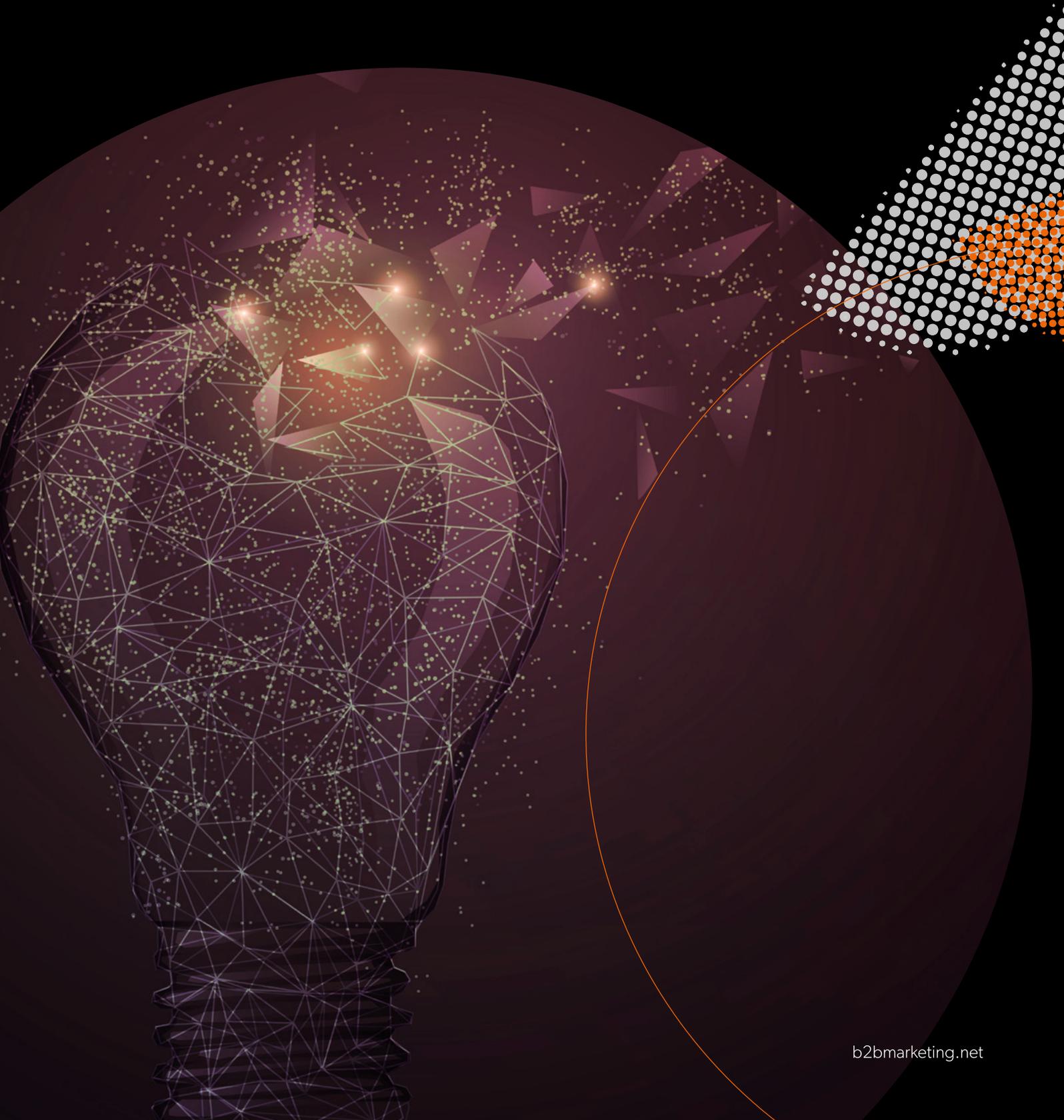
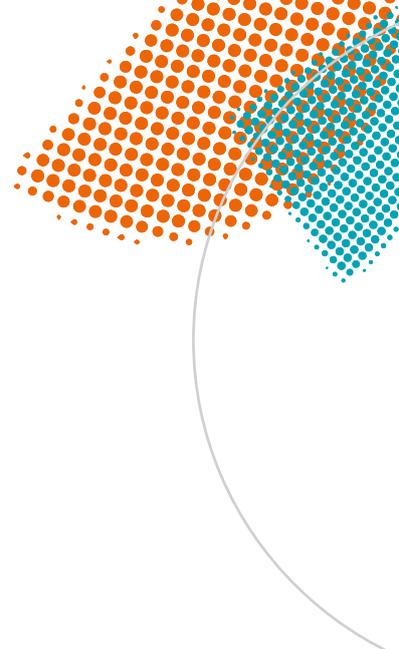


How to unleash your creativity in strategic ABM





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Contributors



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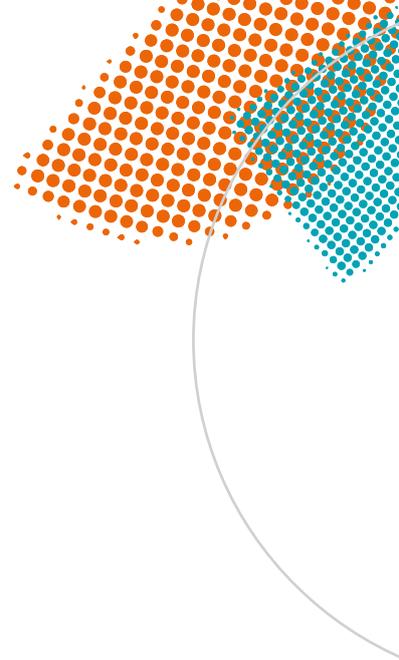
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Section 1

Introduction



David Rowlands
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In the simplest terms imaginable, account-based marketing (ABM) promises to boost your customer acquisition and/or retention and, therefore, revenue. ABM can, of course, be broken down into a series of processes – a list of steps that B2B marketers should follow from start to finish to implement and execute a successful campaign.

However, there is one crucial component of any successful ABM programme that can be hard to measure and, as a result, can often get lost in the mix: creativity.

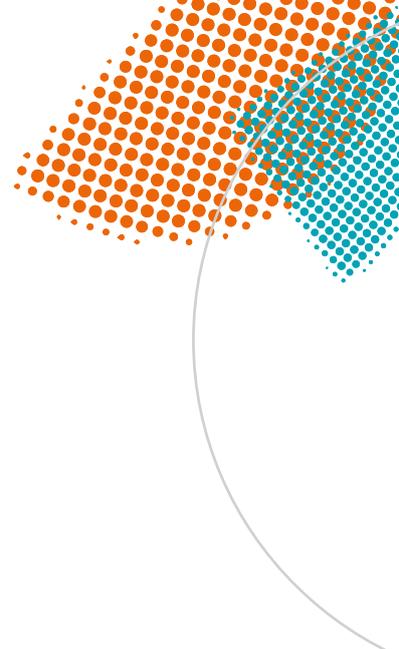
So what does creativity mean in the context of ABM? On the one hand, it can simply mean an interesting and unique campaign idea (for instance, a memorable advert or campaign). However, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

There is creativity to be found ‘behind the scenes’ in a host of

different ways – for instance, in how you gather data, what you can learn from that data and how you use that data. It is also crucial to understand the barriers that exist to creativity in the world of ABM, and how these can be overcome. For instance, how can sales be brought along on the ABM journey, and, rather than being a hindrance to creative ABM programmes, actually help push them forwards?

This report will discuss: laying the foundations for creativity in ABM; planning for creativity; telling your story; and overcoming the barriers to creativity.

Following on from this, it will present an action plan for B2B marketers seeking to step up their efforts towards creativity in their ABM programmes. In other words: ‘how to unleash your creativity in strategic ABM.’



Section 2

Creativity in ABM



Julie Wisdom,
SVP strategy
MOI Global

Few trends in B2B marketing have generated as much breathless excitement as ABM. Although not a new concept, in only a couple of years, it's shot from nerdy specialty practice right to the peak of the hype cycle. But, in spite of the hype, not all marketers are achieving stellar results. Many believe ABM effectiveness falls short of expectations. Could it be that we are missing a critical ingredient?

Creativity in ABM is not the domain of the right brain

ABM is a 'hearts and minds' exercise that requires a different, more intentional approach to creativity that is applied to every step in the process – from research and data intelligence to account selection, audience profiling, conversation mapping and customisation, engagement planning and KPIs, through to creative development itself. We have more data available to us now

than at any time in the history of the planet – and we certainly have the intelligence to make creative use of it.

The best ABM is run by creative thinkers and thinking creatives, who artfully connect the dots over time between the emotional and rational stages of decision-making.

In other words, creativity in ABM is the domain of the whole brain.

Create a vision they can believe in

Everyone has a different set of biases and values and assumptions – what Seth Godin calls their worldview. When you frame your story around your audience's existing worldview, they're more likely to believe it's both relevant and true. Understanding this worldview and how it influences purchase decisions is massive to any ABM strategy.



The most creatively successful ABM programmes are those that use research, data and insights, intelligence gathering, creative thinking – the whole brain – to create relevance, a unique perspective that will turn the heads of decision-makers. A vision they can believe in. And creatively roll this out over time. By definition, strategic ABM must have creative legs – depth (to go from awareness/intent-building to sales enablement), breadth (across decision-makers) and endurance (refreshing for the duration as you embed into accounts).

Yes, this requires patience. These decisions are not made in a vacuum or overnight. By monitoring what is happening within a business and creatively responding with the vision, you continually build relevance. And by building relevance, you create truth.

The creative arm of sales enablement

Creativity in ABM extends to how we engage sales as well. Your sales team can be an absolute goldmine when it comes to understanding how your existing customers are aligned and make decisions. So how can you bring intentional creativity into the exchange with them? Interview them. Like a journalist. Ask questions that get them talking about customers as if they were the product you are selling. Then equip them. Not just

with traditional assets, but with actions, alerts and the ability to self-serve personalised content. Give them workshops, co-created content with their very customers, the ability to show their customers where they have opportunities in the market.

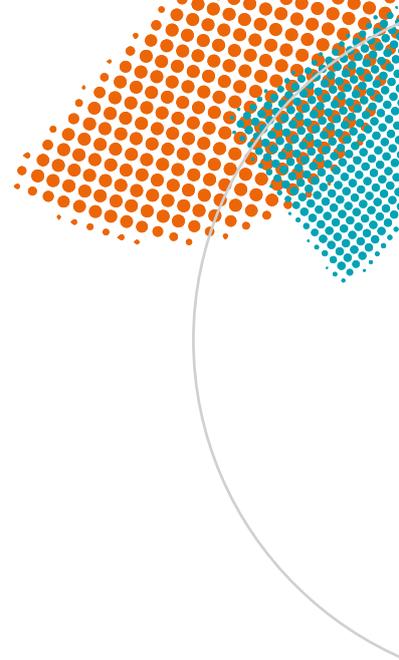
Give them the fireworks to turn the heads of the decision-makers they are after.

Creativity in ABM is the domain of the whole brain

Coming back to Seth for a moment: Some marketers focus so hard on the facts of their offering that they forget to tell a story at all, and then wonder why they've failed. As is true for ABM if we forget that creativity is relevance. It's human. Sometimes it's funny, especially if you have Tim Washer* on your team. Sometimes disruptive. Or loud. Or fast. Or slow. Calming. Alarming. Digital. Physical. Whimsical.

The following report features the leaders who are doing this well. Always with a vision rooted in intelligence. And always right (and left).

**If you haven't heard of him, look him up. Tim Washer is the premier funny man for B2B marketing, a great storyteller, a true practitioner of connecting emotional and rational thinking*



Section 3

Unleashing creativity in ABM

Measurement and rationalism are double-edged swords for marketing. If you're in the business of generating revenue, numbers will generally be a solid indicator of teams that are doing well and those that aren't. But just because the end result is cut-and-dry, that doesn't mean the best way to get there is too.

Here's the problem: with greater levels of bottom-line responsibility, marketers may understandably feel reticent to take risks and try new approaches. But to do big things – like align cross-functional efforts to close your largest client to date – you'll need to do something a little extraordinary. After all, customers aren't objective purchasing machines. In order to build meaningful relationships, marketers need to think creatively.

Customers aren't objective purchasing machines. In order to build meaningful relationships, marketers need to think creatively

Laying the foundations for creativity in ABM

Picture an iceberg. Above the waterline is the visible peak. Below is a huge mass of density and structure which gives the whole thing buoyancy. When thinking about your ABM campaign, it can help to think of the tip of the iceberg as your message, design and content – the stuff your audience will see. Under the surface, meanwhile, you have layers upon layers of strategic foundations. At the very base is sales and marketing alignment.

Aligning with sales

If you're launching an ABM programme into a single account or sector, the first imperative is to unite with sales. During your kick-off session, everything needs to be put onto the table. Both teams need to discuss where they stand today with the account or sector – the good, the bad and the ugly. The key is identifying gaps in your knowledge. In as much detail as possible, the outcome should be to better understand the prospect's:

- › Pain points and challenges.
- › Business strategy.
- › Competitive landscape.
- › Key stakeholders.

The result? Everyone leaves knowing why they've been brought along, what the plan is, and what they bring to the party. As Robert Norum, marketing consultant and ABM specialist, points out: "This stage isn't about creativity: it's about laying the foundations for it." Research is when you can start to get creative.

Data and research: Creativity beyond communications

Put simply, without research, there is no ABM. In essence, ABM is about getting under the skin of the account or accounts you're targeting – understanding their needs, drivers, landscape, pain points, and what keeps them awake at night. Like emotive storytelling, this is about understanding the human condition. Your research is about finding those levers.

With social distancing limiting our access to certain marketing channels, marketers need to go back to the drawing board and dig into the data. Otherwise, as Mike Boogaard, SVP of growth at MOI, pointed out, "everyone runs the risk of falling back on the same tactics and strategies." Creativity lies in insight gathering from data, how you use data, what you can learn through data (whether that's owned or third-party) and how you collect it.

Rigorous research takes time and expertise, so while it's possible to do decent digital surveys inhouse, using a research agency can open up new avenues, which we'll explore below. In any case, resources need to be ring-fenced. Mark Baker, head of marketing operations, EMEA & APAC, Oracle, says you should put aside at least 10% of your project budget for research to enable effective targeting and custom content creation. In order to unlock creative opportunities, your research should deliver an opportunity analysis.

The opportunity analysis: Your key to creative research

Based on your research into your target accounts and how they operate, your opportunity analysis will show you where your product or service can land. It should look like this:

Opportunity analysis

Customer problem	E.g. Staff retention
How we can solve it	E.g. Better hiring software
Who we should talk to	E.g. HRD, wellbeing lead, CTO

Then, when you go into your next strategy workshop with sales, you'll be armed with incisive insight. You can demonstrate the client's needs, how your solution serves it, who the key stakeholders are, and where the best opportunities are for sales reps.

This framework is the difference between conducting desk research and developing a creative and strategic analysis into an account. That's how you get a 360° view of the customer and identify the buttons to press with your creative marketing.

Planning for creativity

With sales and marketing on the same page, target accounts selected, and research with a strategic opportunity analysis under the belt, the foundations are firmly laid for creativity. This is where you can start to refine your unique value proposition and consider viable channels. Though, with direct and event marketing channels currently out of bounds, marketers have to dig a little deeper.

Paul Adams, marketing director, Europe, at Nokia, said that, today, digital adaptability is needed: “With the current physical restrictions, the ability to deliver through virtual platforms is where the innovation is. But with so much virtual activity, the ability to really fit the customer’s interest has become paramount.”

At this stage, it’s crucial to check back in with sales and any other influencers within your company to clearly articulate what the account strategy is, and how you’re going to execute it.

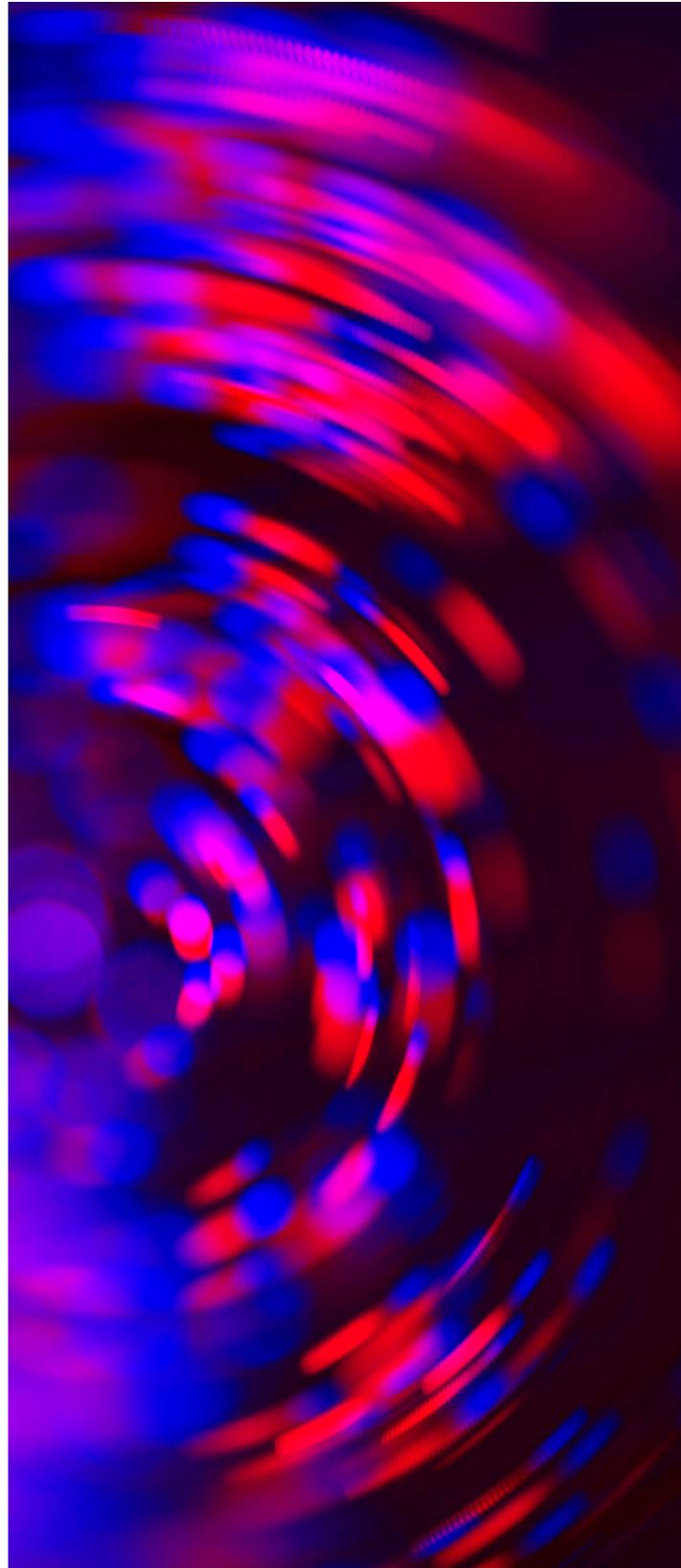
Building your Greek temple

But your value proposition alone is just a promise – in order for it to fly, you need to demonstrate you can deliver.

Now picture a Greek temple, with the upper layer as your value proposition. In order for it to stand up and resonate with the client, you need to ground it with three or four messaging pillars.

1. The customer pain point (e.g. staff retention).
2. How you can help them (e.g. better hiring software).
3. The outcomes your client will see (e.g. 20% increase in average employee tenure).
4. This is the business benefit and outcomes (e.g. better productivity).

Finally, the foundation is why you’re better to serve this than anyone else in the market: your USP.



Telling your story

Without creative cut-through, all of the hard, foundational work will be wasted. You need to take your value proposition and messaging and do something interesting with it. It's not beyond the realms of possibility for internal marketing teams to be able to do this justice, but if they're not full-time creative professionals, it will likely be a stretch. If, on the other hand, you decide to partner with an agency to bring your campaign to life, they'll need to be brought up to speed with the backstory you've worked on. Otherwise, they'll just be guessing.

With those building blocks in place and your agency or in-house team briefed, you can roll your sleeves up and figure out what will resonate with your prospect. Of course, whether it's an animated video, an interactive infographic, or a microsite followed by an email campaign, the creatives you use need to be tailored to whatever the client is likely to respond to. If they're digital natives, social media will likely be on the table as a viable option. If they're a c-suite of Baby Boomers, TikTok probably isn't your best bet.

Creativity in action

There's a trope in marketing about casting your customer as the hero of your narrative. Bev Burgess, senior vice president & global ABM practice leader at ITSMA, pointed towards an example of this kind of storytelling being deployed in a very literal way. "[I recently heard of a] company using a comic to engage buyers in a target account. They featured those buyers and told the story of the issues they faced and what they could do to help. It worked."

For those who can act fast, Covid-19 restrictions can in fact facilitate creativity in ABM rather than hinder it. "Within Nokia, we took what was a physical events programme that would hit many customers and virtualised it to individual customer, or country, level," said Paul. "The time from inception to execution was about three months, and we hit hundreds of companies, with very high engagement scores."

Overcoming the barriers to creativity

Can sales hinder creativity?

ABM is by definition a practice of sales and marketing alignment. While the relationship often takes nurturing, Mike is resolute on the benefits of doing so: "Working with sales can immediately open up a whole load of options that weren't previously available." Often, the problem is a lack of ABM awareness within sales. Therefore, in order to overcome resistance, they need to be brought on the journey.

Of course, no two sales teams are the same. Inevitably, some will be keener to try new things than others, but it's the marketer's job to position their strategy in a compelling way. Bev explains how ABMers need to have great facilitation and influencing skills in order to agree on "whatever is most likely to cut through and resonate with the account." The challenge, as Mark put it, is overcoming sales' targeted, quarterly mindset.

Spearheading with sales

Robert reminds us that: "ABM is not something marketing does for sales – nor is it something marketing does independently of sales." Both sales and marketing have to be embedded into the whole process. That's how you get sales engaged from the get-go.

Schedule a call with your marketing stakeholders and your heads of sales. Talk about macro objectives, country objectives, account objectives. Let sales do most of the talking. When they see you're engaged and listening, they'll know you're serious, and they'll show up in return. When you're mapping out the opportunities, ask sales where they think they are. Let's not forget, at enterprise and strategic levels, sales requires creativity. The whole job is about finding new angles, new ways of thinking and new approaches to engaging the customer – marketers just need to tap into this mindset.

Finding the time

ABM programmes typically run alongside the BAU. This often leaves very little time and energy for marketers to think creatively. But Bev emphasised the vital importance of carving out that time. She advised “doing this outside your normal workspace – be that your morning shower, in a creative studio, or using virtual innovation tools like Mural.”

However, planning to meaningfully engage a decision-making unit within an enterprise account takes time. Your water bills would likely nullify your salary should you choose to do it in the shower. As Mark listed, “you need to build the knowledge, target effectively, design and test both standard and custom messaging, and then allow time to embed in the account through multiple tactics over many months.”

Indeed, “enterprise sales cycles are famously long,” he reminded. “Though enterprise ABM cycles can be even longer.”

Remember, salespeople aren't typically renowned for their patience and studiousness. Your research needs to be insightful, and presented in an engaging way

Don't skip on the research

One of the greatest barriers to creative ABM is research that doesn't deliver insight. It's often presented in the form of a 50-page deck.

Another way businesses skip on research is by cost-cutting. Often, organisations believe they can cut out the research phase by leaning on sales' expertise. This is a risky strategy for two reasons. Firstly, sales are understandably protective over their insight – it's their secret sauce. Grilling them for 30 minutes on the intimate information they've extracted in good faith with a client will likely alienate them.

Secondly, sales only have one view of an organisation. If they're selling IT, they'll likely only deal with the CTO, CIO and their reports. But what about the client's strategy, finances, or brand? What about their problems with customer or employee retention or the competitor they're under threat from? These aren't conversations sales will be having with customers. This is why you need to gather a 360° view of the account.

Injecting creativity into programmatic

Programmatic – or one-to-many – ABM is often maligned by the hardcore of ABMers. Isn't the intimacy and precision required to go after one, or possibly a handful, of accounts the very essence of ABM? Isn't programmatic essentially just segmented marketing? Well, not necessarily.

Mark says that too many believe programmatic ABM is just about content personalisation. “I think that's just clever segment marketing. The trick with one-to-few is to do enough at-scale research for great targeting, and to then build compelling custom messaging.”

Let's say you've identified 200 accounts across EMEA. The first step is to figure out how to segment them in an intelligent way, which will enable you to create some content and messaging that will resonate. This might mean identifying eight industries, and assigning each its own angle or proposition. And within those, you can go a step further and add four to five different personas.

Pretty soon, your message has gone from “Hi Joe,” to “Hi Joe, who works in financial services and is a CMO...”. With those extra details, your message can be tailored tightly to the pain points of its audience. From a content management point of view, it’s complicated, but it’s approaching a level of personalisation far beyond typical demand generation. Still, if your messages are purely solution-based, it’s probably not ABM.

Another way to get creative with programmatic ABM is through intent data. With intent data, you can see that prospect X is interested in product Y. Despite not knowing the individual on the receiving end, by landing content that’s bespoke based on the intent they’ve shown, you’re able to deliver truly unique, problem-solving messaging.

When is ABM not ABM?

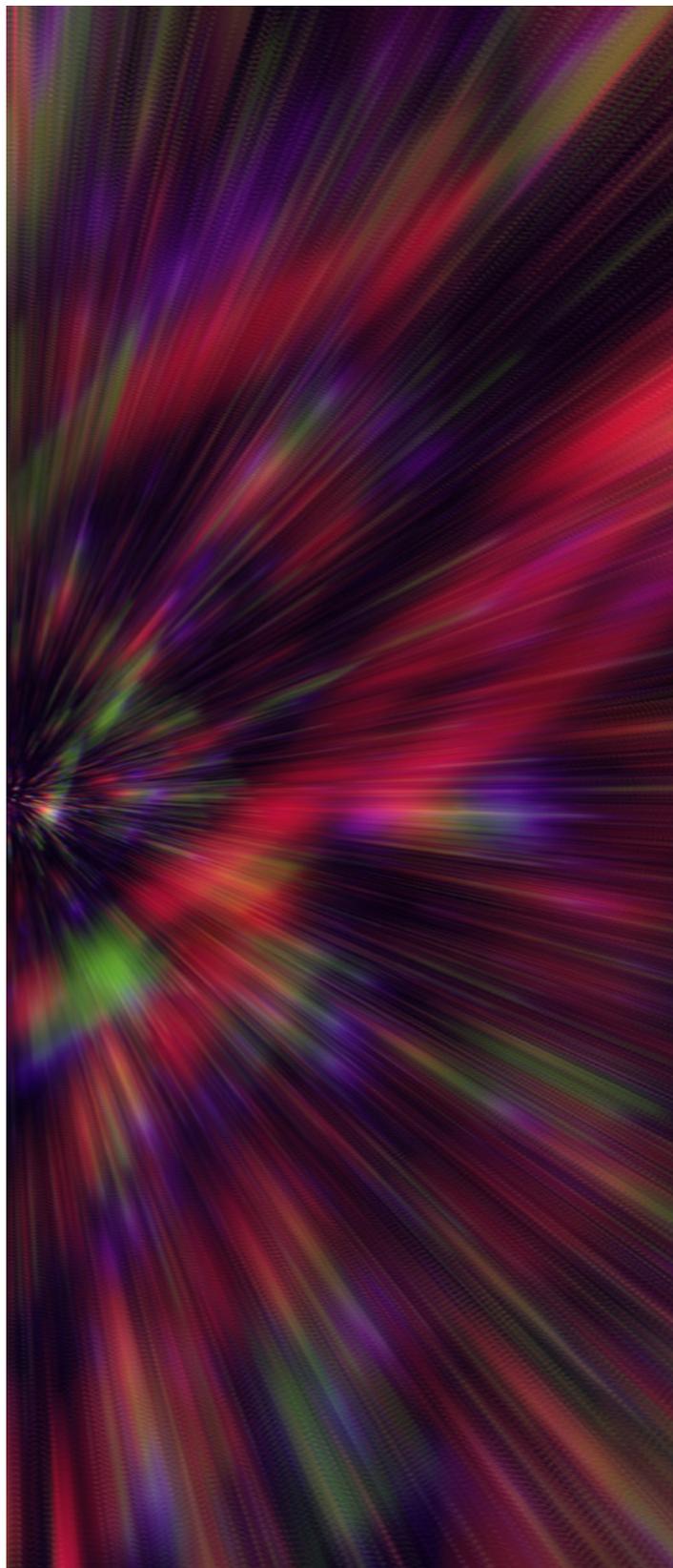
While this can work effectively on a 200 scale, something closer to 2000 would be pushing it. That’s just a clever headline or a sexy creative. Indeed, the potency of the message will inevitably dilute the more it’s scaled. As Mike said: “Programmatic is rarely truly about solving a unique problem for the customer.”

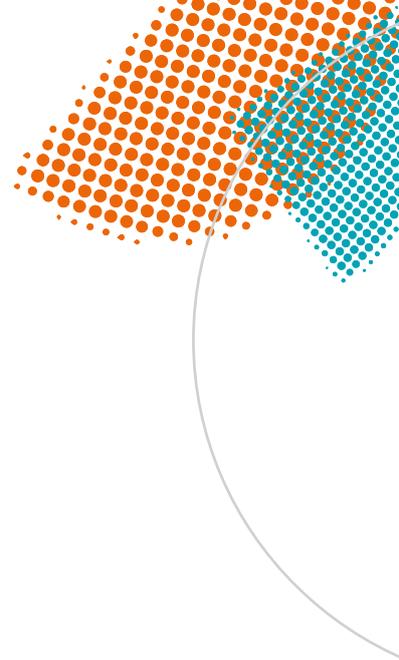
Unlocking creativity in-house and through agencies

People often assume agencies are the most consistently creative of the two, but this isn’t always the case. As Mark put it, “no group has a monopoly over creativity.” However, we can’t ignore the reality. In-house teams typically have to-do lists the length of football pitches, and about half of the time required to fulfil them. This is hardly fertile ground for creativity. Meanwhile, the right agency will bring a wealth of knowledge and experience and a hunger to deliver.

However, clients can’t just hand the agency a list of organisations to target and the products they’re looking to sell them, along with the instruction to go create a LinkedIn ad, build a webinar or record a podcast. Without the backstory, the agency is essential working from the back of a cigarette packet.

“The question any CMO needs to ask is: ‘who has the skill to make ABM successful?’” said Mark. “If you have that experience in-house, great. If not, bring in someone who’s done it before.”





Section 4

Action plan

Clearly, ABM can be a hotbed for creativity. By pooling together expertise and resources, marketers can orchestrate programmes that capture their prospects' imagination and build meaningful relationships. But the devil's in the detail. Creativity needs to be baked into your programme from the get-go. Unless you're truly solving unique customer needs, you're probably just doing expensive marketing.

Here are seven tips to keep in mind when launching a creative ABM programme.

1. Work with sales from the get-go

Too often, marketers will only pay lip service to sales alignment. The partnership needs to go beyond account selection and a conversation upfront. Otherwise you risk just creating a bunch of assets, blasting them out and checking back in with sales a couple weeks later. Instead, sales need to be involved in the decision-making at every stage that's appropriate. This way, they'll be engaged with the programme and fully bought in.

2. Get creative with data and insights

Creativity goes beyond visuals and messaging. What separates brilliant strategic ABM from the rest is the use of data and insights to inform strategy. "By thoroughly understanding your customers' wants and needs," said Mike, "you can position your solution to suit their unique needs, desires and aspirations."

3. Understand the customer

Paul said personalisation isn't ABM – it's just personalisation. "True ABM is about understanding an individual customer's issues, pain-points and needs, and using that to deliver unique messaging that resonates with them and positions your offer in a compelling way. Understanding the customer is ABM 101."

4. Cater for the entire experience

If you're using your traditional marketing assets in ABM, it's just a very expensive form of normal marketing. Sometimes, creativity is wrongly left solely in the realms of design. As Mike put it: "If you're not truly focusing creativity on the entire experience – from messaging to vision, copy to design – you're basically making pretty pictures."

5. Think vision over brand

True creativity in strategy ABM is positioning your product as the only solution in the eyes of the customer. Therefore, all of the effort invested into research, targeting and personalisation needs to be with a focus on finding and hitting the emotional buttons of the customer. That's both the challenge and the opportunity. As Mark said, "while many marketing teams and agencies aspire to this and declare that they're doing ABM, from my experience relatively few achieve break-through."

6. Build an emotional connection

According to Mark, building an emotional connection with a customer requires the same skills needed when interviewing for a job or dating. You need to actively listen, learn and respond in a way that's going to resonate with the person you're dealing with. You need to tell your story through a filter designed especially for them. "Sensing their reactions and responding in kind. In my view, that's creativity at its most essential, built into the relationships we have with each other. If an ABM campaign leader can capture that essence and put it to use in a way that engages and enhances a relationship between people and organisations, they're very special."

7. Aim for the top

Finally, as many of us face budget restrictions due to the pandemic, today it pays to be incisive. ABMers in a Covid-19 world need to set their sights on where the spending decisions are being made – they need to focus on executive engagement among the highest decision-makers and influencers within an account. "Cutting through at these senior levels is even harder though," explained Bev, "so doing your homework on the account and executive, and creating elevator pitches that will land first time keep you in the game."



About

B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as B2B Marketing magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

Its key products are:

- › Online community
- › Magazine
- › Awards
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MOI

Turning the heads that count in B2B

Trends may come and go, but our DNA never changes. We'll take on the latest and greatest technologies and channels, but only if they push the boundaries of creative thinking. That's how we make the real difference in delivering the right solutions for your business and your customers.

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