



# TRUST ME, B2B

Building and Keeping Trust  
in an  
Age of Skepticism and Noise

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In Partnership With TriCom**B2B**

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FIRST EDITION

*“Trust is the enabler of global business ...”*

– Harvard Business Review<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

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Can a B2B company become *more* trusted than an industry trade association?

Can a brand's ideas accelerate a sale and contribute measurable pipeline?

Can marketing make a buyer *less skeptical* of an organization's claims or its salespeople?

The answer to each of these questions is a resounding “yes” – *if* an organization embraces a new, fundamental truth about B2B marketing: The path ahead for growth is not about attention, reach, creative or even technology. (*Don't get me wrong; these are important.*)

The truth is: there is a **bigger** – and **more urgent** – charter for marketing teams today that will determine who survives in a world of noise, chaos and commoditization.

That charter is *trust*.

Wait! Before you roll your eyes, thinking “I know trust matters!”, I implore you to keep reading, because we are facing a crisis of mistrust in every pocket of our world, and it’s preventing growth, even for B2B organizations. In this book, I’ve been given an opportunity to dispel some of the biggest misconceptions and clarify the most misunderstood elements of *building and keeping trust in an age of skepticism and noise*.

How we build trust within the confines of digital marketing is different than ever before. It’s also more challenging than ever, thanks to the broader happenings of this noisy world.

Here, I explain the drivers of skepticism and mistrust that currently affect every organization, regardless of industry. I’ll break down the three key elements of trust and explain exactly how marketing teams can play a pivotal role in building – and sustaining – that connection between a company and its buyers.

Thank you to TriCom**B2B** for supporting the creation of this book. We all know trust is the precursor to any meaningful relationship in life. They, like me, believe it’s time to prioritize this as a critical goal of our B2B marketing efforts, and a skill set within our teams.

Now, more than ever.

Good luck.

– Katie Martell

## **PART 1: The Trust Gap in B2B**

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First, the good news.

At our very core, human beings are predisposed to trust.

*“Trust rarely occupies the foreground of conscious awareness. We are no more likely to ask ourselves how trusting we are at any given moment than to inquire if gravity is still keeping the planets in orbit.”*

*– Clinical psychologist Doris Brothers*

We are hard-wired to trust.

And that’s lucky, because trust is the precursor to any meaningful relationship. We trust our colleagues, our partners and our friends. We trust anyone on whom we rely.

### **Why trust matters**

We simply don’t do business with people (or companies) whom we do not trust.

In many industries, being *the most trusted* can actually deliver a competitive advantage and a brand differentiator. In a world of mistrust, the brand that earns the most trust wins.

More than two-thirds (68%) of U.S. adults say that trust in a brand has a great deal of influence when making a large purchase decision.<sup>2</sup> Trusted companies are found to have stronger buyers and advocates.<sup>3</sup>

From the Harvard Business Review<sup>4</sup>:

*Businesses that build trust among their customers are rewarded with greater loyalty and higher sales. And negotiators who build trust with each other are more likely to find value-creating deals.*

### **The bad news**

We are facing a massive decline in trust – and it threatens to undermine our ability to drive sustained business growth. Trust in the world around us is at an all-time low.

Consider this: Across nearly two decades since PR and marketing firm Edelman began surveying the state of trust in society, their annual study reported the most dramatic decline in trust in the past three years.

*The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that despite a strong global economy and near full employment, **none of the four societal institutions that the study measures – government, business, NGOs and media – is trusted.** Less than half of the mass population trust their institutions to do what is right.<sup>5</sup>*

This hard truth is rightfully giving marketers insomnia:

- 95% of CMOs and brand managers are kept up at night by the issue of establishing trust between their brands and consumers, according to a survey by Brand Keys.<sup>6</sup>
- They know that only 50% of buyers trust businesses to do what is right!<sup>7</sup>
- CEOs feel similarly. The #1 concern among CEOs is that their company is trusted, rated even more important than seeing profits and stock price increase.<sup>8</sup>

## Top CEO concerns



Source: Edelman

Any marketing leader hoping to align with the C-suite (hint: that should be anyone who hopes to keep their job), take note.

## What's behind the decline?

It's important for marketers to understand the key drivers of mistrust if we have any hope of leading our organizations through it.

The three most important factors are noise, bad actors and brand missteps.

## 1. Noise

*“A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”*

– Herbert A. Simon, *Attention Economics*

One major cause of the lack of trust in our world is the rise of information overload. Consider the world your buyers (and all of us) operate in:

- **Brands are now publishers** – 91% of companies use content marketing – with 38% planning to create *more* in the coming 12 months.<sup>9</sup>
- **The news cycle is 24/7** – Our instant access to the world’s current events means every *day* there is breaking news, a new crisis, and a new reason to tune in to our preferred news outlet. WIRED magazine calls this phenomenon the “new FOMO” (fear of missing out). We can’t stop checking the news.
- **Distraction is the new normal** – In one day at work, your B2B buyer:
  - » Receives more than 100 emails<sup>10</sup>
  - » Looks at email or instant messages 40 times (every 7.5 minutes)<sup>11</sup>
  - » Switches between tasks 300 times<sup>12</sup>
  - » Uses 56 different apps or websites<sup>13</sup>
  - » Checks their phones once every five minutes, or 150 times a day.<sup>14</sup>

Whew. Deep breath.

- **Buyers are uncertain and stressed.** – Our B2B buyers are directly affected by a world of information overload. There’s even a name for the condition: *informania*, the “debilitating state of information overload.”

- » Researchers have found it affects problem-solving, creates additional stress, reduces one’s ability to focus, and creates further addiction to new incoming information.<sup>15</sup>
- » CEB reports B2B buyers are better informed than ever, but they’re “deeply uncertain and stressed.”<sup>16</sup>

That stress prevents them from moving projects forward, collaborating with vendors and their peers, and above all, making decisions. When we send an abundance of content to our buyers to help educate them through sales cycles – facts, features, specifications and benefits – we are actually making things worse.

There is a cost to too much information.

### Simple and emotional

*“The brain hates to be overloaded. It will shut down and misinterpret information, or ignore it entirely. It’s just too much. The complex stories and statistics favored in B2B get in the way of our success. We need to work toward **simple and emotional** connection with our audience.”*

– Chris Eifert, Principal, TriCom**B2B**<sup>17</sup>

The increase of media and marketing contributes to “an environment of total noise, spreading confusion and mistrust,” according to the Pew Research Center. What’s compounding the lack of trust is the rise of bad actors within this noise.

## 2. Bad actors

Where do you get your news each day? Do you trust that source?

In late 2018, social media surpassed print newspapers as the main source of news for U.S. adults for the first time in history.<sup>18</sup>

In B2B, 75% of executives surveyed by IDC said they use social media in their process of making a purchasing decision.<sup>19</sup> They, too, are increasingly turning to sites like LinkedIn and Twitter as sources of industry news.

*“Complex sales are fraught with risk ... B2B buyers find the greatest benefit of social media is greater confidence and comfort with their decisions.”*

– IDC

At the same time, social media users are highly skeptical of the quality of news found through these sites, largely due to the influence they know each platform has on the content presented. Also, 88% of U.S. adults agree social media companies favor news organizations that produce attention-grabbing articles, for example.<sup>20</sup>

With scandals like foreign election meddling and the Cambridge Analytica breach, widespread skepticism of content on platforms like Facebook persists. In one study, 73% said they worry about false information or fake news being used as a weapon.<sup>21</sup> These respondents are right to worry. Fifty of the biggest fake stories of 2018 generated roughly 22 million total shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook.<sup>22</sup>

## 3. Brand missteps

It's an age of sunlight, in which brands (and their executives) are called out in headlines and on social media for egregious breaches of public trust.

Consider the headlines (if you believe them!) we've seen in the past few years: Facebook has \$3B set aside, ready to pay an FTC fine for violating user privacy.<sup>23</sup> Boeing grounded its 737 MAX airliners after two horrific crashes were caused by known issues.<sup>24</sup> VW was found in 2015 to have intentionally cheated on vehicle emissions tests, for years emitting 40 times the legal limit of pollution.<sup>25</sup>

HR software firm Zenefits was caught circumventing insurance regulations in a massive scandal, a move the industry called “disrupting themselves.” The SEC busted Daimler for a global bribery initiative seeking preferential treatment from foreign government officials.<sup>26</sup> Suppliers to global manufacturers, including Kobe Steel, Mitsubishi Materials and Toray, have admitted to product data fabrication.<sup>27</sup>

*“Winning trust takes a long time, but it can be lost in an instant.”*

– Akihiro Tada, director-general of the manufacturing industries bureau at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in Japan

In the past 15 years, the following brands received blame for violating public trust and privacy through personal data breaches: AOL, Target, eBay, LinkedIn, Uber, Yahoo!, Marriott, Anthem and Equifax.<sup>28</sup> We've become desensitized to these breaches.

Deceit feels like the new normal for businesses, but the problem is both colossal and pervasive. **The collateral we produce in B2B marketing is the least-trusted source of information for B2B buyers.** In fact, 42% of buyers don't know which companies to trust.<sup>29</sup>

Even our very industry is met with skepticism: Only 4% of Americans think the marketing industry behaves with integrity. For comparison, nearly twice as many respondents felt *lawyers* behaved with integrity (9%). Ouch.<sup>30</sup>



With hyperbolic messaging, unsolicited email, invasive ads, irrelevant content and other prevalent marketing behaviors, who can blame buyers for feeling this way?

Noise, bad actors, brand missteps and our own behaviors as marketing organizations are difficult truths that have collided to create a chaotic environment of distrust surrounding our B2B organizations.

But, to quote 14<sup>th</sup> century Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu, *"In the midst of chaos, there is opportunity."*

### **The opportunity ahead**

Despite this painful truth about how buyers *perceive* marketing, I actually believe our profession holds the key to a better future. History shows us that change thrives within volatile cultural climates. These are the perfect conditions in which to lead.

Trust is a matter of establishing perception, this is what marketing does best.

I believe this is an opportunity for us, not to *hide* or *cover up* the truth, but to help our organizations *be seen as the leaders our buyers need us to be*, and in the process, earn their trust and their long-term loyalty. How? Read on.

Part one has proved that trust is scarce, regardless of your industry. And, for B2B marketers who don't prioritize trust, I hope I've demonstrated why it must earn its place. The next section will show you how to build – and keep – it.

## **PART 2: A B2B Path to Trust**

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To build trust, we need to understand three elements of trust:

1. Competence
2. Validation
3. Relatability/Relevance

Some familiar tactics and strategies are at our disposal to help build these elements. I'll reference them throughout the following sections. Think of them like your trust toolkit:

- Thought leadership
- Public relations
- Content marketing
- Insight-driven sales enablement
- B2B influencers
- Buyer insights
- Values
- Transparency

## Element of Trust 1: Competence

The first major element of trust is competence: our ability and proficiency as an organization.

There are two ways to demonstrate it:

1. *Explicit competence* – Do what you say you're going to do.
2. *Implicit competence* – Prove your expertise.

## Explicit competence

The first (and fastest) way to destroy trust is to fail to live up to the promises we make as an organization. The foundation of trust is simply doing the things you say you're going to do.

We trust someone who keeps their promises.

What company would you say consumers trust the most out of the following: Google, Microsoft, Amazon or Oracle?

The answer is ...

Amazon.

Americans have more confidence in Amazon than they do the government or the press.<sup>31</sup> Why? Because it lives up to the promises it makes (wide selection, great experiences, low prices. Stuff gets to your house when they say it'll get there.)

*"Trust is the function of the promises made and whether they are fulfilled."*

*– Brad Stone, Bloomberg journalist; author of  
The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the  
Age of Amazon*

For B2B marketing teams, this means asking questions like:

- Are we over-promising?
- Is our messaging hyperbolic?
- Where do we disappoint customers?
- Do the experiences of our buyers match the expectations we set?

Within long, arduous sales cycles, our competence is proven by our ability to meet the needs of prospects at every touchpoint spanning months (if not years).

*“There are a lot of explicit promises made and delivered that take place before the sale. There are deadlines to meet, complex answers to deliver promptly, and a level of responsiveness which collectively demonstrate a brand’s explicit competence.”*

– Eifert

### **Look over there**

As the old saying goes, “Nothing kills a bad product faster than good marketing.” Marketing is not a magic wand.

If issues exist in customer experience, product quality or service, fix them first; don’t seek to hide them with marketing.

In an age of review sites and word of mouth, cover-ups are short-lived and harmful to long-term brand integrity.

### **Implicit competence**

In a study of decision-makers buying complex solutions<sup>32</sup> (in this case, IT infrastructure) three elements proved to be among the most valuable to buyers:

1. Guidance
2. Hope\*
3. Vision

These non-tangible elements of value had direct impacts on customer loyalty and whether that customer would be a promoter of the vendor.

### **\*Hope? In B2B?**

All industries are changing, quickly.

*“Steady disruption is the new status quo.”*

– Cassandra Worthy, founder,  
*We Are Change Enthusiasts*

Thanks to the accessibility of computing, information and global collaboration, the pace of transformation is accelerating within every vertical, every industry, and affecting every business.

Because of this, the feeling of whiplash among buyers is a universal one.

I’m willing to bet every one of your buyers operates each day at work with a measure of trepidation for what’s to come. Falling behind, for any of us, means losing our livelihood.

*83% of employees say they fear losing their job.<sup>33</sup>*

That’s why, increasingly, vendors are in a position to provide *hope* for buyers caught up in this whirlwind; hope that, despite the changes coming, you have the insight, expertise and guidance that can help them navigate whatever new dynamics your industry is facing.

It’s no wonder that 48% of decision-makers will **pay a premium** to work with a vendor that has publicly articulated a clear vision for the future.<sup>34</sup> Their livelihood may depend on it.

## Thought leadership in B2B

*“Business buyers don’t buy your product; they buy into your approach to solving their problems.”*

*– Laura Ramos, VP and Principal Analyst, Forrester<sup>36</sup>*

Thought leadership has a measurable impact on the B2B buying process. In a recent survey of more than 1,300 U.S. business decision makers and C-suite executives:<sup>37</sup>

- 89% say that thought leadership enhances their perception of an organization (including increased respect and *trust*)
- 59% agree an organization’s thought leadership is a more trustworthy basis for assessing its capabilities and competencies than its marketing materials and product sheets
- 69% agree reading thought leadership is one of the best ways to get a sense of the type and caliber of an organization’s thinking
- 61% are willing to pay a premium because thought leadership demonstrates deep thinking and other virtues important to them
- 49% say thought leadership is effective in influencing purchase decisions. After they engage with a piece of thought leadership, they sometimes or more frequently:
  - » Invite an organization (not originally in the consideration set) to bid on a project
  - » Award business to the organization responsible
  - » Increase the amount of business they do with the business
  - » Purchase a new product/service they had not previously considered buying

Implicit competence is all about proving your proficiency before the deal, and making clear your expertise, your ability to give hope to a buyer, and your vision of *their* future.

Gartner found that 68% of the B2B buying process has no direct involvement with the vendor.<sup>35</sup> In many cases, the content and ideas you’re producing in-market are stand-ins for your people.

Audit that experience from the buyer’s POV and ask: Is the quality of our thinking clear?

## Make the business case

Forrester Research found that thought leadership, done right, is “a way to stand out from the competition, create interest, and earn the trust of potential buyers early in their problem-solving process.”<sup>38</sup>

Thought leadership helps achieve: <sup>39</sup>	Which results in:
Recognition as expert	» More inbound inquiries, short lists
Philosophically aligned buyers	» Faster sales cycles
Differentiation	» Higher close rates and prices
Sharing, organic WOM	» Greater reach at lower cost
Emotional connection/trust	» Increased loyalty
More value to customers	» Higher LTV
Admiration in industry	» Attract and retain top talent

Admiration, *trust*, closed deals and premium pricing? Yes, please! Investing the time and resources in a robust thought leadership initiative delivers real business impact.

## Do it right, or make things worse

Unfortunately, many marketers have a long way to go in their B2B thought leadership initiatives. Only 29% of decision-makers surveyed gain valuable insights from the thought leadership they read.<sup>40</sup>

*“Most firms don’t have a process or framework for managing thought leadership marketing initiatives, so they push out product brochures and white papers thinly disguised as thought leadership content.”*

– Laura Ramos, Forrester

This can have a measurably *negative* impact on growth: 38% of decision makers say that their respect and admiration for a business have *decreased* after reading poor thought leadership, and it’s directly led 27% to choose NOT to award them business.

Yikes.

## Here’s how to avoid simply adding to the noise

**Have a clear point of view.** Marketing is about creating change. For your content to achieve this, it has to move beyond simply educating or stating facts; it has to take a stand and present a clear point of view.

Some in the industry have advised organizations to think like journalists. There IS a lot to steal from journalism, such as its focus on timeliness and finding the human story of every situation. But there’s a critical difference between simply reporting the facts and leading in thought; the latter is your organization’s opinion presented in a compelling way to move the buyer toward some defined place or action.

Journalists are unbiased (well, they’re supposed to be.) Thought leadership is not.

**Keep it going:** High-growth companies treat thought leadership like product development: as a discipline, not a stunt. This is not a one-time content campaign or a PR blitz to kick off the year. Think of it as a muscle that you need to constantly be working out.

The goal of thought leadership is to unearth the critical thinking that is at the very core of your organization, happening daily as you solve problems for clients. Its purpose is to elevate that advice on a consistent basis in a way that proves your expertise.

For buyers, it's not important that you necessarily have all the answers; it's about demonstrating to buyers you are dedicated to always finding out.

**Be visionary, but practical.** Buyers don't always need you to wax poetic about the future of work, artificial intelligence or a 30-year outlook (there is a time and a place for these).

Chances are, buyers are interested in what's to come in the next five years. After all, that's where their immediate problems are. Companies need to articulate a long-term vision, but don't do so at the expense of addressing your buyers' more near-term, impending priorities.

Give them a vision, but don't forget the road map to get there.

**Simplify.** Thought leadership doesn't mean *talking over your buyers*.

The more complex your offering, the more you need to sell a highly complex understanding of the world in a simple, actionable way.

Let's celebrate some great work being done in this area.

## Examples of B2B Thought Leadership Done Correctly

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## Example 1: Stirling Ultracold – Trust Starts at the Top

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Neill Lane is a leader with a vision.

The president and CEO of Stirling Ultracold, a division of Global Cooling since 2009, he is at the helm of a fast-growing organization that provides ultra-low temperature freezers to the life sciences, biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries.

This market is growing, but it's Stirling's unique approach that has driven this young company's rapid ascent. Unlike other freezers in this space, theirs is re-engineered to be incredibly energy-efficient.

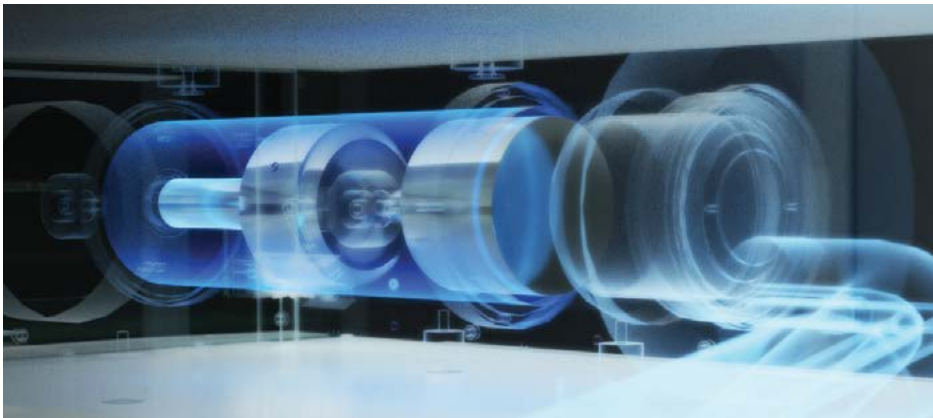
*"Sustainability was a founding value of the business."*

– Lane

Their mission: Change the world. (No, really!) Stirling's product saves 70% in energy costs, leaving behind a smaller carbon footprint. But sustainability was historically not a priority for the majority of buyers in this space.

As Lane describes it, *"There was no market for energy-efficient freezers."*

As the smaller player disrupting larger, older, more entrenched companies, Stirling had to opt buyers into their new way of thinking (their big idea); one that could ultimately convince them to change their parameters for this type of sales decision.



## How it was done

The company launched a thought leadership initiative that included featured byline articles in trade publications, organic LinkedIn posts, case studies and white papers. The goals of the program were to elevate awareness of sustainability among this audience and educate them about energy use, carbon footprint and climate impact.

At its core was a clear definition of the beliefs that formed this new vision:

*We believe being in the business of life sciences comes with a responsibility to drive significant positive change.*

*We reimagine and reinvent. We're not afraid to obliterate the status quo, outstripping competitors who only deliver incremental changes with no impact.*

The program also included speaking opportunities that gave a platform to Stirling's big idea, affording Lane the chance to evangelize the problems with the status quo of the industry to-date and present a vision for a better future.

*"It wasn't about me being on stage. We simply needed to educate our industry on a better way forward. There's a difference between education and a hard sell."*

– Lane

Lane and his team achieved success by a counterintuitively simple manner: telling the truth about how much energy traditional freezers were using (and wasting) and the consequences on both the environment and energy costs for the businesses using them.

*"If my mother found out that telling the truth was our differentiator, she would be horrified."*

– Lane

## Results

Stirling saw remarkable success with this initiative, including multiple high-profile bylines and speaking engagements at a tactical level. The company has continued on its high-velocity growth rate, recently closing a Series B round of funding.

## Take-away

Thought leadership starts at the top of the organization, and executive commitment matters. But the impact extends throughout the business and its ecosystem.

When a big idea is evangelized by an executive spokesperson like Neill Lane, buyers know not only what Stirling stands for, they also re-frame their view of the industry. Larger, more entrenched players are put on the defensive against a new priority of sustainability. What's more, the employees work under a common vision and mission, one clearly articulated internally and in-market.

### Start with why

In his 2009 TED Talk, Simon Sinek famously evangelized a model for inspiring others: **why-how-what**.

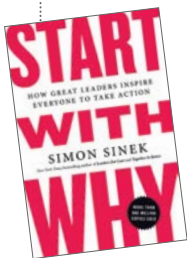
*“There are only two ways to influence human behavior: you can manipulate it or you can inspire it.*

*Very few people or companies can clearly articulate WHY they do WHAT they do. By WHY, I mean your purpose, cause or belief. WHY does your company exist? WHY do you get out of bed every morning? And WHY should anyone care?*

*People don't buy WHAT you do; they buy WHY you do it.*

*We are drawn to leaders and organizations that are good at communicating what they believe. Their ability to make us feel like we belong, to make us feel special, safe and not alone is part of what gives them the ability to inspire us.”*

— Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*



### “Random acts of thought leadership”

With this phrase, Forrester identified a common issue with B2B organizations pursuing thought leadership.

There's likely so much happening within your space that it's hard to decide *what to focus on*. But focus is what gives these programs clarity, maximizing their efficiency, and thereby allowing ideas the time and repetition they need to take hold in-market.

*“Just as political candidates capture their big ideas and positions in a political platform, CMOs will guide their organizations to a more structured approach in developing a thought leadership platform, and the big ideas and provocative positions of this platform will be a major part of what companies share through digital and mobile channels.”*

— Forrester

Create focus and discipline if you pursue thought leadership.



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## Example 2: Building Engines Proves It With Data

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Earning trust requires validation (more on this in the next section).

Simply put: We need to prove our claims to earn trust if we want anyone to believe them.

That creates a great opportunity for marketing teams to think like analysts do, asking, “How can we prove this with data?”

**Building Engines**, a software firm in commercial real estate (CRE, an industry that tends to lag behind in its use of technology), adopted this mindset to fuel a thought leadership and content marketing program that combined great, multi-channel modern marketing with an original research effort.

### How it was done

The company’s core platform manages all operations in a CRE property – something historically done on clipboards and paper-based processes. For many office building or retail property owners, the “operations function” is not traditionally considered revenue-producing or directly related to the key metric they care about most: asset value.

It was important, then, for Building Engines to *prove the value of operations* to the business itself.

This became an opportunity.

The company issued a survey to via email to a mixture of customers and prospects. More than 500 organizations responded, providing a statistically relevant sample size from which to draw conclusions. The survey took just two weeks and collected responses to over 30 questions about participants’ behaviors, attitudes and performance.

### Results

The *State of CRE Operations* report proved a critical hypothesis in the company’s value proposition: Operations *really did* measurably impact asset value. Those companies who performed well in the survey (highest revenues, for example) also had best-in-class operations practices.

The report’s findings allowed Building Engines to close the gap between their product’s core users (property management teams) and their executive teams.

It helped prospects make the business case for their solution in language the C-suite used (asset value), and changed a long-held industry assumption that operations was just a cost center in CRE.

For the business itself, this original research report was leveraged tactically in a number of ways:

- **PR** – A press release announced the findings with early coverage across industry trade publications. Bylines and guest articles were also published in the weeks following the report to help explain the findings and their implications on the industry, while offering advice and guidance based on the best practices uncovered in the research. The research also served as ideal on-stage presentation content for executive speaking engagements.
- **Demand generation** – All prospects who took the survey were given an early view of the findings with an offer for a consultative meeting to discuss their performance in context of their peers. This elevated sales meetings from a demo to a highly strategic, personalized conversation. Even three years following the publishing of the report, sales development reps point to this asset as one of their go-to resources for fostering conversations with prospects.
- **Lead nurturing** – The report was split into small take-aways suitable for email nurture campaigns as the company worked to keep leads warm during the sales process. Quick tips based on the findings gave the company fuel for these programs.
- **ABM** – The report was printed as a high-quality asset and mailed directly to executives at key prospect accounts, often with a sticky note from the account executive identifying a particular area of interest for the prospect.
- **Content marketing** – A webinar was scheduled to walk through the findings and answer live questions from viewers. The company also produced short videos featuring the report’s main author talking about the findings and important take-aways from the study. An infographic gave the high-level data a graphical treatment, and multiple blogs were written stemming from the sections of the report. A short five-question, yes/no interactive assessment allowed readers to instantly assess their performance against the survey findings.

- **Executive resource center** – A microsite was built to serve as a hub for all content related to the research, separate from the core Building Engines website. This gave the findings a distinct, significant appearance, and allowed the information to be presented in a variety of formats (visual, audio, written and interactive).
- **Digital marketing** – Social ads drove net-new names to the report download page, while individual stats fueled organic social posts.

## Impact

In less than 12 months, the research report generated more than 600 qualified leads for the organization, while helping to accelerate additional deals in the cycle. It created momentum for the company's thought leadership program as well, including a future study in conjunction with BOMA (a major industry association).

Perhaps most importantly, the company's board of directors loved the output. (When was the last time your board loved your marketing?)



### 5 traits of best-in-class property management teams

- Manage with an eye toward the bigger picture
- Serve tenants well and document their successes
- Communicate well with tenants in both directions
- Run efficiently, but focus on impact
- Leverage technology

## Original research surveys best practices

A total of 74% of B2B buyers consider original research from brands to be influential with purchasing decisions, yet fewer than half of marketers (37%) use research reports as part of their content arsenal.<sup>41</sup>

If you're considering using this wildly under-utilized tactic, consider the following tips:

- **Don't boil the ocean.** In this business context, don't try to boil the ocean and determine the "capital T" truth. At the end of the day, you're trying to answer a business question and generate business value.
- **Begin with the end in mind** by designing your research around a hypothesis that you can put to use following the survey (e.g., think about the headlines, or the change in behavior the data will catalyze among buyers).
- **Don't build in a bubble.** Sanity check your questions with a small committee of internal stakeholders (CMO, Sales, Customer Success) and external advisors (a handful of select customers is ideal). While this is not an academic exercise, observe research standards.
- **Reuse, reuse, reuse.** Original research is the type of cornerstone content asset that can fuel a multitude of campaigns, channels and tactics. Consistency is key in content marketing (we need to give ideas time to stick), and the findings of your report can help to beat the proverbial drum of your thought leadership platform over long periods of time. Plus, people learn and take in information in different ways; be sure to take advantage of the many channels available to B2B organizations.



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### Example 3: Emerson – Be the Leading Authority

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Within an industry going through major transition, the multinational Fortune 500 firm Emerson leveraged thought leadership to earn *measurably* more trust than even industry associations.

It started with a wave of industry regulations. Customers, vendors, suppliers and partners were perplexed about the appropriate path forward, given these rules being imposed on their sector.

*“If you asked anybody, ‘What’s the clarity of direction on these issues?’, you’d get the most difficult answers you’ve gotten in this industry for 25 years. People didn’t know how to navigate this period, and they didn’t necessarily know how it was going to impact them.”*

– John Rhodes, Emerson<sup>42</sup>

(Don’t forget the words of Sun Tzu: *“In the midst of chaos, there is opportunity.”*)

#### How it was done

The E360 program launched by Emerson Cold Chain Solutions sought to address critical industry issues and trends, from climate change to regulatory pressures. It offered a 360-degree view of the key factors affecting most decisions across the entire refrigeration supply chain in four main pillars:

1. Energy
2. Environment
3. Equipment
4. Economics

This *focus* allowed the organization to be consistent in its thought leadership, putting greater emphases on the key themes that addressed a “once in a generation” convergence of issues taking place in refrigeration (EPA, DOE, FSMA, technology changes, and more.)

Tactics to harness this platform of thought included:

- **Virtual webinars** – offered frequently, about eight times per year, to educate and inform
- **Content hub** – one place for all information in the E360 program; served as a resource library
- **Daylong forums** – gatherings of constituents from the refrigeration industry in different customer-dense regions of the country, featuring keynote speakers and experts. This included opinions and perspectives of those outside the company, such as OEMs, refrigeration manufacturers, contractors, industry associations, media and other value chain members – making them all a part of the conversation.
- **Content marketing in print** – an original, self-published magazine (*E360 Outlook*) featuring the latest emerging technologies, case studies and critical information on regulations. Issues range from 24 to 28 pages in length and were published three times a year.
- **PR and digital marketing** – content within E360 was repurposed into bylined article placements, interviews, YouTube videos and social media threads.

*“Emerson became the first to answer some of the most pressing questions of the industry. Thought leadership is just that: moving away from an overt sales motion of selling products to demonstrating you understand the problems buyers are having.”*

– Jon Berry, Content Director, TriComB2B

## Results

The team conducted a survey of the market, asking, “Who do you trust to have the latest information on regulations or what’s happening in the industry?”

E360 was ranked as the most trusted source – even higher than industry associations where buyers traditionally went to find this information.

Investing in content focused on education and ideas – rather than products and solutions – allowed Emerson to elevate its expertise, thereby elevating its market position and becoming recognized as the leading authority for industry stewardship by virtue of its intellectual capital.



*“Tangible, needle-moving engagement, a high-ranking industry stewardship profile and – ultimately – business opportunities!”*

– Eifert

## Take-away

Ideas have a powerful chance to shape industries as well as buyer behaviors. The products you sell are a fraction of the value you bring to market; your expertise and the trends and behaviors you can spot (and share) are inherently valuable.

Giving them away in-market before a deal helps buyers know you’re highly competent to lead them through the years to come, despite industry chaos and change. For customers in a deal cycle or looking to expand/renew, that thought leadership reminds them they made the right choice and helps to quell their ever-present concern of “Did I make the right decision?”.



## Courage and the power of exceptional truths

Bucking the status quo of marketing as we know it and changing how we do what we do require courage. It also takes courage to confidently promote bold brand ideas that challenge industry norms and offer provocative, disruptive claims.

*“Courage is something B2B industrials need to succeed. Far too many ideas hit the cutting room floor because organizations are too risk-averse. We need courage.”*

– Eifert

Arguably, this is the *only* path forward if we’re to become a function our colleagues trust, and if we’re to be the ones to drive trust for our brands in-market.

Can courage save marketing? Industry expert Michael Brenner thinks so:

*“Behind every bad marketing idea is an executive who asked for it. Marketing is seen as a task-based, tactical function by far too many executives. **In order to save marketing itself, marketers need to have the courage to push back on bad ideas.** We need to fight to create value for our customers through content, stories and better experiences. This in turn leads to more marketing-driven leads and sales and ROI. Marketing is a strategic driver of value to the business – if they let us!”*

Remember: buyers think our collateral and claims are the least-trusted of all information sources. With an abundance of hyperbole (the leading provider of X, best-in-class Y), they are hungry for the antidote.

What is the opposite of fluff and exaggeration? Exceptional truths.

I think of courage in-market as being brave enough to say what everybody is thinking, but nobody admits out loud. These ideas are “exceptional truths.”

Exceptional truths take courage. You’re the first to speak up. And when you do, buyers are grateful. You’ve cleansed their mental palate with candor about the problems they face every day – even if that truth is an ugly one.

*“Unbridled optimism comes across as salesmanship; it seems dishonest somehow. Everyone is allergic to the feeling of being sold to.”*

– Rufus Giscom, founder of Babble in Adam Grant’s book, *Originals*

For example, consider the rise of marketing software and services firm, Moz. When he started the business, founder Rand Fishkin used honesty and transparency in an industry that had been, up to that point, full of shady, secret tactics (i.e., search engine optimization).

When most competitive firms were gaming Google’s algorithm deploying a range of seedy tactics to get their clients to the first page of search results, Rand not only advocated for responsible measures, he willingly gave away all his knowledge.

You may have seen Rand’s “white board Friday” video series which broke down, in GREAT detail, the inner workings of search engine optimization. It was enough information to allow any marketer to leverage his advice, and entirely differentiated Moz and its software from a sea of smarmy SEO vendors.

Rand drew a line in the sand between good and bad, advocating for “white hat SEO” against the risks of “black hat” measures.

*“We were called ‘crazy’ and ‘foolish’ for oversharing so much about the mechanics of the business. But we also became trusted, and, especially because the field of SEO and the broader world of tech startups are so often impenetrably secretive, it paid off.”*

– Rand Fishkin in his (excellent) book, *Lost and Founder*

Rand became the go-to expert on SEO by journalists, a recognized thought leader and industry speaking staple, and amassed a huge online following on social media of marketers hungry for his insight and grateful for his leadership.

Above all, as Rand mentioned, it created *trust*.

That’s exceptional.

## Values in B2B

When all vendors look and sound the same (and are all claiming to be the best) how do you differentiate? One way to do so is through *values*.

Many B2B firms suffer from what I call the “curse of the consideration set,” in which every option looks identical to the buyer.

**Hard truth: Too many brands lack an opinion about the very space they operate in, or fail to make clear what they believe, or what they stand for.**

That’s a critical missed opportunity to differentiate, especially as 77% of consumers do not want a relationship with a brand. When they do, 64% cite shared values as the reason they have one.<sup>43</sup>

Like a good marriage, buyers who are in a relationship with your organization find common ground, mutual understanding and trust with you, because they feel you share the same definition of what’s important.

A total of 60% of executives say knowing what a company stands for is much more important than whether it is innovative (21%) or dominates its market (20%).<sup>44</sup>

To a buyer, if you stand for nothing, or believe in nothing, you mean nothing. In our world of commoditization, where that buyer has more options than ever, brands can’t afford to mean *nothing*.

## How to use values in marketing

Taking a stand operates in two dimensions: for something, and against something.

*FOR: What do we believe in and stand for as a business?*

Perhaps you believe in sustainability (like Stirling Ultracold) or the same vision for the future of work (like workforce management firm Catalant, who believes “the future of work is agile”). You could value honesty/transparency (like Moz) or freedom (like open-source pioneer Linux).

*AGAINST: What do we stand against? What fundamentally conflicts and competes with our purpose?*

There is power in creating an enemy. We’ve seen this tactic work to dire effect in geopolitical situations, but the same tenets apply to B2B marketing.

Your “enemy” in B2B is not your competition. It is a broader, larger *something* that fundamentally competes and conflicts with your purpose as an organization. By taking a stand *against* this enemy, you indicate what you stand *for* as an organization.

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### Example: The Enemy of Salesforce

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Salesforce is credited with pioneering the now standard concept of running a business’ software on its own servers and selling subscriptions – what we all know today as *SaaS* (aka the cloud). But when it began in 1999, on-premise was the norm and had the vast majority of market share. Twenty years later, 75% of CRM spending is in *SaaS*.

One way the firm achieved such a transformational change in-market was its highly strategic use of “finding an enemy.” This “enemy” was born out of the key differentiators of the company’s cloud CRM product compared to its competitors (who sold on-premise software).

*“Our differentiators were ease of use, a business model of shared risk, and low-risk commitment – everything that software was not.”*

*– Marc Benioff, CEO, Salesforce*

Those last five words are the most important: “**everything that software was not**”.

The enemy of Salesforce was not another existing, legacy firm. It was everything those companies *stood for*: Lack of customization. Slow time-to-value. High costs. Difficult scalability and integration. Clunky UX.

To Benioff, this became the rally cry for the company’s early marketing efforts. Don’t forget: at the time, Salesforce was still the David up against the Goliath of Siebel Systems and the status quo.

To break through, they had to be bold.



## How it was done

Salesforce defined and rallied against this enemy by:

- Incorporating the belief into their brand with a “no software” mascot named SaaSy) and the phone number 1-800-NO-SOFTWARE
- Creative stunt marketing such as hiring fake protestors to picket competitor Siebel Systems’ user conference (including fake news crews)

*“The protests were executed just as [we] had hoped, with 25 hired protesters shouting slogans such as ‘Red rover, red rover, software is over,’ donning bright red t-shirts with the words ‘death to software,’ and passing out invitations to salesforce.com’s launch party that evening.”<sup>45</sup>*

## Results

Salesforce was “the buzz of not only San Francisco (and of course, the Siebel User Conference), but also the national media. Within two weeks of the launch, salesforce.com also had more than 1,000 organizations signed up for its service, the majority of whom had learned about the service from reading articles about the launch. Almost all of the coverage portrayed salesforce.com as a viable alternative to the outrageously expensive solutions offered by Siebel and Oracle, and introduced salesforce.com as an edgy new company willing to do things differently.”<sup>45</sup>

The firm will forever be considered leaders of a movement because of this insistence that they *stand* for something and *against* something else. More than 170,000 individuals (the same number of Oracle employees) descend upon San Francisco annually for their Dreamforce conference – not to learn how to use sales applications, but to be part of the movement. **That is the power of an enemy.**

**Note:** Taking a page out of this very book, a competitor to Salesforce, Freshworks, hired a blimp at a recent Dreamforce event with the copy “FAILSFORCE.”<sup>47</sup> A bit derivative, no?

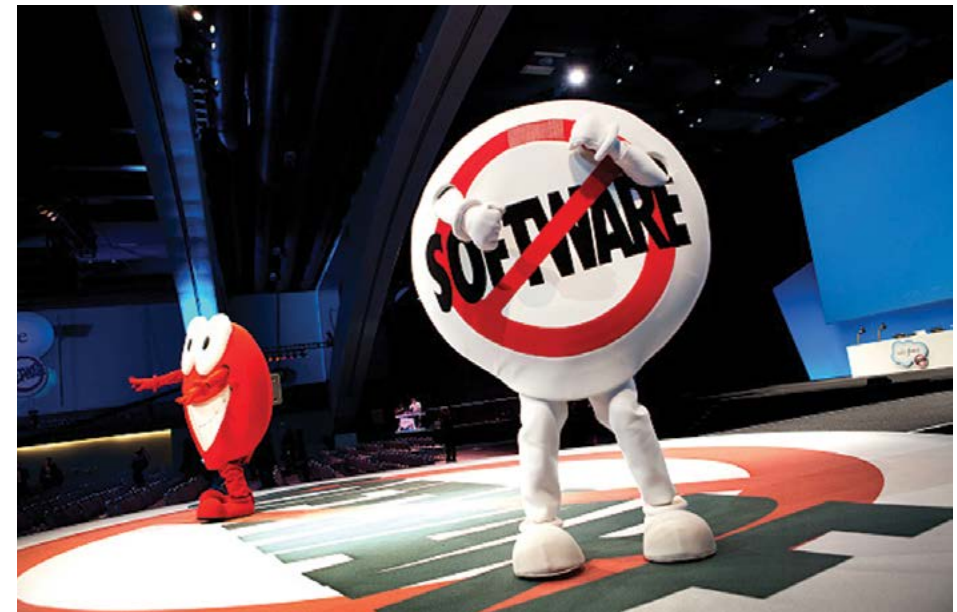
## Take-away

**The enemy is bigger than you.** What’s really important is that this “enemy” was far bigger than Salesforce itself, or its individual competitors. They rallied against

an *idea*, a *behavior* and an *accepted belief*.

**Don’t go head-to-head.** Nobody likes to be told “You’re wrong.” (Any comments section anywhere online will prove this.) We are human; we double down on our existing beliefs. Yes, we have to help buyers see the problem in how they’re doing things today, but it’s not enough to tell them, “You’re doing everything wrong”.

We cannot blame them for their problem. Instead, blame the foe. You have to show the buyer you are on the same side, that you have a common enemy. Team up with the buyer, on their side, against something else.



## Element of Trust 2: Validation

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Part 1 of earning trust through implicit (and explicit) competence is a process of us (vendors) talking to them (buyers). Just as important is how well we can demonstrate the confidence of others in this equation.

In a world of mistrust, we must prioritize the opinions of those who can hold us accountable to what we say and what we do.

### Harnessing external influencers

Consider this: 63% of buyers trust what influencers say about brands much more than what brands say about themselves.<sup>48</sup> By comparison, only 11% of buyers said vendor representatives were very trustworthy.<sup>49</sup> (Ouch.)

### Who influences B2B?

Beyond their immediate colleagues, an ecosystem of sources influences B2B purchase decisions:

- Other business leaders (their peers)
- Marquee customers (brands they admire)
- Consultants
- Micro influencers (often with an audience of 10,000 or less)
- Macro influencers (with an audience of 10,000+)
- Authors and speakers
- Podcasters, bloggers and “armchair analysts” (anyone with a body of content with opinions on the industry)
- Journalists, trade media and associations
- Traditional research analysts

### Are you leveraging these individuals in your content?

The world of B2B is moving increasingly to social media. A total of 84% of C-level and VP-level buyers are influenced by social media when purchasing.<sup>50</sup> While there, these buyers are three times as likely to follow an influencer than follow a brand.<sup>51</sup>

TopRank Marketing recently offered ideas for engaging B2B influencers in marketing campaigns.<sup>52</sup> Here are 10 of my favorite:

1. Conduct a series of video interviews with influencers.
2. Add influencer reactions and expertise to a research report.
3. Enlist influencers as judges in a contest or awards program.
4. Invite influencers to an event at brand HQ: tours, executive meet and greets, education and social content creation.
5. Invite influencers to write a series of articles published on the brand site.
6. Engage influencers to keynote or run a workshop at your user conference.
7. Invite influencers along with clients and prospects to VIP dinners where your brand presents, sponsors or attends industry events.
8. Feature quotes from a group of influencers for a round-up blog post, e-book or landing page.
9. Invite influencers to an executive meeting or retreat to discuss topics of mutual interest, then publish a summary.
10. Invite influencers to do software walk-throughs.



## What makes a great influencer?

Of course, the key question at the core of any influencer marketing is, “Who exactly is an influencer?”

As a baseline, an influencer should have a pre-existing presence in your space. They have recognition and the respect of others. It's tempting to look at the number of followers or reach as the only measure of influence, but it's actually not of paramount importance.

**Q:** Which is more important in an influencer: popularity or relatability?

**A:** Relatability is nearly twice as important as popularity as a quality that attracts people to influencers.<sup>53</sup> (More on this in part three.)

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### Example: Cherwell Software Amplifies the Message

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Cherwell, a leading IT service management (ITSM) company, sought to expand its marketing channels to increase brand awareness. It decided to engage a vast network of IT influencers through the development of engaging and valuable content. The goal of this strategy was to extend the reach of an integrated content campaign while quickly building credibility for the brand.



First, the team researched the right influencers, content topics, content types and amplification platforms. Personalized messages were sent to each contributor to encourage their participation in co-creating content, including:

- **A blog post** that highlighted 25 experts in the ITSM industry
- **An e-book** that was hosted on SlideShare and embedded in a supporting blog post on the website

- **An SEO-driven landing page** launched with the e-book, which provided additional resources, information and included a space to capture demo lead information
- **Social media** amplification, paid and organic, to promote the assets

The assets for the campaign were rolled out in three phases:

1. e-book: 170% increase in views over average assets
2. 5,500 views across amplifying assets
3. more than 1,500 social shares across channels<sup>54</sup>

## Activating customer advocates

For someone to influence your buyer, that buyer must be able to relate to them. That's why two tactics – review sites and referral programs – have become so important as customers wonder what their peers think and feel about the experience of doing business with you.

### Advocacy type A: Review sites

Whenever I travel, I'm constantly using Yelp and TripAdvisor to find high-rated options for dining or opportunities to experience something new near me. When I consider applying for a new job at a company, I use Glassdoor to find out what it's really like to work there. Just as consumers rely on these peer-review sites, an increasing number of B2B buyers rely on similar resources.

Some B2B review sites to consider:

G2 Crowd	Software Advice
TrustRadius	FinancesOnline
GetApp	SaaSGenius
Capterra	TechnologyAdvice
IT Central Station	

Depending on your target market, many of these sites have become an influential resource to inform purchase decisions.

Research shows that displaying five or more reviews can increase a company's conversion rates by as much as 270%,<sup>55</sup> and 92% of buyers said they were more likely to purchase a product or service after reading a trusted review.

Even so, only 43% of B2B businesses are currently using reviews as part of their marketing strategy.<sup>56</sup> That's a shame, as reviews give teams a chance to build trust at every stage of the sales process:

*"... our review program [is a] a strategic element of our core customer marketing program. We have also enabled our sales development reps to lead their outreach with review quotes and have seen a positive lift in conversion and response rates."*

*— Julie Perino, Director, Customer Marketing,  
Digital Experience, Adobe, in an interview with  
Demand Gen Report<sup>57</sup>*

### **Tip: Be proactive; you can't afford not to.**

There's some conventional wisdom at play with review sites that also holds true for B2B: a customer is more likely to write a review of a bad experience than a positive one. That's just human nature!

We must be in the habit of asking our happy customers to leave a positive review at high points in their customer journey, e.g., if they've just renewed, or if they're experiencing great results.

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### **Example: Marketo Drives Enterprise Customer Reviews**

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Marketo, now an Adobe company, is a leading provider of marketing automation solutions. This field, however, is crowded with players large and small – all competing for market share. In such a noisy field, referral sites like AppExchange (owned by Salesforce), G2 Crowd and TrustRadius made up most of the company's pipeline.

### **How it was done**

To help build trust among their enterprise buyer segment, the company encouraged customers to submit reviews with a variety of incentives:

- Offering a special branded hoodie if a customer wrote a review before their annual user conference
- Activating attendees at regional live events and major trade shows to write reviews in exchange for branded clothing
- Creating online gaming experiences that offered advocates points and prizes for writing reviews or making referrals

### **Results**

The results were phenomenal:

- 538 net-new reviews
- #1 position on G2 Crowd within the Enterprise segment
- #1 spot on TrustRadius in Mid-Market/Enterprise segments
- Named "most reviewed in 2015" on G2 Crowd<sup>58</sup>

## Advocacy type B: Referral programs

Most frequently, B2B buyers are asking peers for their opinion. In fact, 84% of B2B decision-makers *start* the buying process with a referral.<sup>59</sup>

Customers referred from other customers tend to close more frequently (higher conversion rates), faster (less time), and have a higher lifetime value.

Why? A referral is founded on trust.

### **We don't do business with companies we do not trust, and we absolutely do not refer them to others.**

Referrals and positive word of mouth happen when customers are delighted by their experience with your firm. But putting a strategy in place in addition to organic referrals can create more deliberate growth.

*"Competency [alone] doesn't create conversations."*

– *Convince and Convert*

To encourage word-of-mouth conversations and referrals, consider the following tips:

**First, look inward.** Ensure your retention rates, reputation and customer experience warrant referrals in the first place. No amount of great marketing can make up for a poor product or experience.

**Find the promoters.** Issue a Net Promoter Score (NPS) survey. Ask how likely your customers would be to recommend you to peers like them. Those who self-identify are the best place to focus your referral initiatives. Also, prioritize those who have been a loyal customer

for an extended period of time and demonstrate strong lifetime value, or those who you know can articulate measurable impact.

**Reward.** Clients do refer altruistically, but incentives work. With the long B2B sales cycle, however, it could take months until you show your gratitude for the closed deal. Consider rewarding a customer for simply making a referral of a qualified lead in your target audience, or in a key account you're targeting. Even something as small as a gift card can go a long way.

Ambassador found that marketers who offered a small referral incentive for a qualified lead, and a larger incentive for a closed sale, saw a 75% higher referral share rate compared to a company that only incentivized closed sales.<sup>60</sup>

## Harnessing transparency

People and companies with nothing to hide, hide nothing.

Yes, earning trust can be that simple.

As we've discussed, every business is being forced into an age of accountability through the emergence of review sites and the ease of connecting with peers to ask their opinions of a brand via social media.

But some brands have realized that fully embracing transparency as a core value of their marketing and business operations will put them at a competitive advantage.

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## Example: Buffer Gets Real

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Buffer provides social media scheduling software to marketing professionals (another competitive space with a multitude of similar vendors providing similar products). What immediately stands out about this firm, however, is a core company value: “default to transparency”.

This is not only lip service (like so many company values tend to be). Buffer lives this value of transparency in radically honest ways:

- Every employee can see every email that’s sent at Buffer.
- The company’s salaries, equity, metrics, weekly improvements – and even funding rounds – are public.
- Buffer’s team published a breakdown of exactly where a customer’s monthly fee goes when they purchase a subscription to this software.

## Why?

*“Transparency breeds trust, and trust is the foundation of great teamwork.”*

– Joel Gascoigne, Co-founder and CEO, Buffer<sup>61</sup>

Trust internally creates trust externally. As a customer, I know whatever Buffer’s marketing materials or sales collateral says is likely to be true, given their pattern of candor.

Operating in this way throughout the business delivers lasting benefits for the company’s marketing efforts. Sure, it serves as a powerful buzz/PR generator, provides ample blog content, and positions its executives as thought leaders in their own right. But more than that, it fosters a brand perception of *trust* – which impacts every buyer interaction much like the air cover of good press.

What’s more, it’s genuine: the antidote to widespread buyer skepticism.

Joel quotes Dennis Bakke (co-founder and CEO of AES) as he explains the risk of tying company values to performance:

*“I kept saying that our values were not responsible for the run-up in our share price and should not be blamed for any down-turns in the future.”*

– Dennis Bakke

## Take-away

If values are just seen as a marketing ploy, they’ll quickly be abandoned when the journey gets rough, or the roller coaster starts its downward tilt. If they’re real, and adopted throughout the business, they can serve as a key differentiator.

## Give buyers what they want.

In a global study of IT buyers, Spiceworks found that 90% of buyers want to make a purchase decision using the help of a free product trial, while only 58% of marketers provide them.

What’s more, 95% of buyers surveyed want in-depth technical spec sheets, while only 73% of marketers proactively produce them.

Finally, 99% want to consider product reviews in their buying process, while only 60% of technology marketers surveyed produced them.<sup>62</sup>

Mind the gap.

## How to build transparency in the B2B sales process

Research firm Gartner has called for a fundamental shift to the way B2B organizations think about supplying content and information to fuel the sales process. What was historically sales enablement is now a combination of buyer *and* sales enablement.

Sales enablement » *buyer and* sales enablement

*“Buyer enablement helps buyers buy ... [it] is the provisioning of information that supports the completion of critical activities necessary to make a purchase. Just as sales enablement helps sellers sell, buyer enablement helps buyers buy by providing them with prescriptive advice and practical support to make the buying process easier to navigate and complete.”*

– Gartner<sup>63</sup>

Recall the impact of information overload: buyers are uncertain and stressed out, suffering from the debilitating condition of “infomania”. This is preventing them from solving problems clearly, focusing, or receiving incoming information.<sup>64</sup>

As mentioned, when we send an abundance of content to our sales force or directly to our buyers in an effort to move them through complex sales cycles, we are actually adding to the problem.

Make it EASY for your buyer to make a decision.



Flowserve VirtualPlant

## Move from static to interactive and experiential.

Consider interactive content such as:

Calculators	Diagnostics
Benchmarking tools	Simulators
Recommenders	

If your insight is locked away in PDFs, you’re missing the chance to experiment with experiential content – and quickly help the buyer get to the personalized information they need.

## Example: Flowserve Provides Context

Flowserve needed to educate new employees, particularly sales engineers, on the products and plants they’d be selling into, and give customers an easy way to explore their products and understand their offerings.

But with a wide breadth of products and complex layers of plant information from oil refineries to desalination plants, this was not information that came easy to consume.

## How it was done

The company decided to create an intuitive, visual way to access this critical data. They built an interactive, virtual plant experience<sup>65</sup> using a content management system within a 3D environment. This allowed even non-coders to update content when necessary.

## Results

The result is a tool that is easy to use, fast and simple, providing buyers with information and answers to well-known challenges in the context of their own work environment.

## Example: AEP Leads the Electrification Dialogue

The mission was ambitious: convince companies to switch from older, gas-powered equipment to new electric technologies. American Electric Power (AEP) knew by doing so, they could increase electricity sales on a significant scale.

But these organizations had a range of questions about converting from gas to electric. And AEP's internal team needed to be educated on the benefits as well.

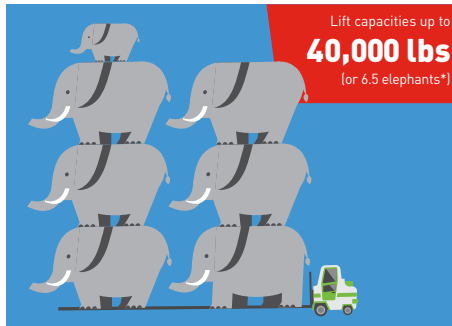
How did they do it? By keeping it simple.

The company first researched the economic and technical advantages of new electric technologies across a range of industrial applications.

*“The status quo, gas-fired technologies, are very entrenched. AEP had to be really clear about the benefits of electric conversion and show clear technical, environmental and economic justifications for change.”*

— Jonah Otchy, Associate Creative Director, TriComB2B

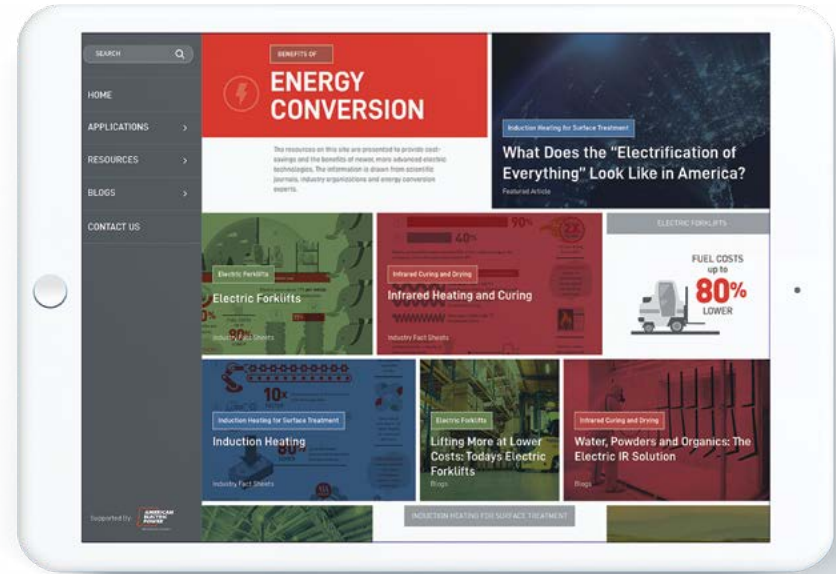
The team presented these benefits in an approachable graphical way with clean and bright imagery accompanied by animation.



They also created a content hub to house knowledge about target industries and applications, a central repository that became integral for customers and employees alike.

*“The content hub was important to business customers because it gave them a centralized place to access information, educational resources and tools from their utility. AEP's breadth of knowledge is on full display in a single site.”*

— Kindra Beck, Client Services, TriComB2B<sup>66</sup>



## Results

AEP wanted to lead the conversation when it came to electric conversion. Thanks to the simplified, benefits-oriented messaging behind this centralized content hub and the simplified information design, it was easy for customers and employees to understand the exciting opportunity at hand. The content hub became an instant, highly visited resource that answered critical customer questions and served up interactive, on-demand expertise.



## Element of Trust 3: Relatability and Relevance

We trust those who we believe have our best interests at heart. We look for intent when we decide to whom to give our trust.

Brands can demonstrate intent through empathy.

Wait, before you roll your eyes at the “e” word (I know, it’s becoming a buzzword), really think about the idea of empathy. To *show* empathy is to demonstrate to someone that we have put ourselves in their shoes for a while and looked at the world through their eyes.

When we *demonstrate* empathy, we’re actively signaling to someone that we can be trusted, because we’ve done the work to find out who they are and what they need.

That is a powerful conduit for meaningful relationships. Empathy causes us to lower our defenses and build powerful connections with others.

But 70% of B2B customers feel brands don’t understand them.<sup>67</sup>

### Time to get personal

Reaching and earning the trust of B2B buyers in 2020 (and beyond) will require marketing teams to get to know them at a personal level. We need to connect with them emotionally.

You may be thinking that emotional connections with B2B purchases are rare. After all, aren’t we more likely to feel a bond with something we buy in our personal lives?

Not quite. Research from Google, Motista and Gartner (CEB) found that, on average, B2B customers are significantly more emotionally connected to their vendors and service providers than consumers.

*While it may seem surprising at first, this high level of connection with B2B customers makes a lot of sense. When a personal consumer makes a bad purchase, the stakes are relatively low. Best case, it’s returnable. If not, it might require an explanation to a spouse.*

*Business purchases, on the other hand, can involve huge amounts of risk:*

*Responsibility for a multi-million dollar software acquisition that goes bad can lead to poor business performance and even the loss of a job. The business customer won’t buy unless there is a substantial emotional connection to help overcome this risk.<sup>68</sup>*

### How do we build an emotional connection with B2B buyers?

One way is to show them personal benefits.

B2B buyers are 50% more likely to buy when they see a personal value for them, or a positive impact on their career. They are also eight times more likely to pay a premium.<sup>69</sup>

Bain and Company published a must-save resource in the *Harvard Business Review: The B2B Elements of Value*.<sup>70</sup> Designed after Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, this pyramid represents what motivates individuals in corporate roles to buy and use business products and services.



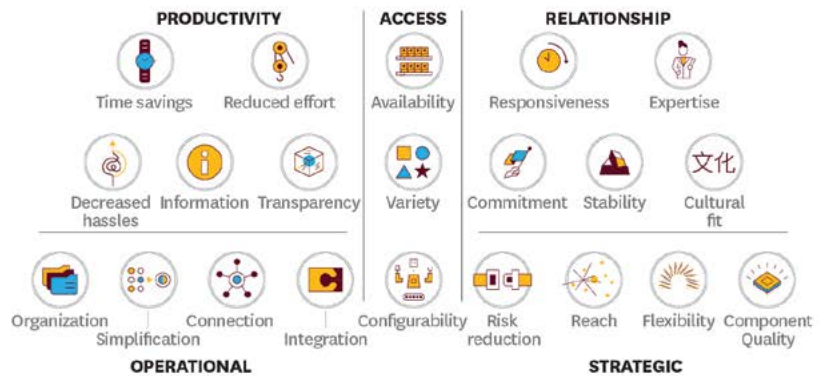
INSPIRATIONAL VALUE



INDIVIDUAL VALUE



EASE OF DOING BUSINESS VALUE



FUNCTIONAL VALUE



TABLE STAKES



At the bottom of the pyramid are the most basic of value statements in our messaging, the objective, **functional elements** of value:

- Meeting specifications
- Acceptable price
- Regulatory compliance
- Ethical standards

These are considered “table stakes” by the researchers. If you don’t meet these basic needs, you have no right to win the deal.

In B2B, we tend to rely on **functional benefits**, including:

- Improved top line
- Cost reduction
- Product quality
- Scalability
- Innovation

As you move up the pyramid, the types of value become increasingly more **personal and subjective**. For example:

- Reducing anxiety
- Increasing marketability
- Network expansion
- Reputational assurance
- Growth and development

This is the realm of differentiation, where brands can break away from the pack within their consideration set and carve out a unique place in the mind of the buyer. Each of these elements speaks directly to the real humans who are behind our purchase decisions.



*We like to think of organizations as rational and logical. The truth is, there are people within them, and those people are just as, if not more, influenced by emotion than everyday consumers. While the latter may place some value on bonding with a brand, the former needs an emotional connection to buy at all. **By getting personal, B2B marketers can get ahead – creating purchase intent, pricing power, brand advocacy and, most importantly, happy customers.***<sup>71</sup>

Consider what the buyer is **really** asking from us:

**Reduced anxiety** – Quell my fear and sooth my concerns. Help me sleep better at night.

**Marketability** – Help me perform well and earn a better position.

**Hope** – Provide trust amid a changing, uncertain future.

**Vision** – Assist me in anticipating change.

Does your marketing content achieve these emotional goals?

Can buyers see themselves in your content? What's in it for them?

Is it clear that you have their best interests at heart?

How will this vision you are inviting them into transform their careers?

Most importantly: Do you know your buyers well enough to know which of these value-drivers matter to them?

*Too often, attempts at differentiation come down to the infusion of value clichés, such as: “world-class,” “global leader” and “innovative solution provider”... The emotional impact comes from relatability: How do customers relate to an offering in the real world? **If it changes their lives for the better, makes them smarter, better, faster, happier, more secure ... then show them exactly how.***<sup>72</sup>

– TriComB2B

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## **Example: STEMCELL Technologies Builds Trust Among Skeptics**

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For one company selling to extremely skeptical buyers, the path to earning trust is paved with relevant, relatable marketing.

STEMCELL Technologies is a global biotechnology firm supporting academic and industrial scientists. With 2,500+ products, this organization provides a range of materials needed for life sciences research, including cell culture media to cell separation systems, instruments and reagents.

You might need a PhD to wrap your head around what exactly the organization provides.

It's good then that 1/3 of the company's staff *has* a PhD, while most others across the business have advanced degrees. It's no wonder the company's tagline is “*Scientists Helping Scientists*,” as there are actual scientists in Sales, R&D and Marketing.

One reason for this approach is the nature of the company's buyers.

*“Our audience is quite unique in that they are highly educated, and they're scientists, which means that they are (by nature and training) a no-nonsense group. They will dismiss anything that even hints at marketing hype or fluff.”*

– Nicole Quinn, Associate Director of Scientific Communications, STEMCELL Technologies

But such a deep understanding of the target audience carries deep benefits across the business:

- **Sales** knows which products would work for a scientist, and can collaborate as peers.
- The primary reason for **R&D** is to help progress science, not necessarily profitability.
- **Marketing** “speaks science. We know exactly what scientists struggle with and can talk at a colleague-to-colleague level, not vendor-to-customer.” – Quinn

“Scientists helping scientists” is so much more than a tagline; it’s a lived promise by an organization dedicated to earning – and keeping – the trust of one of the hardest audiences to sell to.

## How it is done

Tactically, there are some fantastic marketing strategies at play.

**Newsletters.** The company hand-compiles 20 free, weekly science newsletters sent via email and Twitter to keep scientists current on the latest research, news, events and jobs in their fields.

**Documentary.** Demonstrating incredible transparency, the company invited real scientists to peer-review their organization, like they would for a study in their field. They then released the footage in a documentary and comprehensive report.

*“It was unprecedented to let the peer reviewers into every department from top to bottom, to question our motives and values, to snoop through our processes and to get a glimpse of our goals and our challenges. But in the end, the peer reviewers were impressed.”<sup>73</sup>*

**Education and events.** The firm also offers courses and workshops to scientists, and regional meetups like Science in Boston.

**Bi-weekly podcast.** The company also produces *The Stem Cell Podcast* featuring experts in their field.

January 28, 2020

### Ep. 160: “Engineering Human Cardiac Muscle” Featuring Dr. Kacey Ronaldson-Bouchard

CARDIAC. ESCS AND IPSCS. REGENERATIVE MEDICINE



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Dr. Kacey Ronaldson-Bouchard is an Associate Research Scientist at Columbia University focusing on biomedical engineering. She is also the co-founder of TARA Biosystems, which offers physiologically relevant human “heart-on-a-chip” tissue models for cardiac risk assessment and drug discovery applications.

[Read More](#)

## Results

Steady growth, positive brand affinity and loyal customers, all built on a foundation of trust created by unmatched relevance and relatability.

*“Every interaction we have with a customer, whether directly, through our marketing materials, or through the experience with our products, reflects that we know our buyer, we know what we’re doing, and we’re doing it for the right reason. This inherently brings trust.”*

– Quinn

In this example, STEMCELL Technologies demonstrates each of the three elements of trust:

1. Competence (both implicit and explicit)
2. Validation
3. Relatability and relevance



Three Scientists Peer Reviewed a Life Science Vendor - Full Documentary Film

# Quick tips

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## Eight Ways to Build Trust in Your B2B Brand

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How can marketing teams create trust with buyers in an age of skepticism and noise?

- 1. Be honest:** Trust is built when we do what we say we're going to do. For B2B marketing teams, this means gut-checking your own customer and product experience before investing heavily in market-facing tactics. Ask questions such as: Are we over-promising? Is our promise to the market hyperbolic? Do the experiences of our buyers match the expectations we set?
- 2. Demonstrate expertise, hope and vision:** Use thought leadership to prove your proficiency before the deal; make clear your expertise, your ability to give hope to a buyer, and your vision for *their* future. To become a leading authority, your marketing should focus on education and ideas, not only products and solutions.
- 3. Simplify the complex:** Sell a highly complex understanding of the world in a simple, actionable way. Simplify the buying process and avoid paralyzing buyers with too much information. Empower buyers, not just your sales team.
- 4. Leverage new content formats:** Invest in original research. A total of 74% of B2B buyers consider original research from brands to be influential with purchasing decisions, yet fewer than half of marketers (37%) use research reports as part of their content arsenal.<sup>74</sup> Try moving from static to interactive/experiential content like simulators and recommenders.
- 5. Tell exceptional truths:** The antidote to hyperbole and fluff is exceptional truths – what others are thinking, but not saying aloud, or that they're not aware of yet. Bring candor about the daily problems your buyers face and earn their trust.
- 6. Be clear about your values:** Make clear what you stand for and what you stand against. Operate in a way throughout the business that illustrates your values (e.g., with transparency) and build trust through shared principles with buyers.
- 7. Embrace validation:** Harness those buyers who build trust most: influencers, online reviews, and referrals that can validate your worldview and sing your praises. Highlight those voices aligning with yours and to whom buyers can relate.
- 8. Make a relevant, emotional connection:** Be clear how your solution impacts buyers in a personal way. Remember: the emotions behind every B2B purchase – a buyer's marketability, reputation and hope for the future – are on the line. Demonstrate that you understand them best, and they'll trust you have their best interests at heart.

## Conclusion

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Trust may indeed be in short supply. But this is the type of environment where marketing as a discipline, a strategy and a responsibility matters more than ever.

Building that trust requires B2B companies to exercise new muscles and adopt new frameworks for success. For example:

Move from only product-centric collateral (what we do) to galvanizing motivation (what we believe, what we know, and why we do it). Shift from sales-as-order-takers (facilitate the buying process) to empowered missionaries (inform the buying process with our distinct point of view in a simple, clear way).

They're not easy changes, but they'll turn our brands and marketing from disposable to indispensable.

We need to:

1. Prove our competence and lead in thought.
2. Embrace transparency and be accountable.
3. Demonstrate that we understand our buyers at a deep, human level.

The benefits of this approach are innumerable for an organization seeking to grow over the long term. Trust is no longer optional, but rather one of the determining factors as to which companies will survive – and which will fail.

For an industry as mistrusted as marketing, if we adopt the responsibility of driving trust in-market, it also may help to improve the perception of our very profession.

No pressure.

Best of luck.

## About the Author

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Katie Martell was named “one of the most interesting people in B2B marketing,” a “marketing expert to follow,” and a top marketing voice on LinkedIn three times, with experience in a variety of marketing leadership roles at high-growth B2B technology firms.

Today, she serves as a consultant for marketing teams seeking to grow in a noisy, digital age, partnering with brands such as Microsoft, Adobe and Oracle. Katie led New England's largest group for content marketing professionals, Boston Content, and is a frequent speaker at marketing, technology and digital conferences in the U.S. and internationally.

Follow her on Twitter @KatieMartell and subscribe to *The World's Best Newsletter* at [Katie-Martell.com](http://Katie-Martell.com).



## About TriComB2B

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TriComB2B is a B2B marketing agency unabashedly devoted to all things industrial and technical, helping clients design simple, effective ways to connect with audiences, no matter how complex their stories. We take B2B from table stakes to inspired – without a lot of fuss.

No complex theories, jargon or pretentiousness. Delivered from Dayton, Ohio: the most authentic, talent-filled city in the Midwest U.S.

More at [TriComB2B.com](http://TriComB2B.com).



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