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Building an authentic brand

DEFINING THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BRAND SUCCESS

HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

(full version available to Propolis members only)



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SECTION 1

Branding's journey from logo to message to authenticity



PETER O'NEILL,
lead analyst,
B2B Marketing

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

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

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

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

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

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

SECTION 3

Brand authenticity interpreted in practice

BY PETER O'NEILL

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

3.1. The definition varies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



3.2. Brand authenticity is important and does bring benefits

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DAVE HUGHES,
head of marketing, Ideal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4. Authenticity must be visible internally as well as externally

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

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

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

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

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

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

Want to access the rest of this report?

Propolis members get exclusive access to the full version of the report, which includes insight on:

- *Does building an authentic brand mean a clash between commercial and altruistic imperatives?*
- *Has brand authenticity become more important because of Covid?*
- *The building blocks of brand authenticity. What exactly makes an authentic brand, and what should you look out for?*
- *The full version of the competency assessment framework. This report includes a lite version, but Propolis members get all of the granular detail (detail that could make the difference in your marketing organisation).*
- *An interview with Sue Mizera, discussing what the optimal mix between brand work and lead gen looks like, and the link between brand and content strategy.*
- *Our recommendations for your next steps towards building an authentic brand.*

Want to learn more about how you can access all of this content?
Check out Propolis now.

SECTION 4

Competency assessment framework

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

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

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



BRAND & CONTENT STRATEGY ASSESSMENT STEPS

Excelling

- Ensure your messaging framework is continually implemented and adapted across all stakeholders.
- Ensure product messaging is fully integrated in the overall messaging framework.
- Integrate central repository with other internal systems (i.e. DAM, CRM, etc).
- Track audience habits to help continuously plan, improve and educate stakeholders.
- Introduce a cross-functional editorial team, which deploys as overarching annual plan in an agile methodology to allow quick pivoting if necessary.
- Ensure plans are easily viewed, and outside requests are prioritised based on objectives and resource.
- Integrate new channels and work cross-functionally to ensure metrics are consistent and accessible in real-time by multiple teams.
- Now that audiences are constantly defined/reviewed, prioritise engagement plans and co-create with other departments.
- Ensure there is a dedicated specialist brand management team that has power to influence and direct core brand strategy.
- Use dashboards and reports that analyse performance. Automate workflows and use specialist internal resource that manages integrated brand and content management tech stack.

Improving

- Begin to roll-out a messaging framework across the company, and regularly review all messaging.
- Create templates for all content types and add to central repository. Implement messaging framework, editorial guidelines and TOV.
- Ensure content plans are mostly cross-functional, and informed by customer/market research etc. Repurpose content for multiple channels where possible.
- Automate distribution on most external/internal channels, and metrics aligned to revenue are shared.
- Begin working with stakeholders outside of sales to build additional audiences.
- Introduce a dedicated resource for brand management and governance across the whole organisation, and implement supporting systems (i.e. workflow management).
- Use dedicated resources and automation to keep on top of complicated process, and continue to build a multi-layered brand and content management stack.

Performing

- Align branding and messaging with brand vision and values across the customer journey.
- Place customisable content in a central repository, and allow access to teams outside of marketing.
- Create an editorial calendar that is aligned to core brand messaging and personas, and produce content for other departments, ensuring consistent messaging.
- Automate content distribution internally/externally, and begin measuring performance.
- Create customer personas.
- Implement a centralised content team (with specialists), which manages brand-specific requests and regional teams.
- Document most workflows/processes, and share with other teams.
- Begin automating manual workflows.
- Collaborate with IT to centralise and integrate off-the-shelf systems.

Developing

- Understand what the brand vision, mission and values are, and implement this into your messaging framework.
- Begin to work with product teams to collaborate on product branding and messaging.
- Start to build a central repository of brand guidelines/assets and make these accessible to the whole company (including templates).
- Coordinate better with commercial teams in planning brand-aligned content.
- Move towards a self-serve content model and away from emails, and start to introduce baseline metrics.
- Start to define target audiences and work with sales to understand what content to produce.
- Begin to move brand and content production/management in-house, relying on specialist teams.
- Start to introduce technology that hosts content and assets, and plan on integrating them.

Building

SECTION 7

The importance of humanising B2B



PAUL CASH,
CEO and founder,
Rooster Punk

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



About B2B Marketing and Rooster Punk

Powered by the community, for the community.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Find out more at **roosterpunk.com**

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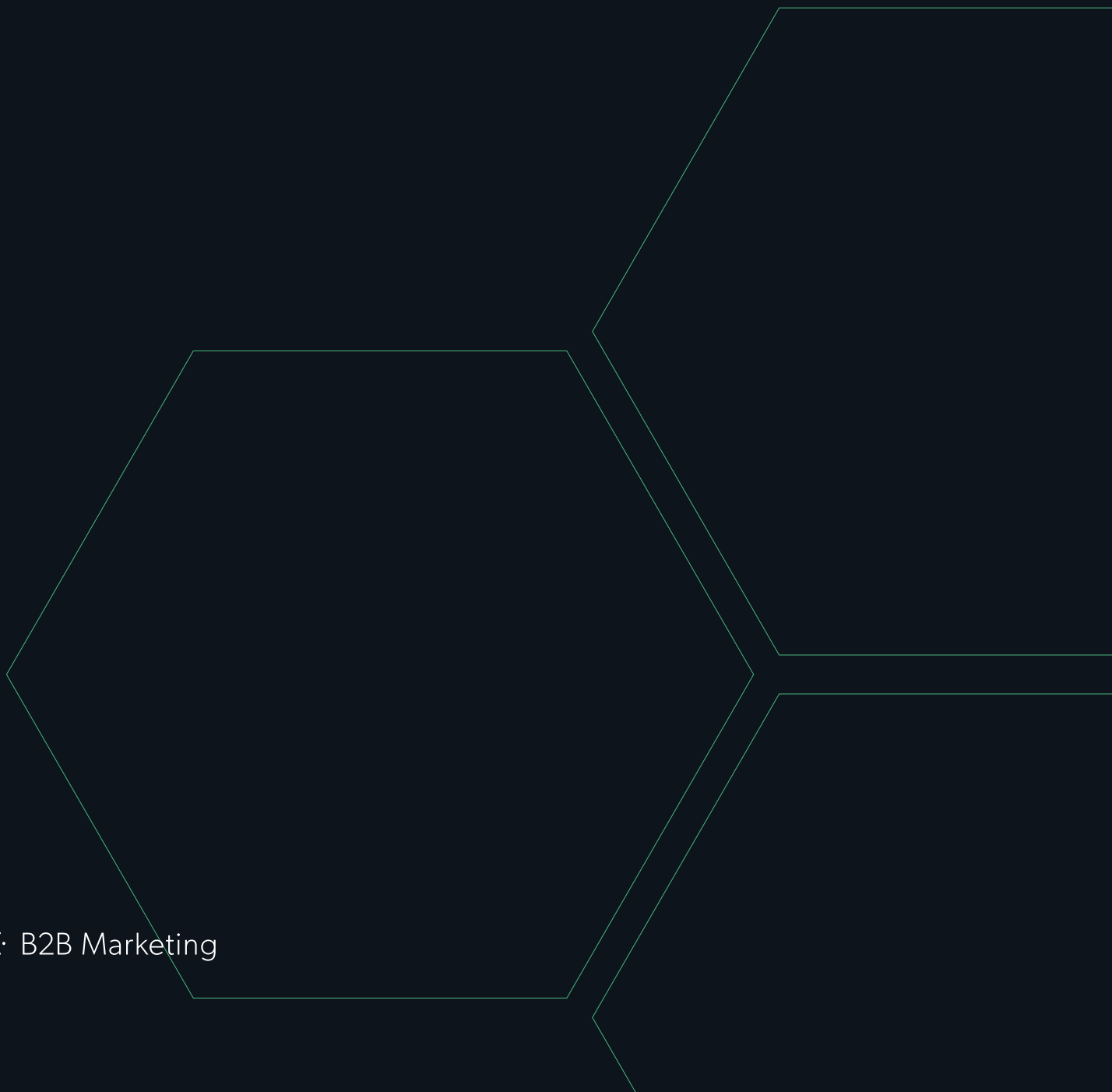
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