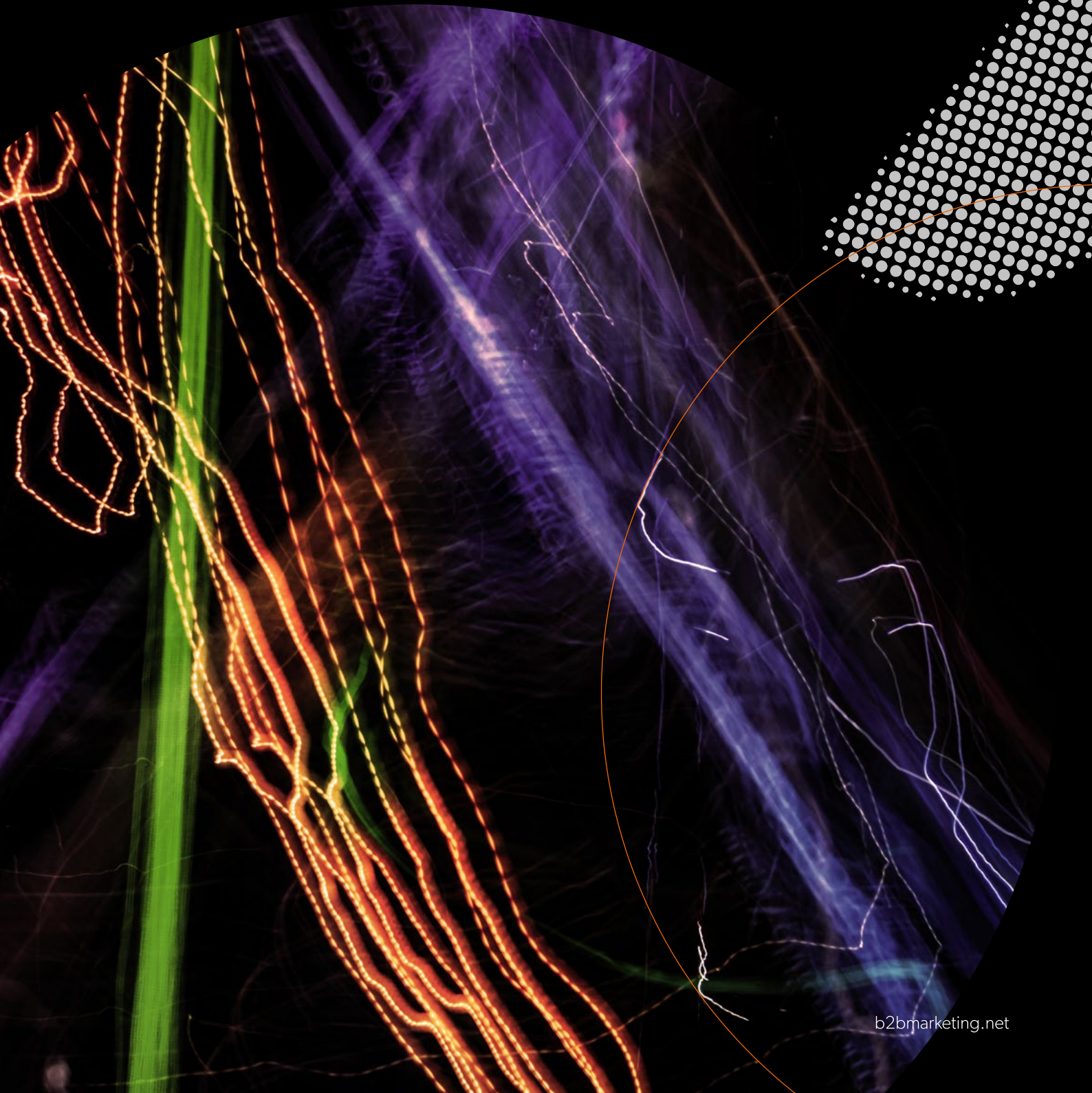


# The state of creativity in B2B

How do marketers define and measure creativity,  
and what role does it play in driving business success?





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# Introduction



**David Rowlands**  
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Marketing has always been regarded as a creative profession. However, with martech, automation and analytics all taking an increasingly large share of attention, where has this left creativity? Has the B2B sector been left dry in the creativity department? Alternatively, have marketers simply found new ways to be creative?

This report will lay out how marketers define and assess creativity, the role it plays in driving business success, the barriers they face in being more creative, and more.

To create this report, we surveyed 179 B2B marketers, asking questions like: 'Do you believe

that marketing is an inherently creative profession?' and 'How important do you think the role of creativity is in achieving your marketing goals/KPIs and increasing ROI?'

In addition to this, we interviewed four senior B2B leaders to obtain a more nuanced view of the state of creativity in B2B.

So, what does creativity look like in B2B? Do marketers feel they are inherently creative? What does the future of B2B creativity look like? How do marketers measure success when it comes to creativity? What is the business case for creativity? Read on to find out.



# Commentary



**Ben Hodge**  
strategy director  
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As humans, we are hardwired to pay attention to things that are different. In nature, small differences in the environment can signal threat or opportunity. We have never been the fastest or strongest of creatures, but this innate ability to detect and understand what is different has been a key factor in our success as a species.

Marketing 101 tells us that we need to deliver the right message, to the right people at the right time. But we must never forget the importance of being different. In today's hyper-competitive B2B world, the chances are that your competitors are reaching the same

conclusions as you about what is 'right.' Same message, same people, same time.

Creativity isn't about being different for the sake of it. By looking at communication problems from different perspectives and finding unexpected ways to solve them, we, as marketers, can make creativity a powerful strategy that captures attention, compels people to look deeper and creates a strong connection beyond the rational.

In my experience, marketers are usually vocal advocates of creativity, but, when we look across the spectrum of B2B marketing, we see a complicated picture. It often seems that, while there is an underlying ambition among marketers to be creative on the one hand, there is also a reluctance, or maybe fear, to follow through with new ideas on the other.

Technology also has an important role to play in the shifting relationship between marketing and creativity. The resources marketing teams were once able to invest in creativity now need

to go much further as businesses increasingly focus on building and deploying their martech.

Today, there is a danger that marketers settle for the 'safe' option rather than the creative one that lets them stand out, and instead put their faith in their technology to do the heavy-lifting when it comes to getting results. But, great marketing needs both creativity and technology. While the right tech will connect your powerful messages to your most valuable audiences more effectively than ever before, it will also do the same with bland, undifferentiated messages.

When we set out with B2B Marketing to design this study, our objective was to understand more about the changing relationship between the B2B marketing community and creativity – the attitudes towards it and the barriers to achieving it. By better understanding this story, we can help marketers to step out of their comfort zone and into their creative zone to drive better business outcomes.



## Section 1

# The creative landscape

### 1.1. What is creativity, anyway?

Like many subjective things, it's not easy to pin down a single definition of creativity. John Cleese said it's simply new ways of thinking about things. Albert Einstein, meanwhile, went with the more cerebral definition: "Creativity is intelligence having fun." To set the parameters for this analysis, we asked our sample to describe their take on what creativity means in the context of B2B. Here's a selection of responses that represents the wider sample:

*"The role of creativity is to bring insight powerfully to life in a manner that will persuade your target audience to take the specific course(s) of action that will push your brand forward."*

*"Creativity is the ability to turn relevant market and customer insight into effective campaigns and communications, whether that be as simple as a tweet, or as large as a brand launch."*

*"Creativity is the use of original messaging, new technologies and innovative tactics to help achieve the business' commercial objectives."*

*"Creativity in the context of marketing is creating something engaging where people don't feel they are being sold to."*

*"Creativity is the ability to use emotion to bridge great ideas and great business."*

While the answers varied widely, three themes emerged:

- › Bringing new, unique and innovative ideas to the table.
- › Entertaining, engaging and inspiring the intended audience.
- › Eliciting action that sells products, differentiates brands, or solves business problems.

In a line, creativity in B2B is using fresh ideas to incite action that drives results.

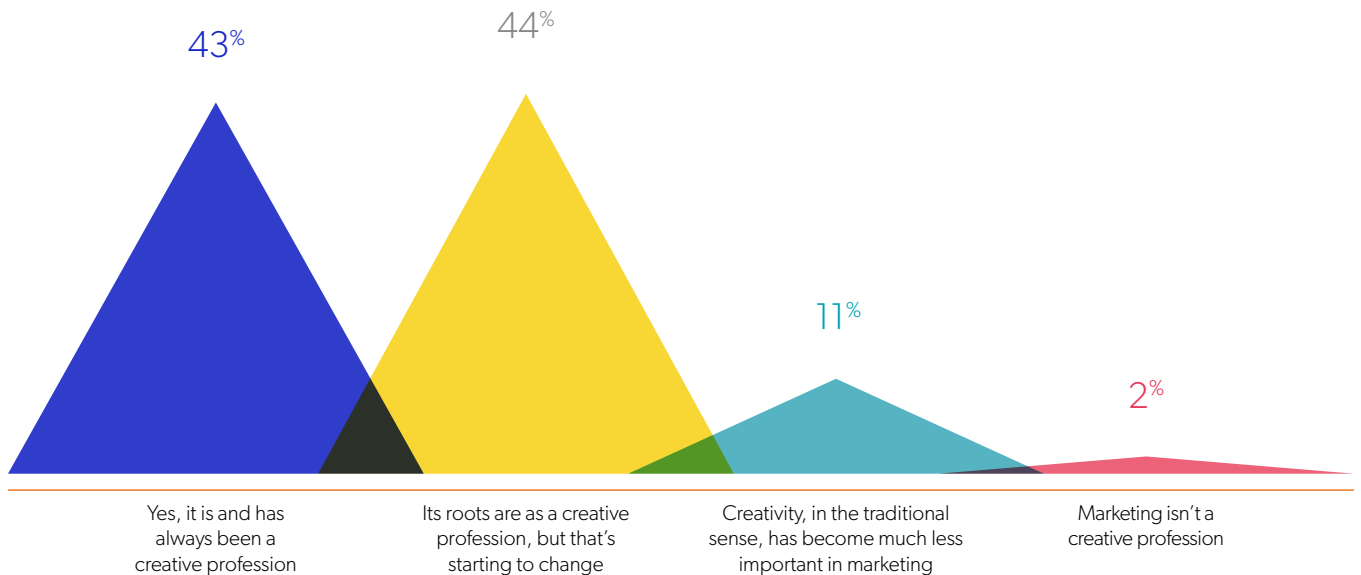
***"Creativity is  
intelligence having fun"***  
Albert Einstein



## 1.2. The importance of being imaginative

The three parts of this definition – innovation, customer engagement and results – signal a rather important role for creativity. But with today's laser focus on the bottom line and measurement, coupled with the influx of automation, data and technology, is marketing itself still a creative profession?

**Do you believe that marketing is an inherently creative profession? In other words, it relies on creativity (in one form or another) to be effective?**



Some 43% of our respondents resolutely believe it is. Though a similar amount (44%) say that, while its roots are as a creative profession, it's starting to change. Another 11% believe creativity has become much less important in marketing. Only 2% outright refused the motion, but clearly there's creative ambivalence among B2B marketers. What's sewn this seed of doubt?

People have heralded the end of creativity in marketing since automation and ROI entered our vocabulary. However, going by our definitions above, this is a false dichotomy – it's not one or the other. Creativity is the thread that binds ideas, insight and action. Yes, marketing has become more ROI-focused. And that's precisely why creativity is so important.

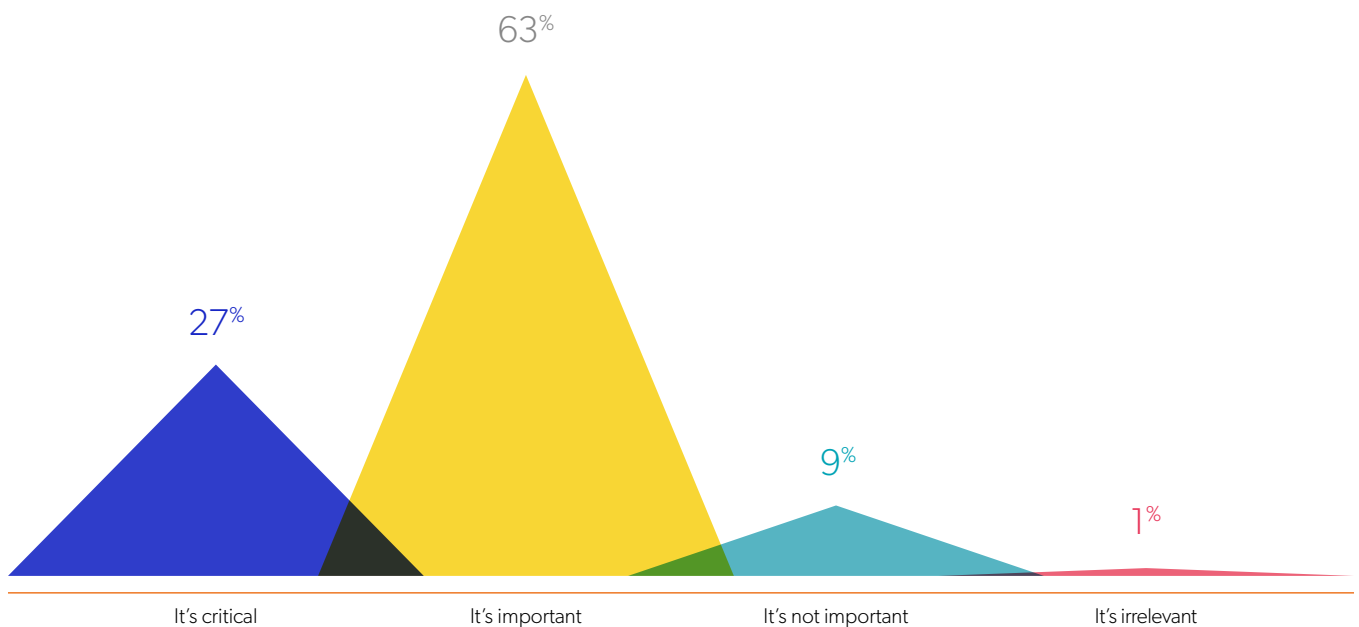
*"Creativity has always been and still is at the core of what makes a good marketer, but I believe that the shift towards more digital marketing means that the balance is moving away from mainly art, to more science. When we do more data-driven, insights-based and automated marketing, we need marketers who know how to interpret and analyse data."* Malin Liden, head of strategic programs, EMEA field marketing, SAP

*"Strong creative has to resonate emotionally with the receiver. Humans are hardwired to feel things. It doesn't matter if that human is responsible for buying pizza for their family, or servers for their company's IT department. If they emotionally feel an attachment to one brand or choice over another, that will inform their decision."* Annessa Piper, marketing director, Autodesk

### 1.3. Creativity as a commercial asset

We asked our respondents how important they believe the role of creativity is in achieving their marketing KPIs and increasing ROI. A near comprehensive 90% said it was either important or critical. Just 1% said it was irrelevant.

How important do you think the role of creativity is in achieving your marketing goals/KPIs and increasing ROI?



So, on the one hand, marketers believe creativity is waning in the profession. On the other, they say it's crucial to achieve KPIs and ROI. The following chapters explore this paradox further. But first, let's see how individual marketers believe they stack up creatively.

*"Marketers cannot, and will never be successful in generating business impact without creativity. Marketing is about building engagement with people whose attention we have to compete for [...] we need to be interesting enough to draw their attention and make them want to move in our direction. That takes creativity and intelligence, but also deep knowledge about the audiences."* Malin Liden, head of strategic programs, EMEA field marketing, SAP



## Section 2

# The creative marketer

Following Cleese's aforementioned definition of creativity, whenever you find a way of doing something that's better than what has been done before, you're being creative. As such, contrary to common assumption, creativity isn't something solely about the arts – or, in our case, messaging, design, copywriting and marcomms. As Prelini Udayan-Chiechi, VP marketing EMEA, Zendesk, points out: "Creativity is required in all parts of the planning process, from ideation through to build and execution."

A creative idea can come from anyone. The marketing ops exec might spot an opportunity in the data. Your head of campaigns might know the right communication channels for the right audiences. Your brand lead might be the one to craft the message, but everyone has played a creative role. With that in mind, we asked our respondents about their own creative prowess.

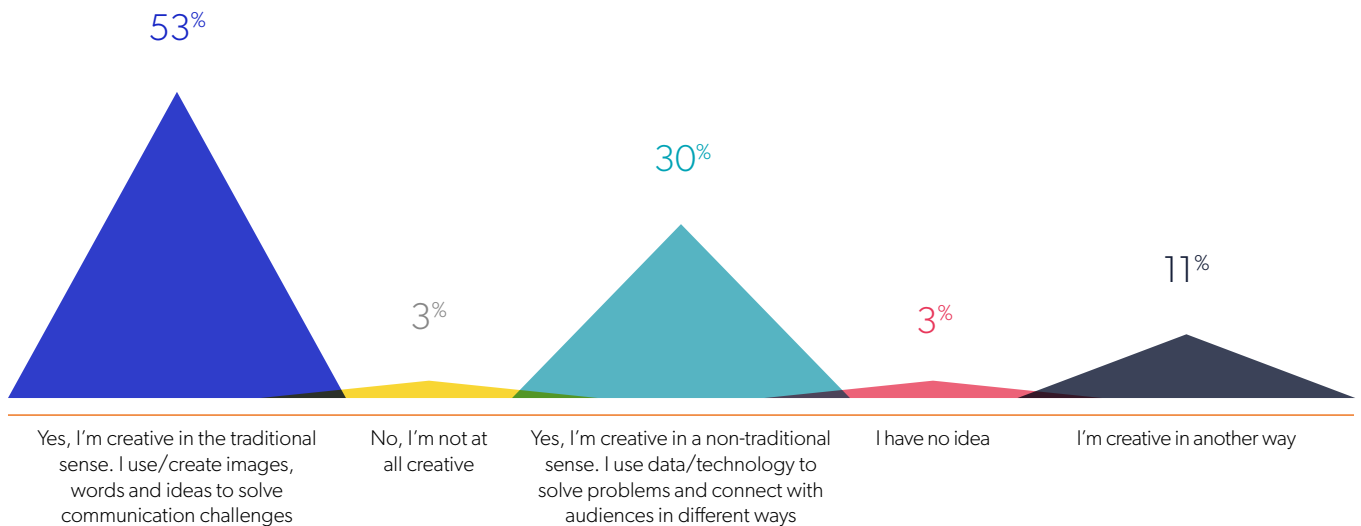
### 2.1. Perceptions versus reality

Over half of B2B marketers say they're creative in the traditional sense, by which we mean using creative ideas, words and images to solve communication challenges. About a third said they're creative in a less traditional sense, using data and tech to solve problems and connect with customers. One in 10 said they're creative in a different way, while just 3% said they're not at all creative. In other words, 94% of marketers believe they're creative in some way.

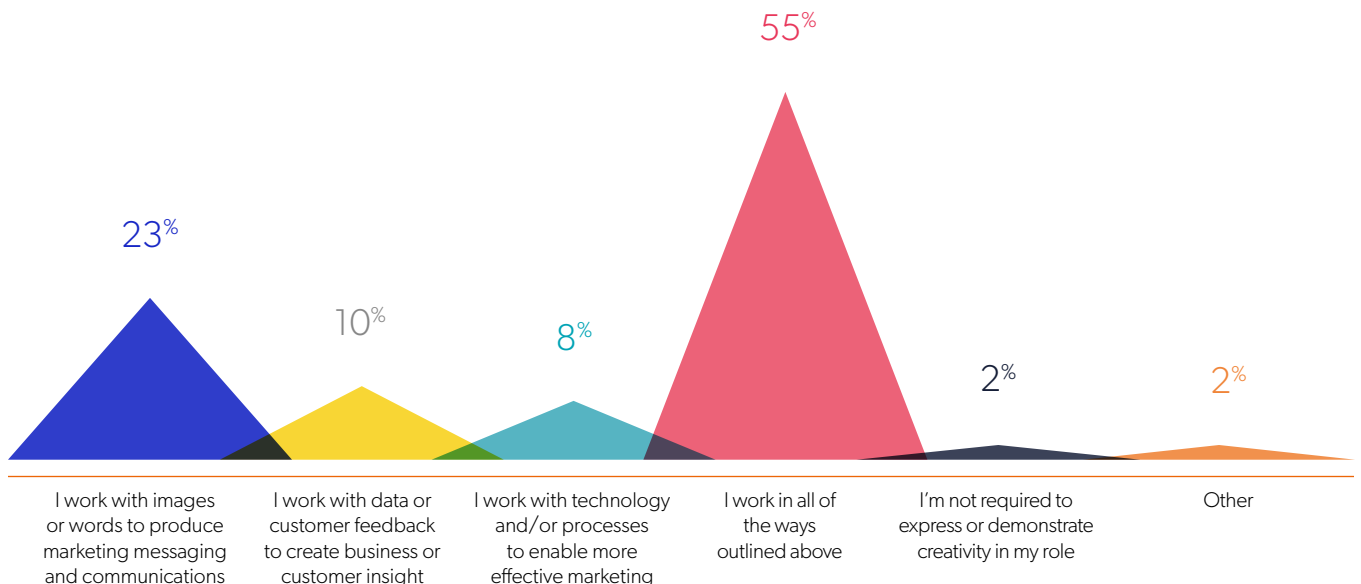




## Do you consider yourself to be a creative person?



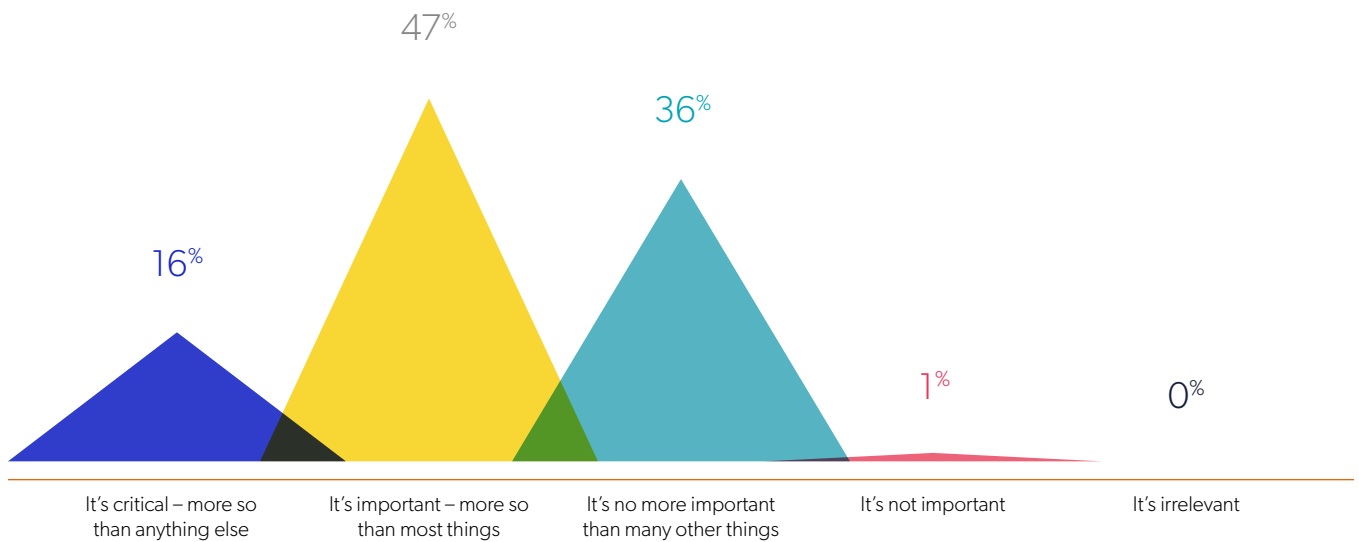
## How are you required to express or demonstrate creativity in your role?



This roughly reflects how marketers are required to express creativity in their roles. Around a quarter (23%) work with images or words to produce messaging and comms, while 10% work with data and insight, and 8% use technology to express their creativity. Though most marketers are creative generalists, working in all of the above ways.

Clearly, as a breed, marketers aren't lacking creativity. Or, to put it another way, marketing isn't attracting less creative people. And yet, as we established earlier, over 50% of marketers believe the profession is losing its creativity. So, perhaps the increasingly systematic processes are removing the need for human ingenuity? To find out more, we asked our respondents how important creativity is in their ability to do their job effectively.

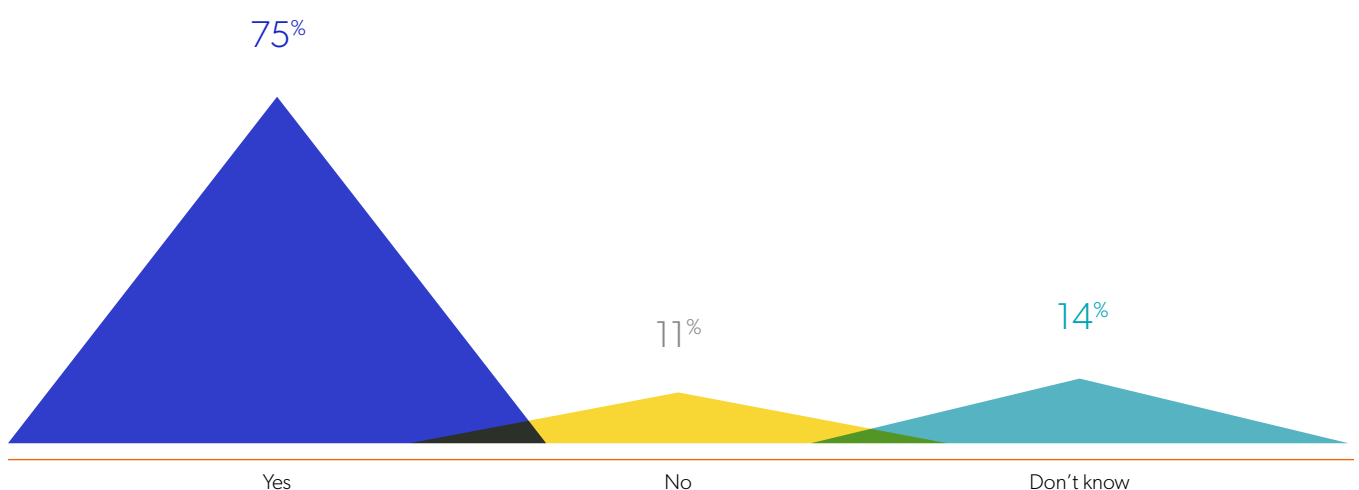
## How important is creativity in your ability to do your job effectively?



16% said it's more critical than anything else, while nearly a half (47%) said it's more important than most things. Over a third (36%), however, said it's no more important than most things, leaving just 1% saying it's unimportant.

For the lion's share of marketers, creativity is either critical to their jobs or it's extremely important. Little wonder then that, when we asked whether they felt being more creative would benefit them in their career, 75% said yes. And just 11% said no, leaving 14% sitting on the fence.

## Do you feel it would benefit you personally in your career to be more creative?

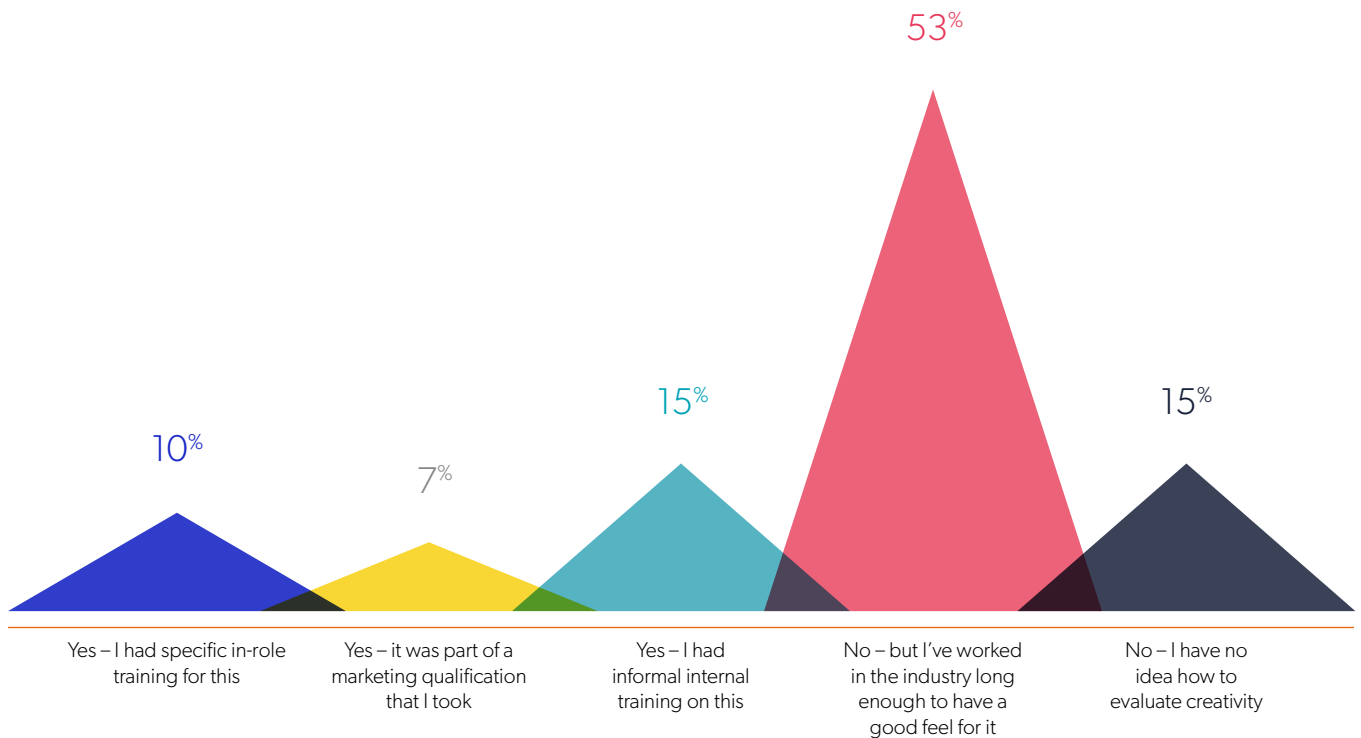


*"All marketers today have to be data-driven and technology-minded to be successful in the new world of marketing. However, it's also important to have creativity of thought when it comes to ideas and execution. Both need to marry together."*  
Prelini Udayan-Chiechi, VP EMEA Marketing, Zendesk

## 2.2. Assessing, evaluating and acquiring

Clearly, creativity is essential not just to marketers' current successes, but also to their career progression. So, what steps are they taking to nurture it? What training or guidance are they receiving to evaluate creative work?

### Have you ever received any training or guidance in how to evaluate creative work?



Only a third (32%) have undergone any form of training, ranging from qualifications to more informal training. Over half (53%) have had no training at all, having acquired their ability to evaluate creativity by working in the right environments.

Considering so many marketers say creativity would benefit their careers, it's surprising to see that only 17% have received formal training when it comes to evaluating creative work.

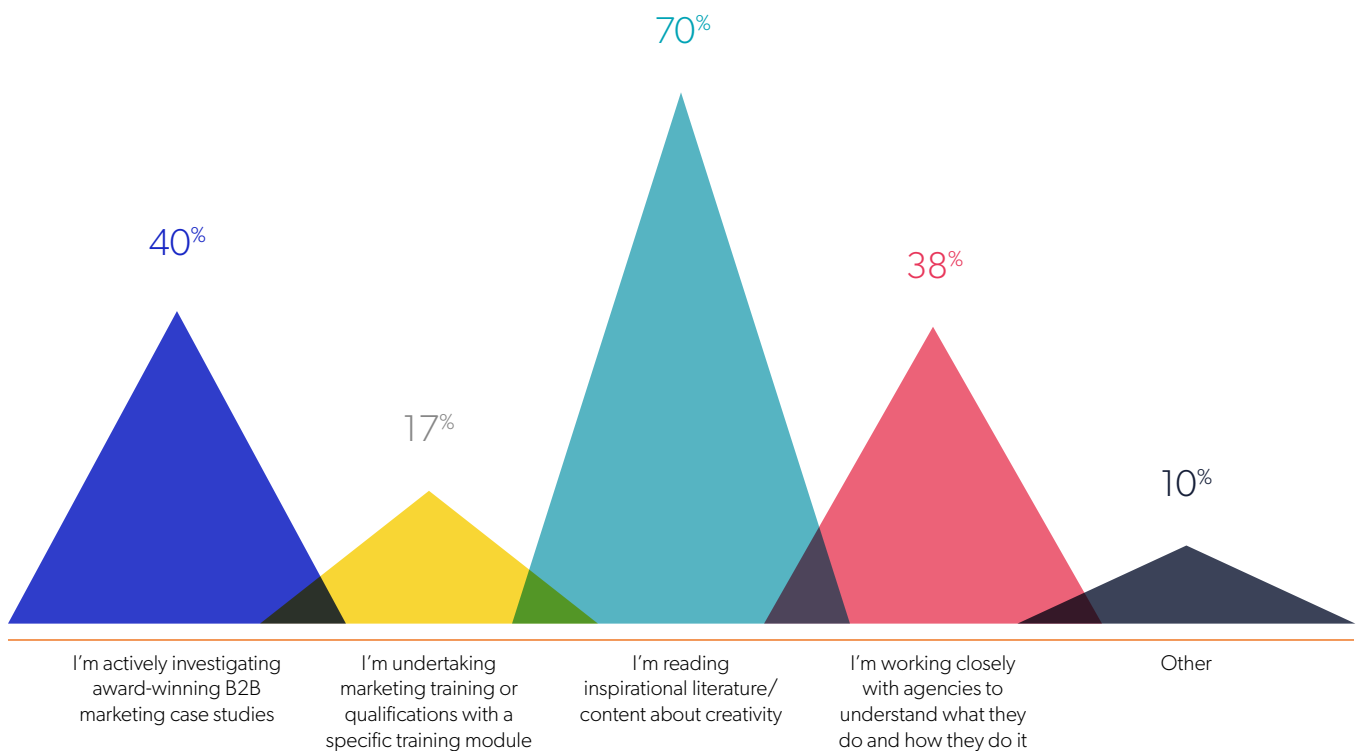
As Malin points out, this highlights "a huge gap in marketing training and onboarding programmes."

While we could indeed do a lot more to both learn and facilitate the learning of creative methods in B2B, it's clear that just being in a creative environment is sufficient to fuel imagination. More so than learning to be creative, in order to unlock the best of our abilities, we can create the conditions in which creativity can flourish.

## 2.3. Becoming more creative

With creativity established as the primary driver of ROI, a key weapon in their professional arsenal and the asset most required for them to flourish as professionals, becoming more creative should be pretty high on any marketer's priority list. So, with that in mind, we asked our sample what steps they're taking to do so.

Which of the following steps are you taking to become more creative? Select all that apply



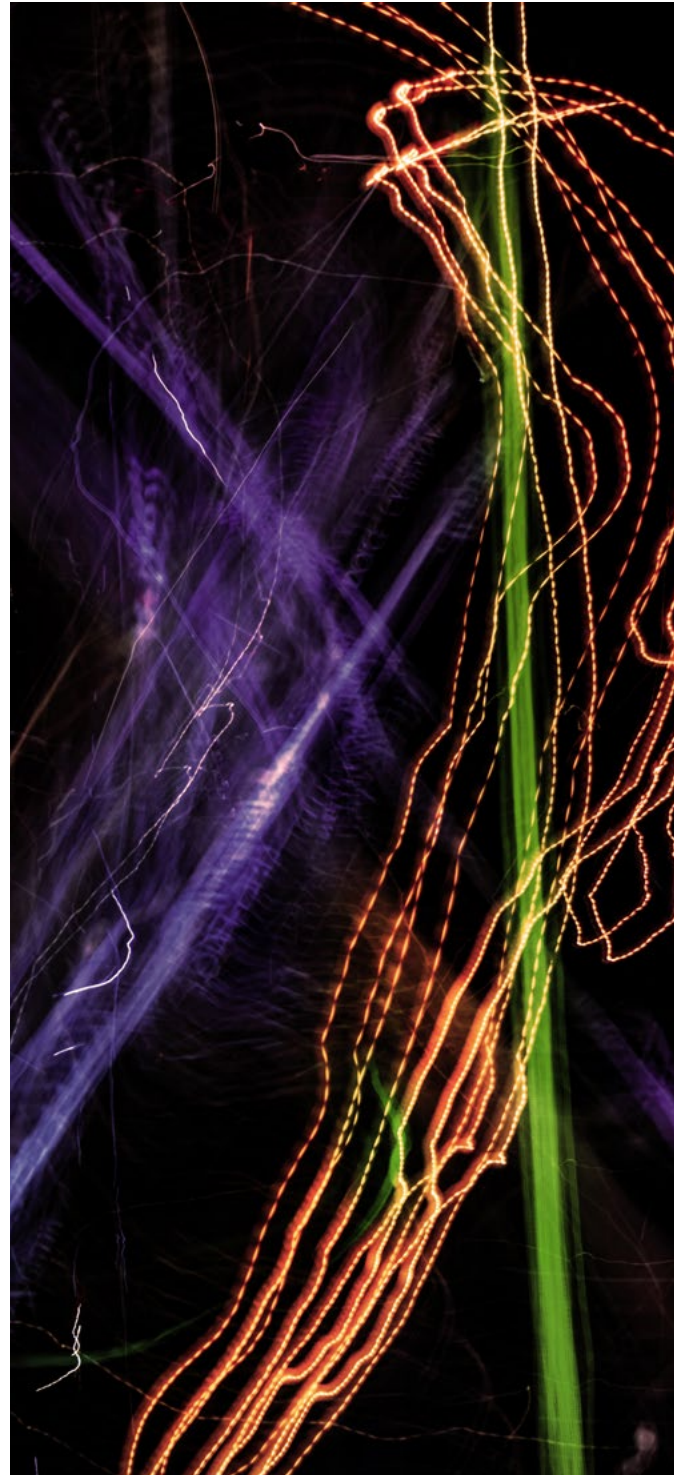
The single most common route is through reading inspirational literature and content about creativity. This is followed by researching B2B case studies from which they can gain inspiration from their peers. The next go-to resource for individual creativity is working closer with agencies, who traditionally devote so much of their days honing their creativity.

## 2.4. Five ways to be more creative

A creative mindset is one that is full of questions and possibilities. It's easy to get stuck in our comfort zone and not try new things, so Dr. Christine Bailey, managing director and CMO, SMB UK & Ireland, Valitor, offers a few tips to help you break free from your comfort zone:

- 1. Dare to begin before you're ready.** Too often, we become paralysed trying to envision the end state before we begin a new project or endeavour. You can't always wait for the perfect time or perfect solution. Start road-testing ideas and approaches.
- 2. Challenge your limiting beliefs.** Remember: beliefs are not facts. Noticing – and then challenging – your limiting beliefs lets you break free of your comfort zone.
- 3. Change your perspective.** Our brain will solve the problem differently if we phrase the question differently. For example, the question isn't 'who is going to let me?'; it's 'who is going to stop me?' We operate in a very fast-paced world, and we don't always have time to sit around and wait for permission.
- 4. Dream big, but take small steps.** A little anxiety is good for you. It's normal and often helpful in focusing attention and is a drive to get things done. When healthy anxiety becomes overwhelming stress, the opposite is true. The solution? Take small steps to achieve big dreams.
- 5. Have a direction – not a plan.** If you have a clear direction, you will naturally find ways to get there, and you won't get disheartened if your plans don't always work out!

Now, let's broaden our search for creativity in B2B to marketing teams. What are the barriers and enablers of creativity within teams? What do we risk by being too bold or not bold enough? And crucially, how can we build more creative marketing functions to deliver ROI?







## Section 3

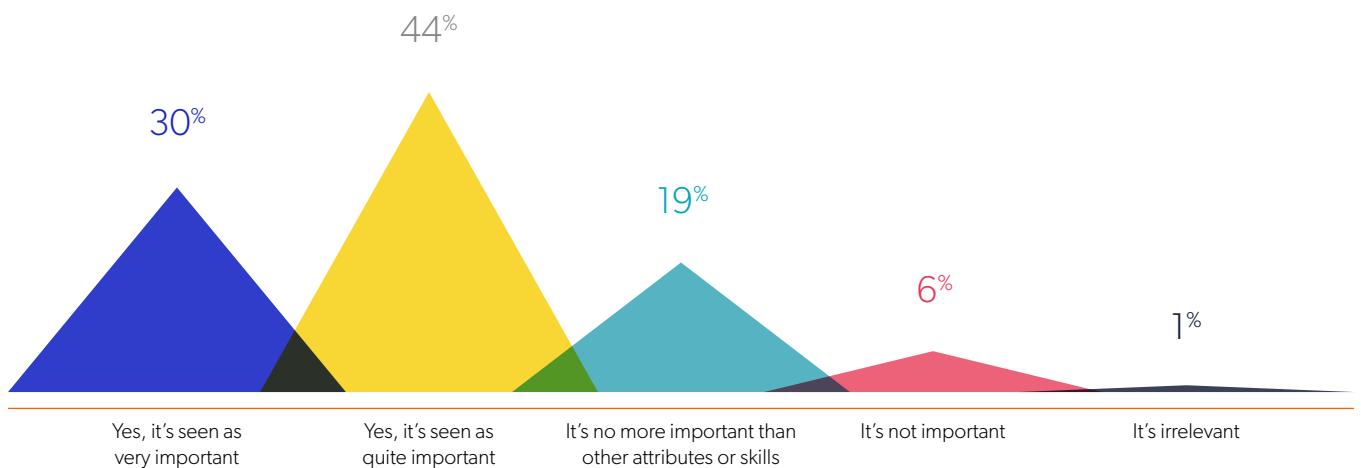
# The creative team

### 3.1. The value of nothing

From The Socrates School in ancient Greece to The Bloomsbury Set, and Monty Python to The Beatles, truly creative and groundbreaking work tends to come from groups. While no one is expecting a marketing team to devise a school of philosophy (though, as a profession, you could argue they already have), it's clear that collectivity can push talented people to do greater things than they would alone.

Part of this is because creativity flourishes in environments where people feel psychologically safe and free to fail. For someone to stick their head above the parapet and say, write or do something that could make them look like an oddball, they can't fear humiliation. Key to this safety is the value placed on creativity within groups.

Is creativity something which is valued or cultivated within your marketing team, either by colleagues, team leaders or both?



Over three-quarters (74%) of marketers said creativity is seen as quite or very important within their B2B marketing teams, which, on the surface, is promising. However, that leaves a quarter of teams who believe creativity isn't particularly important. That's right: one in four B2B marketing teams don't place much value on creativity. Alarm bells should be ringing for leaders across the land.

We established earlier that creativity is imperative to achieving marketing goals, and yet a quarter of marketing teams aren't placing much value on it. So, what's behind this creative reticence? Is it a lack of curiosity, or are there other, more bureaucratic forces at play? We asked respondents about the barriers to creativity within their teams.

### 3.2. Barriers: The B2B marketer's catch-22

The biggest perceived blocker to creativity is budget, with almost half saying it's a barrier, and over a third saying it's the single biggest barrier. This is somewhat surprising. While budget can open doors, it doesn't impede the creative process. Words, images and sounds are largely costless – but invaluable. Social media and digital channels let every brand (and all their competitors) act as publishers with full creative control at relatively little cost. Can marketers, in fact, afford not to be creative?

Budget restraints were followed, perhaps predictably, by challenges proving ROI and a lack of infrastructure. So, two of the top three barriers to creativity boil down to money. **Here's the marketer's catch-22: creativity is essential to generating ROI; but the greatest barrier to creativity is proving its ROI.**

Rory Sutherland, vice chairman of Ogilvy UK, said that if you only believe in logic, you can't perform magic. By this, he simply means that if you're going in with a mindset only to make incremental gains on defined metrics, you're almost definitely missing huge opportunities. Suspicion towards creativity in marketing is prevalent among many B2B organisations, especially in more traditional spaces

like manufacturing. They see value being increased by cheapening or changing a product, and therefore view marketing as a cost centre, rather than a revenue driver.

In these scenarios, marketers need to prove the value of creativity to the board, their teams and their organisations. They need to challenge the language of 'decision-making units' and notions of customers making rational purchases, and demonstrate they're selling to people who can be connected with on an emotional level. If, as phone manufacturers assumed in 2007, people only wanted longer battery life, no one would have ever bought the iPhone.

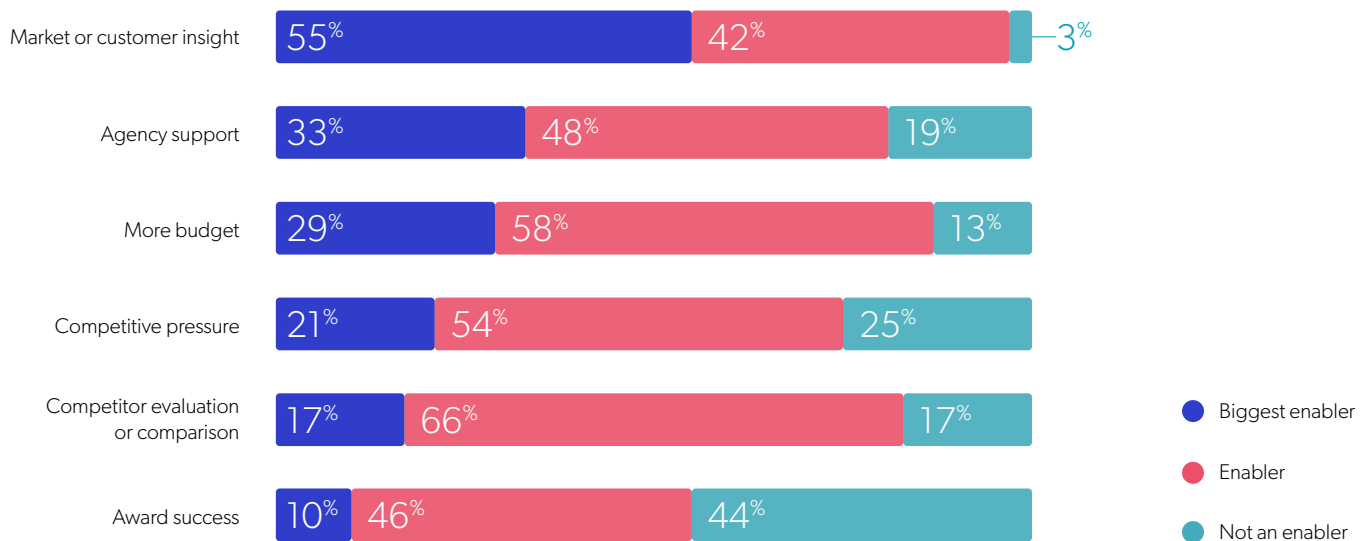
*"In B2B marketing, we may have more of a tradition of 'playing it safe', not sticking our neck out too much, not being too bold or even controversial. But when we market in a digital environment, and when we increasingly need to reach broader buying centres or even the customer's customers, we need to market at scale to audiences who do not yet know us, and that is not possible if you don't stand out from the crowd. With increasing competition for attention in the digital space, you need to be very creative to cut through the noise and reach those new audiences."*  
Malin Liden, head of strategic programs, EMEA field marketing, SAP



### 3.3. Enablers: It's all about perspective

So, how do marketers shake off these restraints? According to our respondents, customer insight fuels creativity; nearly all our respondents agreed. And this makes sense. In a game where customer-centricity often defines a brand's success or failure, intelligence on the target is table stakes for creativity.

In your experience, which of the following are the best potential enablers of creativity in marketing?



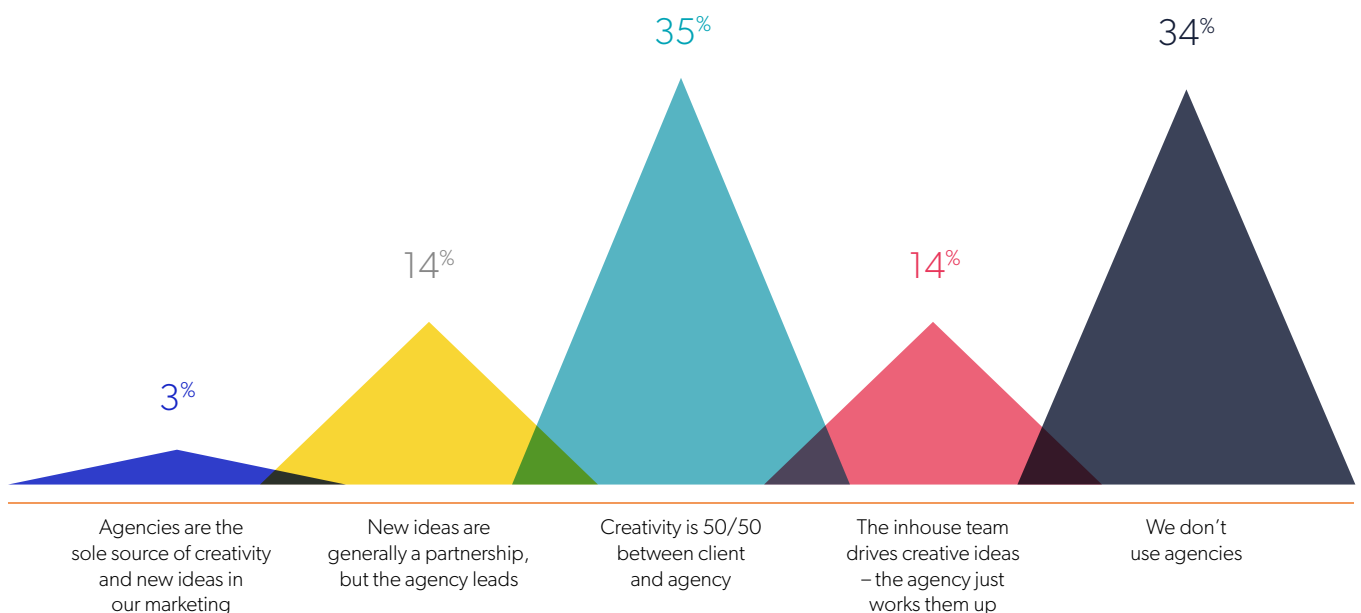
The next biggest enabler is agency support, with a 33% of B2B marketers agreeing. A huge 81% overall stated that this was either their biggest enabler, or just an enabler. When reflecting on the importance of creating environments in which creativity can thrive, it makes sense that the right agency – one whose bread and butter is to provide fresh and expert insights for finding new ways of solving business problems – is the key to unleashing your creative potential and achieving your business' goals. The other enablers identified by our respondents – including competitor evaluation or awards success – can also roll into your agencies' purview too. So, let's explore this creative linchpin further.

### 3.4. Agencies: The creative linchpin

In traditional (and supposedly rational) industries, such as finance and manufacturing, agencies are often thought of as the sole arbiters of creativity. However, it's clear from our survey that inhouse marketers and marketing teams not only have the capacity to be creative, but they also need it to pursue commercial objectives. What's also increasingly clear is that the creative process in a B2B context is assisted by the right environment, support, confidence and camaraderie.

So, we asked our respondents to what extent their agency drives creativity. While a few said the agency is the sole driver, most marketers paint a very collaborative picture, with 14% saying it's a partnership effort led by the agency, and 35% saying it's a total 50/50 split.

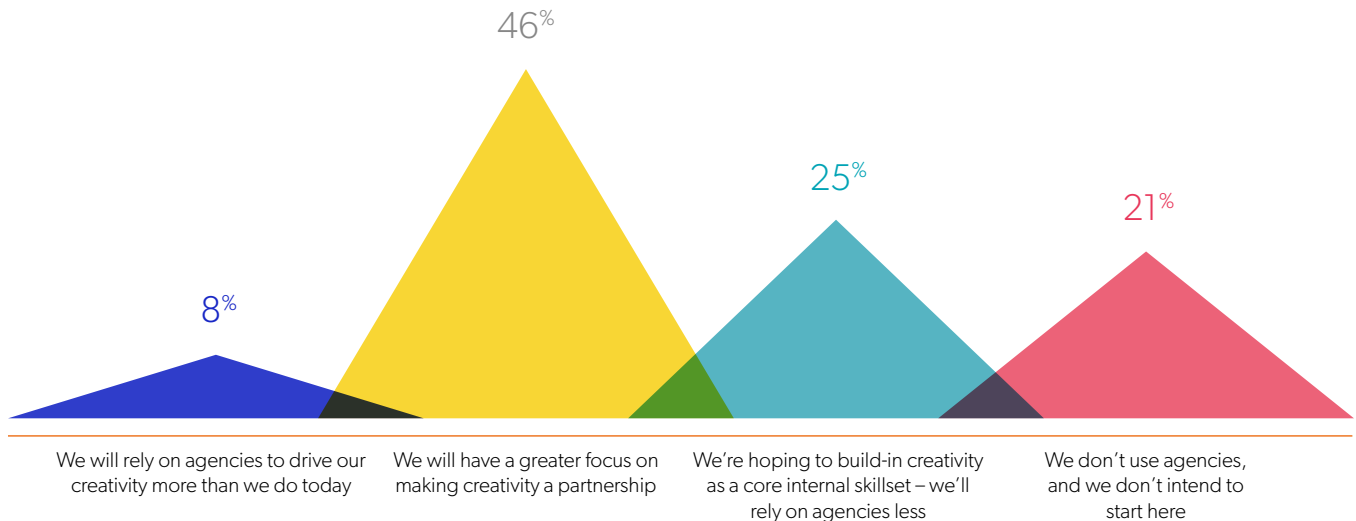
#### How, and to what extent, do you rely on agencies to drive creativity in your marketing?



That's the state of play today. But with the hypothesis that marketing is becoming more rational, data-driven and risk averse, surely it would stand to reason that marketers are in fact paring back their creative aspirations? We asked how our respondents see their reliance on agencies to drive creativity going forward.

In fact, the majority (54%) plan to increase their creative endeavours with agencies going forward. Meanwhile, 25% are planning to go it alone and double down on creativity inhouse. Whichever way our respondents decide to go forward, it seems that, by and large, they have one thing in common: their future is creative.

### How do you see this going forward?

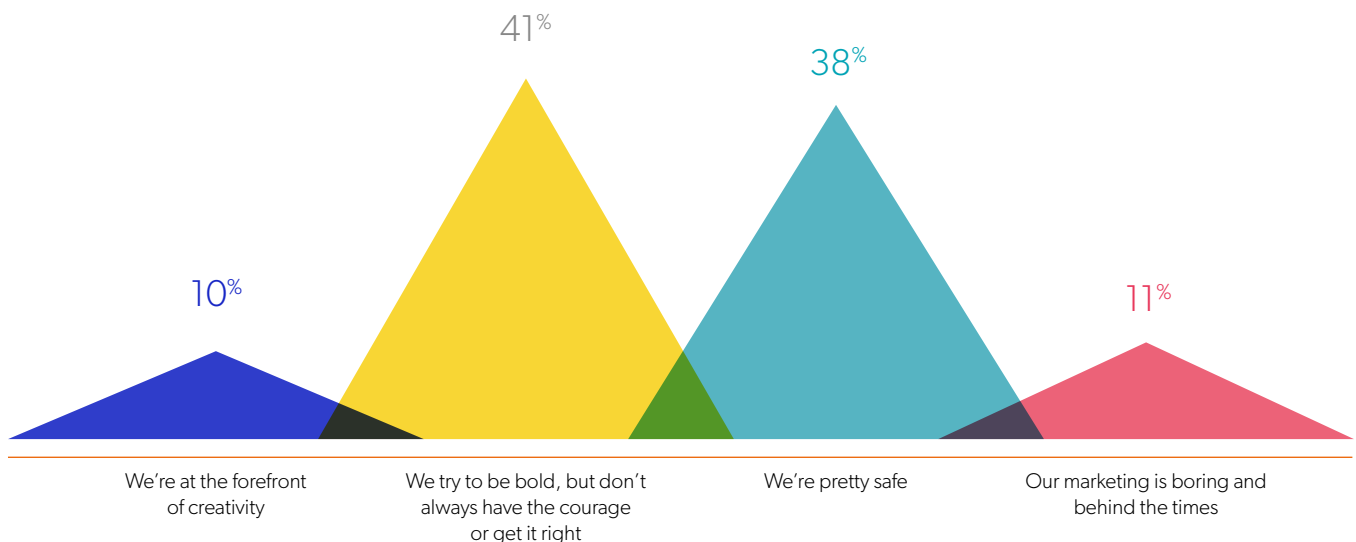


### 3.5. What next?

We've explored the lay of the land for creativity in B2B – the barriers, the enablers, the value and the imperative. So, what's next? We asked our marketers to assess the creativity of their own campaigns and

programmes compared to competitors. It seems, broadly speaking, they're a little conservative. Some 41% said a lack of courage thwarts their creative efforts, while a further 38% admit to being pretty safe. 11% say their marketing is vanilla, leaving just 10% believing they're at the forefront of creativity.

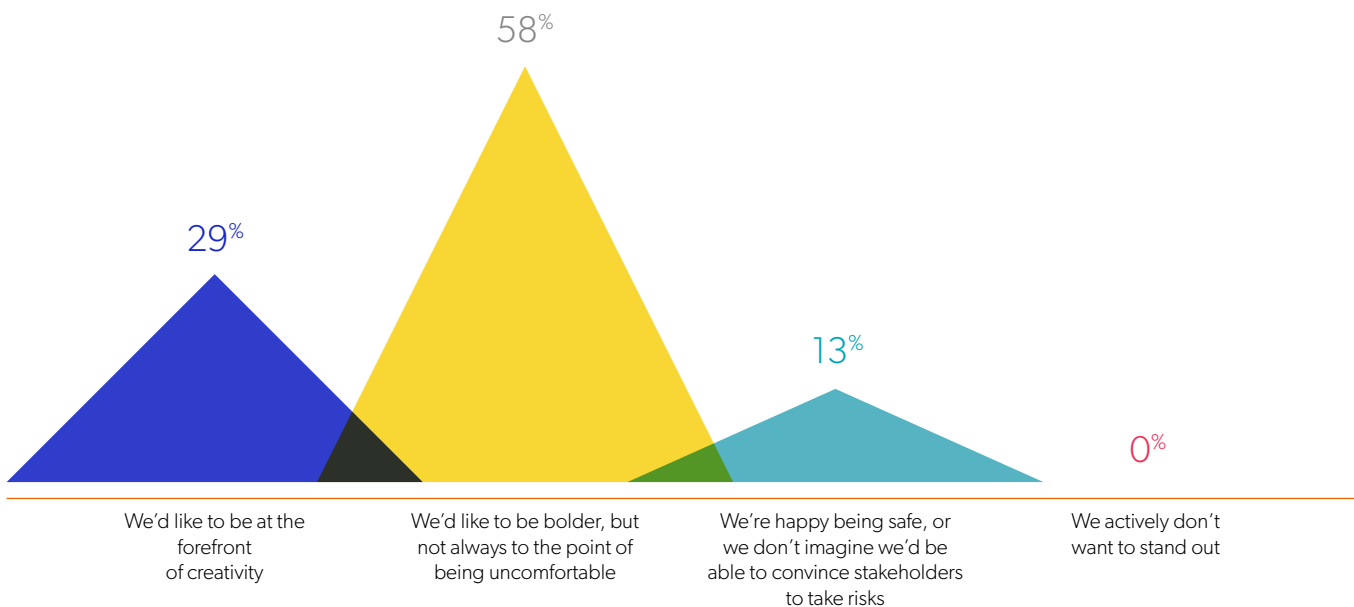
### Thinking about your marketing campaigns or programmes, how creative are they, in comparison to other B2B brands (either in your sector or elsewhere)?





But the future isn't grey. We finished by asking our respondents to look ahead and think where they would like their creative efforts to be. It's heartening to see an overwhelming majority are set on striving to be bolder and more creative in the future.

### Where would you like your marketing campaigns or programmes to be, in creative terms?



So, 87% of marketers are hungry to be more creative. If you're in the 54% of those planning to partner with agencies to do so, make sure they can harness technology and are willing to challenge the status quo. Because if one thing's been made clear, it's that while everyone adopts the same tactics in this remote working world, fortune favours the bold.

*"Greatness never happens in a comfort zone, so there is a clear risk in a strategy that is more focused on avoiding being boring than aspiring to be interesting. It is one of these cases where we want to play it safe but still win big, but that does not work on the stock market (unfortunately!) and it does not work in marketing or anywhere else. If we want to win big, we need to take*

*risks and we need to leave our comfort zones, even if it means we might fail from time to time."* Malin Liden, head of strategic programs, EMEA field marketing, SAP

*"In fact, Forbes wrote in 2019 that their influence lies in the way they tune into customer attitudes and industry trends, translating an ever-growing set of data points and marketing inputs into a coherent strategy for their own business, and often, a vision for the industry as a whole. To be an extraordinary marketing leader, they will most likely need to take a leap into the unknown and apply customer insights in a way that they haven't done before. All this demands creativity."*

Dr. Christine Bailey, managing director and CMO, SMB UK & Ireland, Valitor

# 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](http://b2bmarketing.net) or call +44 (0)20 7014 4920.



[b2bmarketing.net](http://b2bmarketing.net)



## Torpedo

We believe creativity has never been more important for B2B brands. In a world overloaded with content and dominated by fragmented communication channels, creativity is the hook that demands attention.

We champion your brand, think like your customers and see the world through their eyes. By creating ideas, propositions and stories that resonate with your audience, we persuade them to give you some of their valuable time. Compelling them to stop, look, listen, engage and believe.

Our team blends strategy, design, content, UX and technology to deliver effective multichannel marketing campaigns, ABM programmes, brand communications and digital experiences that bring your brand vision to life.

We give B2B marketers the creative firepower to captivate customers, build brand trust and accelerate business growth.

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