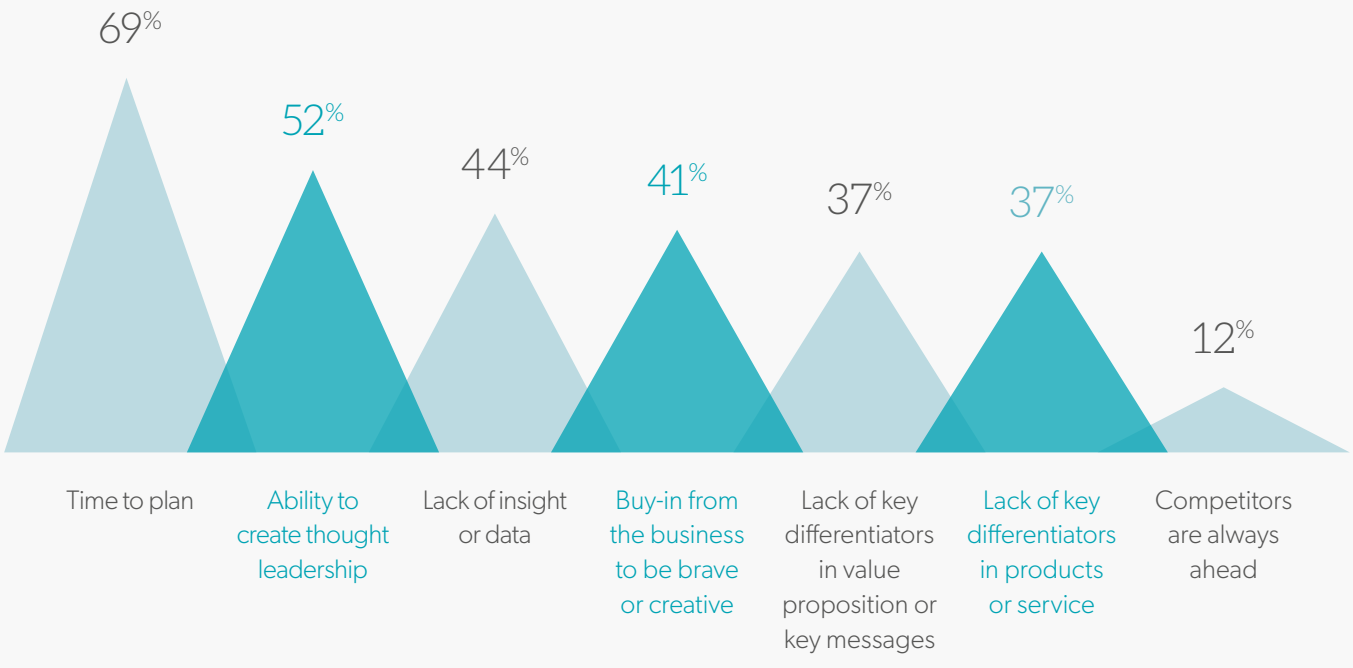
You do have time. But you're almost certainly wasting it by trying to fill too many channels.

Of the 11 channel options the survey offered, eight out of 10 marketers are using 10 of them. In addition, almost two-thirds of respondents claim to be creating exclusive content for seven of these. That's spreading content too thin. No wonder it's so poor.

Less than one in 10 marketers rate their ability to create content for all these channels as excellent. They're settling for average to good.

"You do have time. But you're almost certainly wasting it by trying to fill too many channels"

Figure 7.
What are the top three challenges when it comes to differentiating your content?



4 key takeaways

1. **To be different, focus and do it better**

   The results of the survey show marketers are spreading themselves too thin – trying to cover too many channels and ending up doing a pretty mediocre job across many of them. Efforts should be refocused to concentrate on doing a better job through the channels that really matter. The result should be better content that's more relevant to the target audience. This refocusing should also remove the challenge of 'time to plan'. Formalising this in a documented strategy will also help drive crucial consistency.

2. **Use data to drive your differentiation (beyond the obvious)**

   There's more data on customers and prospects available for marketers than ever before. Start using it to help your content stand out. Look beyond the obvious segmentation (industry, company size or browsing device), dig into the data and examine those correlations that really have an impact on your brand's bottom line. Which groups have the highest propensity to buy? Or which segments are the most frequent customers? By doing this, you'll have a better idea which audiences to target with your differentiated content.

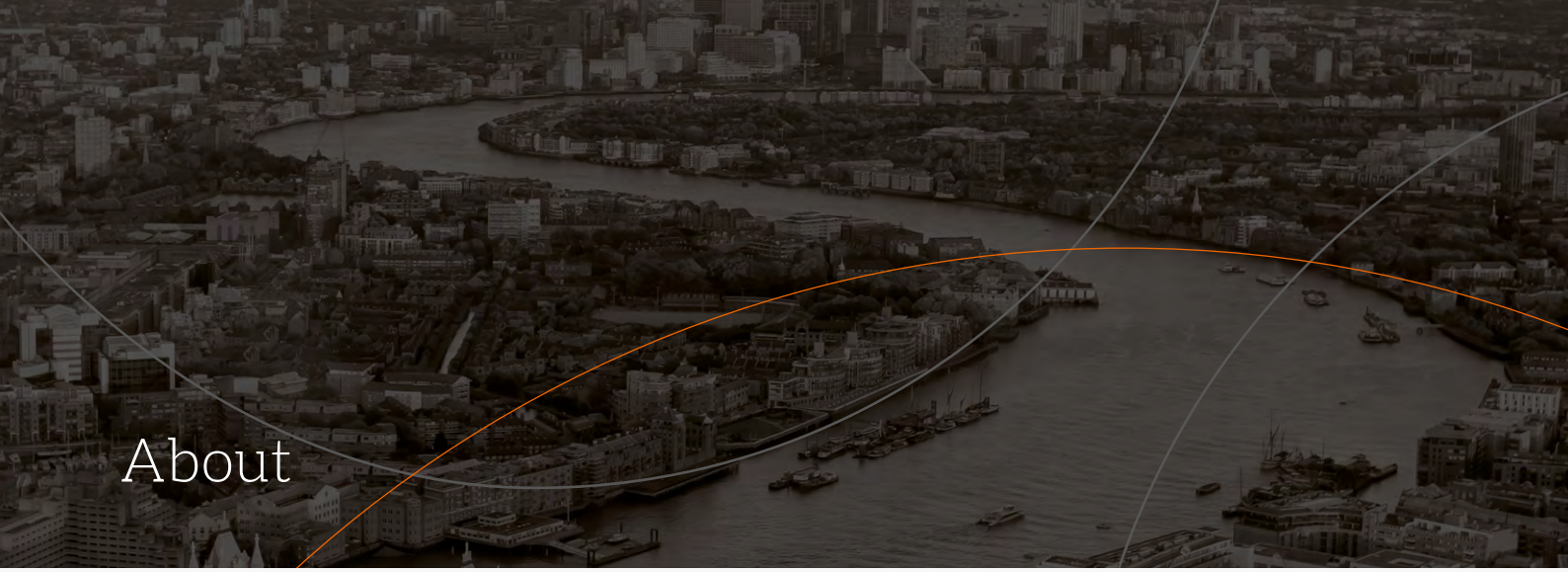
3. **Understand the 'why' behind customer experience, and make your CX consistent**

   We can see from the research that B2B marketers think customer experience is important, but the way they're measuring their differentiation efforts suggests they don't really understand why. Providing great CX isn't only about generating new leads and pipeline (although, those are among the many benefits). It also develops customer loyalty, encourages repeat business, reduces churn – and perhaps most importantly – makes your brand stand out in the marketplace. If you can create an outstanding CX through your content, and make sure it's consistent across all your communications, that's what'll differentiate you from the competition.

"Providing great CX develops customer loyalty, encourages repeat business, reduces churn and makes your brand stand out in the marketplace"

4. **When you differentiate, measure it**

   Almost half of marketers are not making any effort to measure the impact of their differentiated content. How will they ever know if they're being successful or not? And if you've got no idea how your own content is performing, how can you judge whether you're outperforming the competition? Establish your success measures from the outset, track the impact of your efforts, and most importantly, use this data to continuously improve your strategy.



About

B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

Its key products are:

- Online community
- Magazine
- Awards
- Research and reports
- Training
- Events
- Membership.

For more information on any of these products or services go to b2bmarketing.net or call +44 (0)20 7014 4920.

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Tomorrow People

Tomorrow People is an award-winning specialist B2B content agency with offices in Birmingham (UK), London (UK) and New York (US). It uses modern marketing techniques to redefine B2B brand experiences for some of the world's best-known companies. It does this by creating compelling content for everyone from tech startups right through to established financial service providers.

Founded by two partners in 2011, Tomorrow People employs over 30 people across editorial, web development, account management, design and digital marketing teams, as well as working closely with a pool of sector expert copywriters and videographers.

Tomorrow People is a pioneer of the inbound marketing approach, using highly relevant, targeted content to drive leads through a nurturing process and convert them into customers.

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