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B2B Marketing

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Mapping the small business customer journey



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Introduction

Small businesses don't enjoy being treated like enterprise prospects. Yet it's an error many B2B marketers make.

Any organisation serious about gaining a share of the UK's £1.8 trillion small business market, should be aware that a bite-sized enterprise proposal won't impress 'bite-sized' business owners. They want to be listened to and understood on their own merits.

We spoke with CMOs directly marketing to small firms to uncover the differences between the buying journeys of small businesses and enterprise customers. We asked how they map the small business customer journey and where B2B marketers can make the biggest impact.

Read on to find out:

- What makes the SME customer journey different to that of an enterprise customer.
- How to segment your audience.
- How to track your customer touchpoints.
- How marketing can make an impact on the SME journey at each of its four stages: Awareness, consideration, purchase, and post-purchase.

> "The first thing to recognise is that no SME would ever classify themselves as an SME! It's a catch-all term invented by enterprise-focused vendors for a market that is usually not their hunting ground."
>
> Dan Roche, director, partner marketing, Automation Anywhere

Earnest's top 4 ways to smooth the customer journey

As part of its Think Small project, marketing agency Earnest has examined where B2B marketers are going wrong when approaching small businesses. Here are their four key pieces of advice:

1. Don't put unnecessary obstacles in the customer's way.
2. Avoid overwhelming customers with choice.
3. Consider different routes to purchase.
4. Use clear and transparent pricing, easy to understand terms and conditions, and flexible contract terms.

Part 1

Why SMEs are different

What are the main differences between a small business' customer journey and that of an enterprise client?

The buyer is likely to be the user

Unlike enterprise firms, product buyers tend to be end-users. Enterprise customers often use intermediaries, agencies or networks to instigate their purchase. This results in longer purchase journeys with longer procurement checks.

The customer journey is much shorter

The small business customer journey is shorter, because there are usually just one or two decision-makers, who tend to be the most senior people in the company. The lower cost of the product or service also makes the journey shorter.

The speed of decision-making is faster

An enterprise sales cycle can last months, or even years. SMEs generally want to make their purchases as soon as possible. There can be as little as one week's research before making a purchase.

Decision-makers are not always technical experts

While there may be a subject matter expert driving the enterprise purchase, for small business owners these purchases are just part of their day job. This makes them more averse to technical jargon, so you'll need to keep it simple and straightforward. Talk to the pain-points that are leading them to search for solutions.

The SME journey might not be linear

SMEs are often looking for immediate solutions to problems they've identified. They lack the well-defined purchasing processes enterprise firms have. This can make the journey more straightforward as they don't have layers of bureaucracy to push through. But be aware small customers won't all arrive at the same entry point.

In addition to these differences, the small business customer journey often has more in common with a B2C one. The scale and volume of transactions required to match the value of a single enterprise-level contract means a mass marketing approach and channels (which aren't traditional B2B options) could come into play.



How to segment the SME market

All good marketing starts with understanding the customer. In detail.

Small businesses are not a homogenous entity. If your starting point is planning how to target 'SMEs' in general, it isn't going to be effective. The term SME can cover sole traders to mature mid-size businesses with multiple offices and hundreds of staff.

Depending on your product or service, segmentation by location, industry or a combination of firmographics could work. Alternatively, you could employ the SUE model of segmentation. This looks at:

- **Significance:** What does the purchase mean to the business?
- **Urgency:** How time-critical is the need for that purchase?
- **Ease:** How simple is it to research and buy the product/service?

The higher the SUE the more the purchase is considered and analysed. The lower down the scale, the more emotional the purchase decision becomes.

For more advice on segmenting small businesses, download our free guide **Building a successful SME campaign.**

Questions to ask of your customer

Once you've segmented your audience it's time to understand your customers in greater detail.

Among the questions you should ask are:

- Who are the decision-makers?
- Who are their influencers?
- What are their challenges and needs?
- Where do they go for information?
- What's their decision-making process?

Apply this intelligence to your customer journey map, stage-by-stage. This can be supported by a deep analysis of website journeys using Google Analytics, supplemented by heat-mapping tools (such as Clicktale or Crazyegg) and user testing tools (such as usertesting.com or Optimizely). Qualitative research, such as focus groups, can also help to understand customer motivations.

Once mapping is complete, you may need to dive deeper, developing journeys for specific products or services, and plotting alternative routes of entry and exit.

> "The customer journey is no longer linear. Our customers are facing other things, like market and national trends that will adjust their needs. You have to track and adjust that journey like a living thing. Understand the customer, and their decision-making process. Take the time to analyse how you're doing at each stage, and be prepared to make the changes."
>
> Linh Bergen-Peters, CMO, Spotcap

Touchpoint template

Having plotted the SME's buying journey, you should identify the various triggers that'll entice your SME customer into moving to the next leg. This will allow you to deliver personalised messages to the right person at the right time, and identify where customers are dropping out.

Basic template for your touchpoint audit

	Awareness	Discovery	Engagement	Sale, fulfillment and onboarding	Servicing
Customer touchpoints	**Owned media** › LinkedIn feed and Groups › Twitter › Website › Blogs › YouTube **Earned media** › Engaged LinkedIn users › Engaged Twitter users › Google search **Paid media** › LinkedIn › Twitter › Display retargeting › Paid search **Face to face** › Trade shows	**Owned media** › LinkedIn feed and Groups › Twitter › Website › Blogs › YouTube › Email › Whitepapers › Webinars **Earned media** › Engaged LinkedIn users › Engaged Twitter users › Review sites **Real-time** › Trade shows › Breakfast meetings	**Owned media** › Sales collateral › Case studies › Video testimonials › Email › Website and blog › LinkedIn › Twitter › Proposals/RFPs **Real-time** › Sales team – telephone › Customer services team – telephone › Sales meetings/ pitches › Tailored inhouse events	**Owned media** › Whitepapers › Blogs › User groups **Real-time** › Invoicing › Warehouse dispatch › User training › Courier › Customer support › Account management	**Owned media** › Email – renewal programme › Webinar education programme › Whitepapers › Loyalty programme **Real-time** › Account management › Customer support

Building trust before the journey begins is crucial

Small businesses won't begin a purchase journey with you if they don't trust you. Earnest's research with Imperial College London into *How small businesses really buy* found confidence was a crucial factor in purchases – it applies to the source of advice, the recommendation and in the brand itself.

Trust is more important within the SME customer journey because often the stakes of the purchase are much higher and more personal. It's harder for small businesses to write off bad decisions, and the decisions can be make or break.

Focus on providing a solution, rather than making a sale. After all, behind every business purchase is the drive to resolve a problem. If you can position yourself as a source of advice, a small customer is more likely to trust you, and if they don't immediately buy from you, they are more likely to return to you when they are in the market for a solution.



> "If you're looking to buy something critical to your business, you're not going to buy it from someone you don't trust. I think that's our, and our competitors', main challenge – to establish that level of trust. That's why we put a lot of effort and investment into something like 'Sage Advice' [the company's blog]. Once you have trust it's easier for people to take that next step in the journey and trust you with a purchase."
>
> **Miguel Gernaey, general manager, digital marketing, Sage**

Part 2

Awareness

Why SMEs are different

SMEs claim not to be influenced by direct marketing. Just 7% of small businesses surveyed by Earnest said advertising is a purchase trigger and 3% said the same of social media. This compares to more than a quarter (27%) of small businesses that believe they're most likely to take notice of products or services when 'scanning the market'.

How you need to approach them

Marketers can make the biggest short-term impact by working out the search journey – from search query to the landing page. For products or services that don't have high search volumes, branded channels should be added to create a branded search query. The benefits are lower-cost traffic, and sending traffic direct to the website.

With smaller business generating lower revenue per deal, you'll need significant volumes to be able to make outbound worthwhile. Television and radio ads, along with Facebook advertising, were highlighted as the most effective channels.

> "[In my previous role] we were constantly running ongoing, integrated campaigns across multiple channels, as the objective was to maximise new customer acquisition. But as an example, we would see a small spike in PPC/organic search leads when we pursued outbound, awareness-raising tactics such as email, and a larger spike when we ran (more expensive) above the line campaigns, such as radio ads."
>
> **Dan Roche, director, partner marketing, Automation Anywhere**

Key actions

- **Be present.** Have a strong brand presence to ensure SMEs know who you are, and have the right perception of you.
- **Focus on inbound tactics.** SMEs will be searching for a solution to their pain-points. Make it easy for them to find the answer from you with SEO and branded search.
- **Support your inbound activity.** Awareness raising tactics such as TV or radio ads will boost any inbound campaigns – but you need to be sure the cost of any outbound activity does not outweigh the revenue it will generate.

> "Know your customer as much as you possibly can, and build trust – that's one of the most important things. Preconceptions of your brand have a huge impact, no matter what you do in terms of digital and the experience. If you can't get over that first hurdle of them being able to trust you, you're not going to get anywhere."
>
> **Kirsty Bedingfield, strategic planning manager, central campaigns, Sage**

Case study: Four-inch Freddies

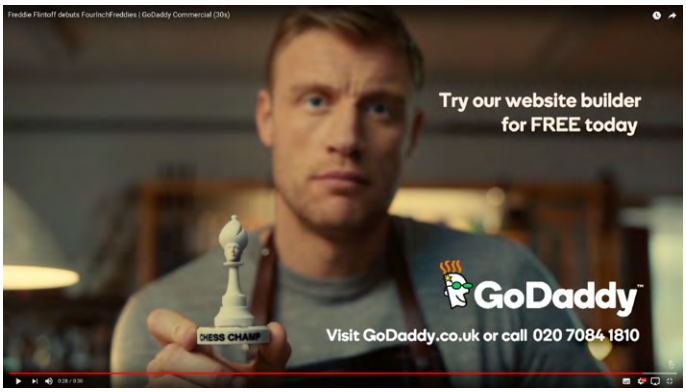
In January GoDaddy began its latest campaign, which ran across TV, digital, social and events, encouraging SMEs to use its web-building tools and software. This campaign supported GoDaddy's inbound efforts.

Former cricketer-turned TV presenter, Andrew Flintoff, was used as the campaign spokesperson. He explained how he built a website in less than an hour using GoDaddy's tools for his own 'side-hustle', creating four-inch miniature models of himself.









Part 3

Consideration

Why SMEs are different

SMEs may not be experts in your products and will look to trusted sources for advice. Targeting these individuals is just as important as trying to reach the small businesses directly.

As they've started a journey with you, ensuring they don't drop out at this stage is critical. That means making the route to conversion as smooth as possible. If small businesses can't find the information they're looking for, they'll disappear. If the process is too complicated, they'll abandon and find an alternative that doesn't cost them additional time, effort and money.

Earnest's research found more than half of small businesses cited product demos as the most trustworthy source of information at this stage. Demos tend to take place at a much earlier stage of the customer journey than for enterprise clients, because SMEs are time-poor and want the information much more quickly.

How to approach them

Small businesses rely on external influences, meaning your marketing programmes should target those influencers too. Understand who they rely on for advice – subject matter experts, local business networks or trade bodies, for example – and make sure your messaging is attuned to those groups. At accountancy software provider Sage, for instance, accountants and bookkeepers are the two primary groups of influencers.

Review sites are also a key source of information for SMEs, so ensure you have a positive reputation. Favourable advocacy from small business customers you've previously worked with can have a hugely beneficial impact here.

To make the journey as smooth as possible, concentrate on the landing pages and ensure these either have all the necessary product information on them, or they have clearly signposted routes to where customers can find what they need. If the SME shows interest in a product, but can't find the details or faces an obstacle, they'll abandon you.



"We noticed our customers were dropping off at a point where they needed to share information with us. They had to share documents on financial information and business performance and it was quite a tedious process. Because they're time-poor and want simplicity, we developed a proprietary document recognition software. This allows prospects to drag and drop documents, and in less than a minute our system recognises the relevant data, standardises it, and maps it to our own underwriting system. It has really simplified the lives of our clients who are applying for a loan. And we have seen the effects of that in the journey."

Linh Bergen-Peters, CMO, Spotcap



Key actions

- **Target the influencers.** Marketing to those whom SMEs rely on for advice and support is just as crucial as the small businesses themselves.
- **Make it easy for them.** Focus on a clear progression from landing pages to finding product information, to accessing trials and finding customer support.
- **Support trials and demos.** If a customer takes a demo, make sure they are supported the whole way through the process to boost stickiness to the product.

Part 4

Purchase

Why SMEs are different

While the majority of small businesses do prefer to complete their transaction online, it'd be wrong to presume they only want a digital experience. There's plenty out there who'll want to pick up the phone or speak to someone in person.

SME expectations are similar to those of consumers, in that they expect things to be easier online. But there's a swathe that aren't computer savvy and don't use computers on a daily basis. For them, the option to pick up the phone is welcomed.

> "One of the key pieces of feedback our customers keep bringing up is that they want personal interaction. You can digitise to make some of the process easier and faster, but when they want to speak to somebody, you definitely need to be there for them."
>
> **Linh Bergen-Peters, CMO, Spotcap**

How to approach them

The important thing is to ensure you have a variety of options for your small business customers, and don't apply a one-size-fits-all approach.

Make sure you have the routes to customer goals mapped throughout your user journey. Some customers will want a quick purchase, others will require greater support. Ensure these are signposted on the website to direct the different customers down the most appropriate paths. But don't provide so many options that the customer doesn't know which to choose. Two or three should be sufficient.

> "You need to have those options depending on who your audience is and who you're talking to. It needs to be easy for those ahead of the curve, and accessible for those not completely confident about it."
>
> **Kirsty Bedingfield, strategic planning manager, central campaigns, Sage**

Key actions

- **Map your goals.** Understand what your SME customers are trying to achieve, and map the routes to those goals within your customer journey.
- **Optimise the biggest volume goals first.** Rather than trying to redesign all possible flows at once, which can quickly become confusing, concentrate on those that will drive the biggest volumes.
- **Provide options.** Not all SMEs want a solely digital purchase process (even if most do prefer one). Make sure you can provide sufficient options to serve all customers.

Case study: Using Peter Jones to build Trust with SMEs

Sage has had a strong brand in the UK for a long time, but perceptions in the market changed. Customers viewed its products as more expensive than their rivals and that the business was only interested in serving bigger customers.

To address these, the company launched its 'Ambition' campaign earlier this year, which was targeted at SMEs. Sage appointed Peter Jones, entrepreneur and former star of UK TV show *Dragon's Den*, as its 'ambition ambassador'.

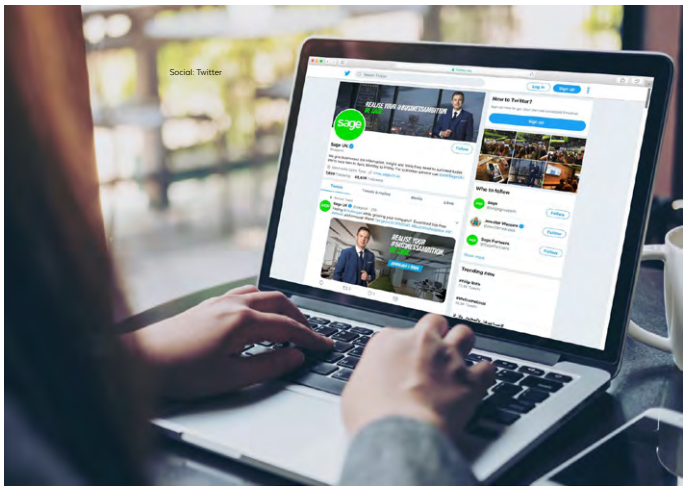
Miguel Gernaey says: "Having someone like Peter Jones as an ambassador for Sage, who is also a long-time Sage customer, builds trust. 'If Peter Jones can trust Sage, so can I'."

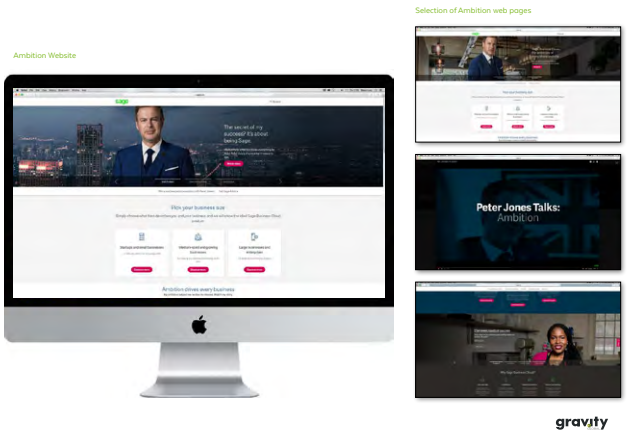
The campaign is running across TV, online and social, and there was a competition to find the UK's most ambitious business, where the winning small business would receive one-on-one advice from Peter.

"Ambition helps us get across that it doesn't matter what size you are," says Kirsty Bedingfield. "Every small business, whether starting out or scaling up, has ambition, and we're here for that journey. It helped us to help shift that perception and build that trust with small businesses."









Part 5

Post-purchase

Why SMEs are different

Of all the stages in the customer journey, it was the final stage that our experts said most resembled the enterprise journey. The reason is that for small businesses, after-sales care is just as important as the pre-conversion stages.

Again, because small businesses might lack technical expertise, this post-sales support is also vital to help them make the most of your product and improve their customer experience. Providing a great experience is the key to customer retention. Spotcap has mapped this stage of the journey in detail to optimise it, and seen 50% of customers return to them when they need a loan.

Small businesses place a high value on being part of a community, so developing an ecosystem where they can share advice, gain support, and talk to their peers is a way to leverage this. It makes them feel connected to their fellow customers, and creates a strong bond between them and your brand. Once a small business has signed a deal, most see it as a long-term commitment and they want that loyalty reciprocated.

> "It's a really important part for us that our care agents are available and can answer all the questions our customers have because that's a key point as a brand and a business. That is a bit more like in enterprise B2B, because you would expect support and help."
>
> Kate Cox, CMO, GoDaddy



How to approach them

It's important to provide different options for support, just as you provide different purchase options depending on the SME's preference. This could be email, phone or even dedicated account managers if resources permit.

At the consideration stage we saw what valued recommendations can bring in the small business community. Once the customer has made the purchase, there should be a mechanism to share their good experience. This could push referrals to online review sites, or web forms that allow customers to submit feedback. These testimonials can then be used to boost positive perceptions of the brand at the consideration stage with new customers.

You may find your small business customers are keen to help you develop case studies because they recognise the value of their recommendations to others in the SME community. Of course, it can also deliver PR for their own business.

If your purchase process involves selling products or services through partners (such as banks, law firms or local chambers of commerce), you should map in how SMEs will interact with them in your journey. These interactions, or even parallel journeys, could have a big impact on your customer's overall experience.

Strong networks are vital to small firms and brands need to engage with them. Establishing a community, either online or in person can help cement the bond between your brand and your customers. This could include offering space for SMEs to meet, or lending your in-house experts to run workshops on topics that will help them grow their networks. Earning a place within their network will enhance your brand's position as a trusted partner, and make it more likely the small business will recommend you to their contacts.

Key takeaways

- **Provide ongoing support.** The customer journey doesn't end at the purchase stage. Make sure you have resources in place to service a small customer's desired method of support.
- **Drive advocacy.** Make it easy for SMEs to share positive experiences at the end of the customer journey. This will benefit you when new customers come to consider your products.
- **Build a community.** Small businesses rely on networks. Helping to support these by creating communities for your products and services will enhance your brand.

Testimonials can then be used to boost positive perceptions of the brand at the consideration stage with new customers

Part 6

The SME customer journey checklist

1. Segment your market

Go beyond firmographic segmentation, and apply the SUE model – significance, urgency, ease – to more effectively identify your target customers.

2. Understand your prospects

Take the time to understand your potential customers, their business, motivations and pain-points in detail. Find out their needs, who they are influenced by, where they do their research, and their decision-making process.

3. Map the journey

Take your customer intelligence and combine this with deep analysis of website analytics to understand pathways and user journeys. Use the output to create a map of the different touchpoints at each stage and identify any potential roadblocks.

4. Build trust

SMEs won't buy from you if they don't trust you. Position your brand as a source of advice rather than a product and solution provider. This will pay dividends when the small business is ready to make a purchase.

5. Optimise your journey

Small businesses need to be able to find the answers they're looking for easily, and the route to conversion should be made as smooth as possible. Focus on developing landing pages that drive customers to pages with clear product information.

6. Support product demos

Demos or trials tend to take place earlier in the SME customer journey. These should be supported experiences for customers. This could be done through a combination of in-product communications, email campaigns, or telephone/in-person support from sales or product managers.

7. Provide options for purchase

Not all small businesses favour a digital experience, even if the majority expect to have this as an option. Ensure your journey map incorporates a variety of routes to purchase – but concentrate on those that drive the highest volumes to begin with.

8. Put after-sales care in place

Post-purchase support is just as important for SMEs as it is for enterprise customers. Provide a variety of support options, and make sure these are included within your journey mapping process.

9. Drive advocacy

Recommendations and referrals are vitally important to winning business among the SME community. When SMEs make a purchase, make it easy for them to provide both feedback on their experience. Share this with their small business network.

Comment

Reduce the friction to meet new expectations



Chris Wilson
MD, Earnest

The customer journey is starting to cause a lot of pain for B2B marketers. At the enterprise end of the market, it's manageable – largely because experienced sales and pre-sales teams can handle this on a personal, one-to-one level.

For the small business market, it gets harder – largely because of scale. There are simply too many small business customers to make replicating the enterprise model financially viable.

Therefore, more of the small business customer journey is online, or even through a call centre. And here is where we see a huge gap between small business customer expectations and the experience they actually receive.

Small businesses have grown used to using Amazon, Facebook and Google to meet many of their organisation's needs. Unsurprisingly, they've come to expect similarly 'frictionless' interactions elsewhere.

Unfortunately, many vendors simply haven't designed their online presence and customer-facing systems to reach this high bar.

We already know that much of the B2B buyer journey is spent online. That only adds to our industry's task to make the customer journey as beneficial as possible – for customers, and our own organisations.

This is where marketing is already starting to win. The content marketing world has helped instil the discipline of 'filling the funnel' with helpful content. After all, 89% of buyers say vendors who make it easier to build a business case get their business. But there's still work to do, with 46% of buyers saying they're overwhelmed by the content available.

While suppliers that make buying easy are 62% more likely to win a high-quality sale, that doesn't mean making it happen is easy. A great SME customer journey goes way beyond content marketing. Marketers must achieve a broader remit by owning all the customer touchpoints – from online and call centres to the actual systems customers interact with.

It's worth it. We're all under pressure to deliver revenue, but this is often translated to mean net new customer acquisition. When great experiences mean existing customers spend 140% more, isn't it time to change the focus? We think so. Your SME customers will thank you for it.

About

B2B Marketing

Established more than 12 years ago, we are the number one go-to resource for B2B marketers across the globe.

Through our content hub and professional development services – including events, training and networking – B2B Marketing users are empowered with the tools, insight and inspiration they need.

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Things change fast in B2B. Just staying on top of the changes can be a full-time job. So, we do that job for you.

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About

Earnest

Earnest is an award-winning agency chasing the humdrum out of B2B marketing.

Since we opened for business in 2009, we've been on a mission to show humdrum the door and pack it off with a one-way ticket to Blandsville. Because we believe business people need to be inspired, entertained and enthralled by brands every bit as much as consumers. After all, business people are still people. They just happen to be at work.

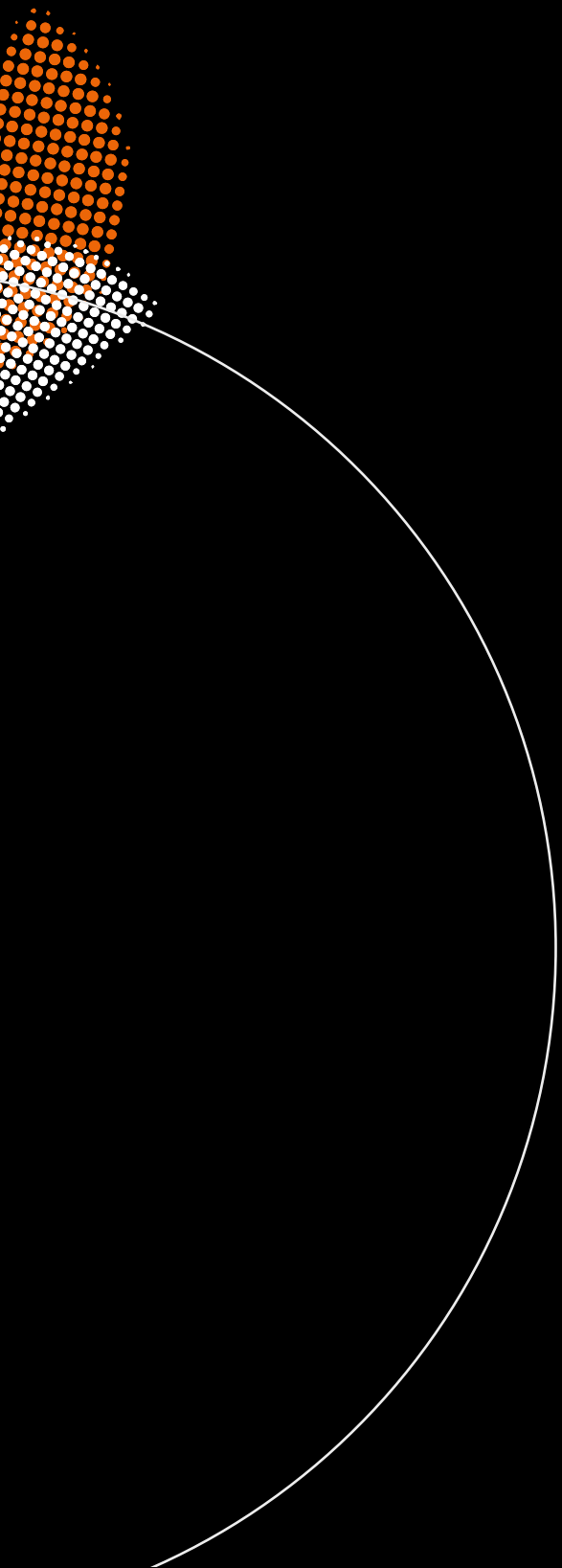
We help our clients with branding, campaigns, strategic planning, content, and experiential – delivering results and delighting audiences. We've earned a reputation for coming up with ideas that ignore the obvious and go way beyond the client's original objectives.

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