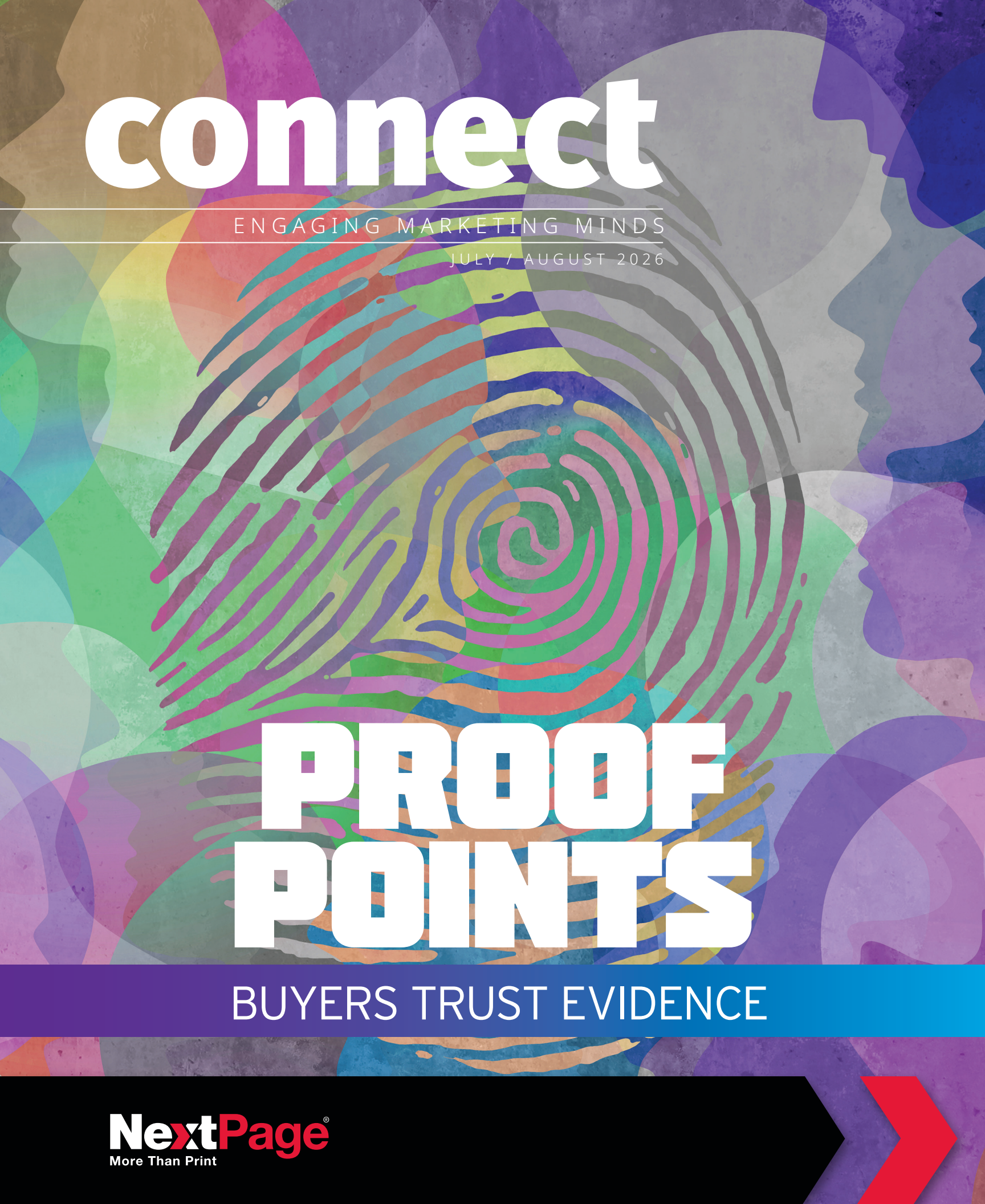




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ENGAGING MARKETING MINDS

JULY / AUGUST 2026

PROOF POINTS

BUYERS TRUST EVIDENCE

97% of Marketers say
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Source: G2's 2025/2026 Marketing Technology Benchmark

WHAT'S MISSING

Somewhere along the way, marketing has been reduced to activity. Campaigns. Channels. Budgets. Outputs. The work has become a checklist, and the value is only measured by what can be tracked, optimized, and reported.

While that may keep things moving, it doesn't move anything forward. In our opinion, the real value of marketing has never been what it does. Real marketing is about how it thinks. And it seems like that kind of thinking is under pressure.

If we do a bit of a deep dive into companies, there are a couple of variables shaping decisions. First is compliance, which is necessary but debilitating if left unchecked. The second is efficiency, which is about being lean and doing more with less. Both matter but neither really builds anything remarkable.

What we have observed is the piece called discovery, which doesn't neatly show up on a dashboard, but it is everything to a marketing department. It is a little uncomfortable because it challenges assumptions. In addition, it introduces ideas that don't immediately fit within existing structures. And because of that, it's often the first thing organizations quietly push aside in favor of predictability.

Discovery is born from listening and real observation. And in today's world, discovery is where differentiation lives. It's where new markets are uncovered, better solutions are designed, and real connections with customers are formed. Without it, marketing lacks momentum and simply becomes maintenance.

We believe that marketing has to reclaim their role as the thinking engine of an organization—to bring a customer-out perspective that doesn't just support the business, but challenges it when necessary. In turn, this approach values curiosity as much as consistency. And it demands asking better questions rather than just delivering better outputs.

Real marketing is intentional. But discovery has to be developed, protected, and practiced. The companies that figure this out will have an advantage that no amount of efficiency can replicate. They'll still run lean. They'll still stay compliant. But they'll also see what others miss.

And in a day where everyone is getting faster and cheaper, seeing differently might be the only thing that matters.

Warmest regards,



Gina M. Danner
CEO, NextPage



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SK MARK FRIEDMAN and he'll spill the secret that's not really a secret: Sales teams get most of the glory. As every marketer knows, when the deal closes and the numbers hit, the spotlight always shines on the team generating the revenue. But in between the lines of those signed deals is the stark reality that while few deals happen without sales, even fewer happen without marketing.

That's just part of the equation—one where impact is harder to isolate and attribution is constantly questioned.

"It's part of the job," says Friedman, VP of Marketing at FUJIFILM North America Corporation Business Innovation

Division. "And it's okay. You don't go into marketing looking for glory."

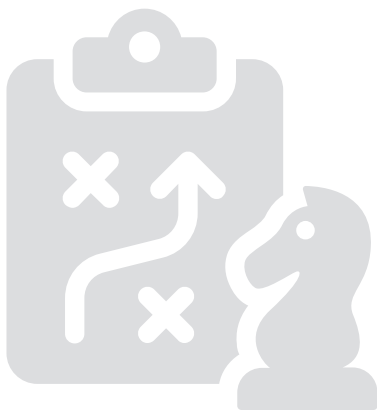
For the past 15-plus years, Friedman has been a warrior in these battles. Throughout his career, he has built and scaled marketing teams across global manufacturing and distribution businesses. Each step along the way carried the same

“ I THINK A LOT OF THE FRICTION COMES FROM MANAGEMENT SETTING THE TWO UP AS COMPETITORS FOR BUDGET, GLORY, ATTRIBUTION, HEADCOUNT AND LEADERSHIP ROLES. SALES AND MARKETING ARE PARTNERS.”

— MARK FRIEDMAN, VP OF MARKETING AT FUJIFILM NORTH AMERICA CORPORATION BUSINESS INNOVATION DIVISION

BLURRED LINES

SALES 2.0
FOR B2B
FIRMS



“WE LOOK AT MARKETING LIKE A PRE-CONVERSATION PLANNER, NOT WORKING COLLATERAL WITH SALES... THIS ALLOWS CONVERSATIONS TO START AT A HIGHER LEVEL.”

– **MOHAMED YOUSUF**, CO-FOUNDER/CEO, SMART WORKFORCE AI

focus: Clarify the go-to-market strategy, align marketing and sales around measurable pipeline contribution, and position the portfolio for long-term growth.

"The relationship is much simpler than everyone makes it out to be," Friedman says. "It's all about mutual respect. Sales and marketing are two very different functions, which most of the time have very different strategies, tactics and short-term goals. There are overlaps, meetings, projects, but when the teams

go off to do their work, sales is a one-to-one, face-to-face effort. Marketing operates at scale, reaching broad audiences at once, but often without the personal, one-to-one connection that defines a sales interaction."

To close that gap, Friedman and his team have built a layer between marketing and sales focused on qualification and early discovery. The strategy brings context to every lead handoff. "We have introduced a human element in between sales and marketing to help qualify, do initial discovery and compile the data points. So when we hand off leads to sales, they can do what they do best."

Friedman says the approach helps shift the focus from volume to value. While fewer leads may make it through, the ones that do arrive with greater intent and stronger context, allowing sales to

step in as advisors, not just responders. "Sure, this means fewer leads get to sales, but we also don't waste their time with those who are not ready for a buying decision."

That same focus on quality over quantity carries into how his team handles data. Rather than overwhelm sales with information, they are working to make marketing insights more usable in the field by surfacing key data directly within CRM systems to guide next steps and strategy. "We have more data today than we have time to figure out and share," Friedman says. "Separating the actionable data from the non-actionable is hard."

Instead of trying to eliminate tension between the two parties, he is working to reframe it. "Much of the friction comes from how organizations structure incentives around budget, attribution and ownership," Friedman says.

TIMING AND THE ART OF MARKETING AND SALES

For more than 15 years, Mohamed Yousuf has worked in complex, high-pressure environments where time, compliance and human limits collide. Today, as the co-founder and CEO of Smart Workforce AI, he has a firsthand look at how the roles of marketing and sales are intersecting in pipeline creations.

"For us, when it comes to the role of a sales rep, it has shifted from being the primary source of outreach to becoming the decision guide," Yousuf says. "Marketing now does a significant portion of the upfront work."

Yousuf says alignment comes from shared ownership of outcomes, not just message handoffs. Both teams operate from the same pipelines, accounts and signals. "We look at marketing like a pre-conversation planner, not working collateral with sales. By the time sales engage, they know what marketing campaign pushes online, what problems they are trying to solve. This allows conversations to start at a higher level."

Instead of explaining what Smart AI does, his team focuses on the gap between their current state and the outcomes they are trying to achieve. "Data also plays a big role," Yousuf says.

"Insights are very important around operational inefficiencies, cost leakage, employee wellbeing, etc., especially in shift-based environments. This allows reps to focus on real business impact."

The biggest friction Yousuf sees between marketing and sales still comes from timing and understanding. While marketing optimizes for engagement, often using broader artificial intelligence (AI) applications, sales stays focused on solving specific, real-world pain points.

While friction around narrative still exists, broad messaging may drive engagement but rarely translates into effective selling. Alignment improves when both teams focus on the same signals tied to revenue outcomes.

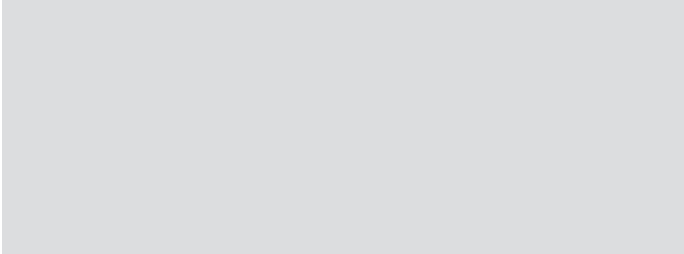
"We focus on a few things," Yousuf says. "Conversation quality is first. Many

marketing-generated opportunities progress through the pipeline; we now have them on different days focus on specific pain points, rather than a general post every day. Second is sales cycle efficiency; we look at every opportunity thoroughly; we don't just send a generic message but have them first see how that lead came, and what are their specific industry pain points. This takes a lot more time but is a lot more efficient."

Ultimately, alignment doesn't come from eliminating the differences between sales and marketing, but from understanding and leveraging them. When both teams focus on shared signals tied to real business outcomes, what once created friction becomes the advantage. ■







PROOF POINTS

BUYERS TRUST EVIDENCE



HE FIRST TIME Michael Sebastian realized something had changed, it wasn't in a pitch meeting or a campaign review. It was in the absence of both. A client reached out, ready to move forward. There was no request for a deck or drawn-out discovery process. No need to be convinced.

"They'd already made the decision," says Sebastian, founder of digital branding agency Branded Mayhem.

What stood out wasn't the speed, but how the decision had been made. The buyer hadn't relied on brand reputation or a polished narrative. Instead, they worked backward through the proof, including published pricing, documented performance metrics and real client outcomes that could be verified without ever speaking to the agency.

That moment has become a pattern. Sebastian says buyers are making decisions earlier than most marketers can track, relying on evidence rather than messaging. "The buying decision is made against artifacts, not adjectives."

It's a subtle shift, but one with massive implications. For

**“ WE STOPPED SELLING BRAND
AS PERCEPTION. WE SELL IT
AS INSTRUMENTATION NOW.
IF WE CAN'T SHOW WHERE THE DIAL
MOVES AND HOW, WE'RE BACK IN THE
PERCEPTION BUSINESS.”**

– MICHAEL SEBASTIAN, FOUNDER, BRANDED MAYHEM

years, brand reputation carried deals across the finish line. Today, it is often just a byproduct that forms after the decision has already been made. "Reputation is a lagging indicator," Sebastian says. "The sale gets made at the layer underneath it."

That realization has prompted a clearer understanding of what marketing is responsible for. Instead of shaping perception, the work now centers on building systems that produce visible, measurable outcomes, signals buyers can evaluate on their own terms. "We stopped selling brand as perception. We sell it as instrumentation now. If we can't show where the dial moves and how, we're back in the perception business."

In that model, proof isn't a campaign output. It is the operating system. It doesn't come from dashboards or reports, but from customers, specifically what they say when no one is asking.

Sebastian references a recent hospitality client where early customer reviews uncovered a phrase the team had never used internally. It appeared repeatedly and ended up becoming the brand's defining contrast point. "The customers supplied the enemy. We organized it."

Unprompted and independent signals carry the most weight. While performance metrics still matter, they validate what's already happening rather than creating it. "The strongest signal is the one no agency can fake," Sebastian says.

This thinking also is reshaping how brands approach influence. Instead of hiring external voices, Sebastian's team builds environments that generate advocacy on their own. During one recent opening, more than a dozen customers posted about the experience within days without being asked, paid or prompted.

"We don't hire influencers. We design brands that activate their own."

Even with detailed measurement across engagement and conversion behavior, Sebastian is clear on the limits. "We can tell you what's happening across the system. But tying one decision to one revenue outcome? That's rarely real."

Instead of chasing false precision, the Branded Mayhem team tracks system-level changes like audience shifts, signal strength and evolving behavior. That shift also has redefined what gets produced. For years, agencies focused on deliverables that worked in presentations. Now, they only matter if they perform in the real world.

"Single-lever attribution is mostly fiction," Sebastian says. "We measure the system. We stopped delivering things that don't ship. If it doesn't work in the wild, it doesn't count." ■

MEANING IS THE NEW MARKET ADVANTAGE

For Anthony Reeves, the industry's shift toward proof is both necessary and incomplete. Reeves, VP of Global Brand + Creative at Kohler Co. and author of "Eat the Donkey," says buyers do not trust brand claims. They trust evidence and brand consistency.

In today's landscape, that reality is driving measurable change, i.e., campaigns built around real numbers and real performance are converting faster and more efficiently than those centered on positioning alone.

Still, Reeves cautions against swinging too far in that direction. "What I see is companies struggling with the long-term. If everyone leads with outcomes, every brand becomes the same."

Proof, by nature, is replicable. Take metrics, which can be matched and results mirrored. Without a distinct brand foundation, companies risk blending together, competing on performance alone with little to set them apart.

That's why Reeves sees the most effective strategies as a balance. "A credible customer story with numbers outperforms any brand campaign in the short-term. But you cannot survive on one alone."

Brand claims and proof points work best together. Proof validates the promise, and brand makes it stick. That same balance shapes influencer strategy. "We do not chase reach," Reeves says. "We prioritize relevance and credibility."



As skepticism grows, paid influence loses ground to voices that feel earned, not orchestrated. Measurement also remains a work in progress. "In Q2 2026, outcomes are key in a tightening economy," Reeves says. "But the gap is full-funnel attribution across channels."

While marketers have improved tracking across the top and middle of the funnel, Reeves says connecting those efforts to long-term business impact is still evolving, and the bigger hurdle may be cultural. "The hardest part is letting go of control and narrative."

Proof isn't always polished or perfectly aligned with a brand's message, but that imperfection is often what makes it believable. "Stop overproducing brand stories," Reeves says. "Don't mix brand stories with AI (artificial intelligence)."

Today, proof is no longer the supporting act—it's the standard buyers use to decide. The brands that win won't just tell a better story; they'll build systems that prove it, every step of the way. ■

THE EVIDENCE-BASED BUYER

NAVIGATING THE NEW B2B BUYING JOURNEY

Today's buyers aren't waiting for a pitch deck—they are investigating brands on their own terms. The modern sale isn't won through clever messaging, but through verifiable proof. This breakdown looks beneath the surface at how B2B buyers bypass traditional marketing to make decisions based entirely on hard data, organic peer advocacy, and real-world outcomes.

IN FOCUS

ABOVE THE SURFACE

(The Old Model: Perception)

THE NARRATIVE:

Polished decks, brand messaging, and external influencers.

THE REALITY:

Buyers are bypassing this layer entirely.

BELOW THE SURFACE

(The New Model: Instrumentation)

THE SHIFT	THE STATISTIC (External Proof)
Independent Research	70-80% of the B2B buying journey is completed before a prospect ever contacts a sales rep. SOURCE: Gartner
Peer Trust Over Ad Agency Trust	88% of buyers trust word-of-mouth and independent peer reviews over messages directly from the brand. SOURCE: Edelman Trust Barometer
The Attribution Myth	Only 11% of marketers feel highly confident in their single-lever or last-click attribution method. SOURCE: Marketing Ops Survey

VERIFIED ARTIFACTS:

Transparent pricing, documented performance metrics.

UNPROMPTED ADVOCACY:

Organic customer reviews and self-activating communities.

INSTRUMENTATION:

WHAT ACTUALLY
CLOSES THE SALE

THE BOTTOM LINE:

REPUTATION IS A LAGGING INDICATOR:

Stop trying to shape perception. Build systems that produce measurable, undeniable outcomes.

LET CUSTOMERS SUPPLY THE NARRATIVE:

The most potent marketing copy is the organic language your customers use when you aren't in the room.

IF IT DOESN'T SHIP, IT DOESN'T COUNT:

Pivot away from deliverables meant for the boardroom and focus exclusively on what performs in the wild.

TACTICS

LEADING THOUGHT

With AI fundamentally reshaping content discovery, the competition for B2B attention has shifted from sheer volume to earned authority. Research from Ascend and TopRank Marketing in The State of B2B Thought Leadership in 2026, uncovers how top-performing brands are successfully navigating this transition by prioritizing original insights and human-led collaboration.

› **97%** of B2B marketers say thought leadership is critical to full-funnel success, and yet only 43% extend it beyond acquisition to engage and retain customers post-sale. Research-based thought leadership can serve as an engine that drives content across the entire customer lifecycle.

› **93%** of B2B marketers using original research-based content feel that it is effective at driving engagement and leads. 48% feel it is very effective. Original research is an essential part of effective content for marketing that builds trust across the buyer journey.

› **74%** who frequently collaborate with influencers report their research-based content as very effective vs. just 29% of everyone else. Partnering with industry experts adds credibility and distribution to thought leadership content and doing so on an ongoing basis can compound the impact.

› **78%** of B2B marketers surveyed say interactive and experiential content increases repeat engagement, but only 33% regularly build it into their campaigns. This disconnect between belief and action creates an opportunity for B2B brands to elevate reach, engagement and impact with content as an experience, not just information.

› **32%** of professionals now discover thought leadership through GenAI tools. Discovery habits are adapting to new technologies, and AI search is reshaping how buyers find and engage with expertise.

[HTTPS://TPRK.US/3LUGYRI](https://TPRK.US/3LUGYRI)



“ B2B marketers in 2026 need engines that build trust, visibility, and results — engines designed to perform with the speed of change in technology and buyer behaviors. Original research is one of the most reliable fuels, providing the credibility that AI tools, shifting budgets, and skeptical buyers alike demand.”

- THE STATE OF B2B THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN 2026,
ASCEND AND TOPRANK MARKETING

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

At its core, Account-Based Marketing (ABM) is a strategic go-to-market approach where marketing and sales teams align to treat individual high-value accounts as "markets of one" rather than chasing a broad, anonymous audience. Instead of casting a wide net to capture as many leads as possible (the traditional "lead gen" funnel), ABM flips the script: you identify the specific companies that are the perfect fit for your solution, and you orchestrate a personalized campaign to engage those accounts.

OUTCOMES ROCKET surveyed 771 marketers on the state of ABM in 2025, highlighting new trends and investment priorities. The key findings are as follows:

📌 **71.2%** of organizations currently implement ABM strategies.

📌 The estimated average ROI from ABM programs is **137%**, with nearly half of organizations citing ABM as delivering the highest ROI.

📌 **78.7%** of companies incorporate AI into ABM, mainly for personalization, predictive analytics, and targeting.

📌 **40.3%** of organizations plan to invest in ABM 2.0 capabilities within the next 12 months.

📌 **49.7%** of organizations plan to increase ABM budgets in 2026.

📌 **86.2%** of respondents expect AI to boost ABM ROI over the next year.

([HTTPS://WWW.OUTCOMESROCKET.COM](https://www.outcomesrocket.com))



On the Record

For brands that treat channels as silos, what shifts are required to align them under a framework to drive brand, equity, demand, and revenue?

I think the first shift is a mindset shift, and it's probably one of the most difficult. Our research with Ascend2 found that a third of marketers cited limited visibility into funnel performance as their top barrier to success. Another third pointed to over-reliance on just a few channels or tactics. These two problems are connected. When you can't see what's working across the full customer journey, you often fall back on what feels familiar.

What's needed to integrate these departments is a unifying system. At TopRank, the framework we've built to address this is called Best Answer Marketing, or BAM. The organizing principle for BAM is the customer journey vs. channels. As a result, thought leadership becomes the platform that gives every marketing team, every channel and format something to rally around, so assets and narratives reinforce each other.

When thought leadership narratives are based on proof such as original research or proprietary data corroborated by industry experts and media as part of an integrated, multi-channel effort, it creates the evidence and consistency that resonates with all forms of discovery from LLMs to Google to conversations on social media.

With 32% of professionals discovering insights through GenAI tools, how should B2B brands adjust their strategies so

THOUGHTLEADING

ORGANIC INSIGHTS ARE CRITICAL FOR B2B BRANDS, SAYS TOPRANK CEO **LEE ODDEN**

With over two decades of experience at the intersection of content, SEO, and influencer marketing, Lee Odden, CEO of TopRank Marketing, is a true pioneer in the B2B landscape. As the owner and CEO of TopRank, Lee spearheads a mission to elevate the industry through his "Best Answer Engine" framework—a holistic approach that bridges the gap between Brand, Demand, and Revenue. We sat down with Lee to unpack the findings of the 2026 State of B2B Thought Leadership report and discuss how marketers can navigate the current landscape while keeping human creativity at the core of their strategy.



they are 'cited' as authoritative sources by these AI engines?

That 32% number is specific to thought leadership content but overall B2B content discovery using LLMs is even higher—94% according to research from Forrester. The real story is that GenAI tools weren't even on most marketers' distribution lists when we conducted the research.

Buyers are already there but most B2B marketers are still catching up. That gap matters because AI engines surface content that carries authority signals like original data with clear attribution, consistent expert voices, and structured answers to the specific questions buyers are actually asking. If your content doesn't have those things, it's not the best answer and you're still playing catch-up, which means you're basically invisible in a space where attention is growing exponentially.

A lot of the B2B brands getting this right are investing in original research as a foundation. Our data found that 93% of B2B marketers using original research-based content rate it as effective at driving engagement and leads, with nearly half calling it very effective. AI tools are essentially trained on the web's most credible signals, and proprietary research with a clear point of view is one of the

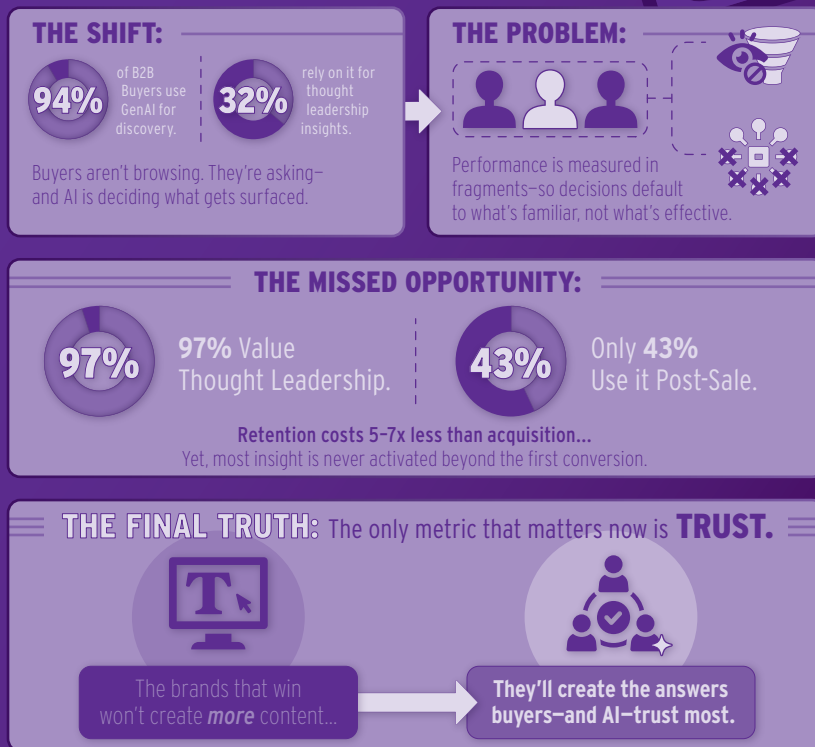
strongest signals you can create. It's the same logic that has always driven thought leadership authority, just accelerated by the way generative AI synthesizes and cites its sources.

The practical strategy evolution for B2B marketers is to optimize their content for answer engines. This an extension vs. a replacement of SEO. AEO or Answer Engine Optimization means structuring content in ways that make it easier for LLMs to identify and choose your content as the best answer. Things like formatting section headers to read as specific buyer questions, using key findings that stand alone as citable statements, and making sure your brand and contributors are clearly attributed throughout.

Content co-created with industry influencers and creators can amplify this significantly. When recognized industry voices contribute to your content and help amplify it, that's a trust signal AI engines recognize in much the same way that human readers do. In BAM terms, the Trust System and Multi-Channel Discovery pillars are doing the same job for AI discoverability that they've always done for human discoverability. The principles haven't changed. The surface area for content

If Your Content Isn't the Answer, It Doesn't Exist.

THE NEW REALITY OF B2B
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN THE AI ERA



SOURCES: Forrester—B2B Buyer Journey Research; Gartner—The Future of Search & AI Discovery; McKinsey—The Value of Personalization in B2B; Demand Gen Report—B2B Buyer Behavior Survey; Edelman & LinkedIn—B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report.

discovery has expanded and some might say, fragmented.

While 97% of B2B marketers view thought leadership as critical to full-funnel success, only 43% are extending it beyond acquisition to engage and retain existing customers. Why does this gap exist, and what is the strategic cost of treating thought leadership as a top-of-funnel attraction tool?

I think the gap exists because of how most B2B marketing teams are organized and measured. Acquisition has clear, attributable metrics: leads,

SQLs, pipeline contribution. Post-sale is a little murkier, often owned by customer success or account management, and marketing isn't always accountable to that. Naturally, marketing's effort will concentrate on where the incentives are. The result is that thought leadership gets mentally filed as an awareness and demand generation tool, and the customer relationship gets handed off the moment a deal closes. That's a structural problem posing as a content strategy problem.

The strategic cost of this disconnect can be pretty significant. Acquiring a new customer costs five to

seven times more than retaining an existing one, but most thought leadership content investments focus on awareness. Our research with Ascend2 shows top performers are nearly twice as likely to use thought leadership post-sale; 47% versus 28% among the rest. That gap shows that those brands understand an existing customer who keeps learning from you is far more likely to expand, renew, and advocate than one who stops hearing from you after onboarding. When thought leadership is applied through the full customer lifecycle, it becomes a retention engine and a revenue multiplier, not just a source for name capture.

For the B2B marketing leader feeling overwhelmed by the current velocity of change, what is the metric or mindset they should prioritize to stay resilient and results-driven?

The feeling of being overwhelmed is real, and I think it's worth talking about what's actually causing it. It's not any single change; it's the pace of change compounding on itself.

After working in this industry for 25 years, I'm not sure I've seen an environment quite like the one B2B marketers are dealing with now. There are new AI platforms and myriad martech tools, fragmented discovery channels and changing buyer behaviors, tighter budgets, and evolving buyer expectations to name a few. B2B marketing leaders are now being asked to adapt faster than most organizations can actually move.

What I've seen that separates the leaders who stay resilient from those who burn out is pretty consistent: they stay grounded in outcomes vs. chasing the latest and greatest. With that perspective, the question isn't "are we using the latest thing?" It's "are we earning the trust and confidence of our buyers, and can we show it?" That's the mindset shift needed to deal with feeling overwhelmed in an environment where there are simply too many distractions.

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