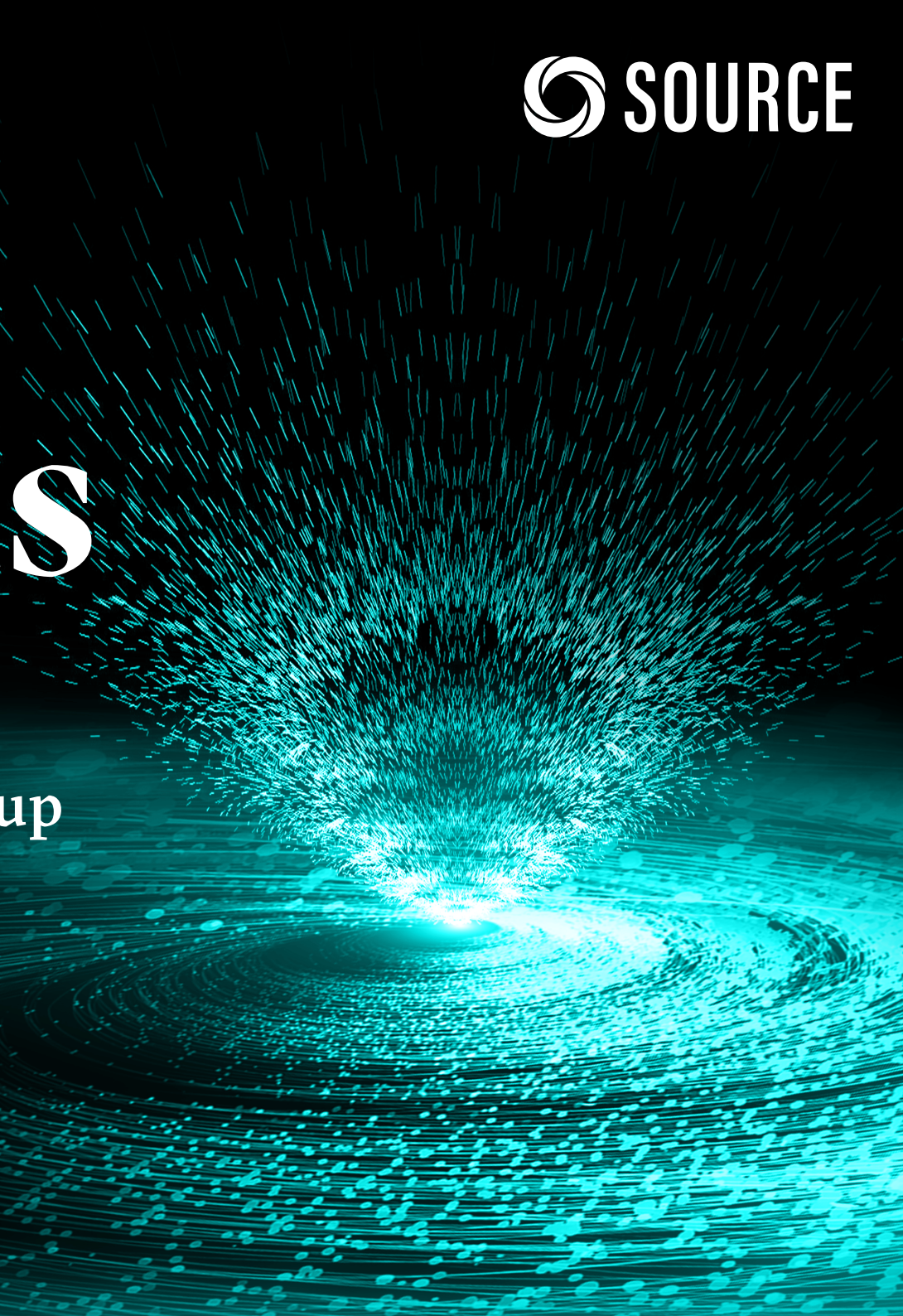


Re: Focus

How professional services
marketing leaders are facing up
to a challenging market



Foreword

With a pandemic behind them and uncertainty ahead of them, clients could be forgiven for wanting to keep their heads down.

But our research shows that three quarters of organisations have more ambitious goals than they did in 2019. Despite recognising that their overall ability to invest has been compromised, nine out of 10 say they're likely to increase their use of professional services in the next two years. There's barely a client we've interviewed in the last year who hasn't talked about the urgent need for transformation.

This creates opportunities and challenges for professional services firms in almost equal measure. As patterns of demand shift, which services should they be investing in? Clients are looking for proof that firms can have a rapid and materially positive impact on their organisation, but how can firms best provide it?

Responding to these questions will involve all areas of a professional services firm, from strategy to delivery, from talent to technology. At the centre of it—the lightning rod for all this activity—is the need for a transformed approach to marketing. Yet professional services firms have often had a love-hate relationship between fee earners and marketers. Now, surely, is the moment when that should change.



Fiona Czerniawska
Founder and CEO

Two things struck me most in the course of this research.

First, the resilience, clarity, and positivity of the marketing leaders we spoke to. Second, the critical importance of empathy in a challenging market. Not sympathy, not concern, but an ability to understand someone else's perspective, and to connect with how they are thinking and feeling.

Empathy is behind a strong refocusing on client listening to better understand client needs. It is also central to building closer connections with partners, practitioners, and business development colleagues.

Neatly, empathy was the original driver of this research. We wanted to better understand how marketing leaders are thinking, feeling, and acting in response to what looks like a down market. We regularly work with marketing leaders in professional services firms on specific research questions or discrete strategic challenges, but this was an opportunity to widen the aperture.

While this group is diverse in terms of backgrounds and personalities, the degree of agreement on what really matters and what needs to be done was striking. I hope you find their thoughts insightful.



Paul English
Director

About our research

This white paper provides strategy, marketing, and business development professionals with an insight into how marketing leaders are thinking, feeling, and acting in response to an uncertain business environment.

Source spoke to marketing leaders from professional services firms between December 2022 and February 2023. Through in-depth interviews, we sought to understand how professional services marketing leaders are thinking about market uncertainty, economic headwinds, geopolitical instability, and the impact of these forces on their remit. We also asked them some quickfire either/or questions to gauge their raw, instinctive take on certain subjects, the results of which are expressed in some of the graphs within this paper.

Leaders were drawn from three broad areas of the professional services industry—consulting, accounting, and law. Collectively, the headcount of firms represented by our interviewees numbered over one million people.



\$150 billion

The total revenues of the firms represented by our interviewees.

“

“What is ‘business as usual’ in this day and age? I think it’s out of the window. Business as usual is **business as unusual now; that’s what we should call it.”**

Adam Soames, Hogan Lovells

What really matters

In the course of researching and writing this report, we identified four crucial ways in which professional services marketing leaders are responding to today's uncertain business environment.

The great refocus

Faced with uncertainty on all fronts, marketers are refocusing their efforts and thinking more deeply about what really matters.

Marketing, fast and slow

Marketing leaders are walking a strategic tightrope, defending brand against pressure to prioritise short-term interests while simultaneously having to adopt an agile, responsive approach.

Building tighter bonds

Marketing functions are forming closer connections with practitioners, business development units, and the wider firm, aligning their activities and centring their focus on the needs of the client.

A new talent imperative

Gone is the age of the marketing generalist, at least at the mid-level—instead, specialised skillsets must be integrated horizontally to maximise efficiency and agility.



Contributors

Source would like to extend our thanks to the marketing leaders who contributed their time towards making this white paper possible.

Name	Job title	Organisation
Gregor Ridley	Director of Marketing and Communications, EMEA	Alvarez & Marsal
Chris Goodman	Chief Marketing Officer	Crowe
Nancy Leibig	Director of Brand and Insights	Crowe
John Rudaizky	Global Brand and Marketing Leader	EY
Lucy Canning	Director of Brand, Marketing and Business Development	Grant Thornton UK
Adam Soames	Global Head of Business Development & Strategy	Hogan Lovells
Mani Dasgupta	Vice President, Global Advisory Partnerships	IBM (formerly CMO, IBM Consulting)
Sophie Oberkamp	Global VP Marketing, HR Advisory Solutions	Kincentric
Leor Franks	Business Development and Marketing Director	Kingsley Napley
Sam Burns	Global CMO	KPMG
Jamie Wallis	Head of Marketing and BD	Law& at DLA Piper
Matthew Klein	Managing Director and Chief Marketing Officer	North Highland
Lex Melzer	Chief Marketing Officer, Australia	Norton Rose Fulbright
Jo Scarlett	Chief Marketing Officer	PA Consulting
Amanda Nizzere	Chief Marketing Officer	Prophet
Antonia Wade	Global Chief Marketing Officer	PwC
Sarah Cooper	Partner, Head of Sales and Marketing	PwC UK
Nicole Petrie	Chief Marketing and Business Development Officer	Schulte Roth & Zabel

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Introduction: Same storm, different boats

“The world is in a tough spot, right across the board. But IBM Consulting are in the business of long-term relationships.

“Whenever clients are in uncertain scenarios, or they feel like they don’t know the right next step—that’s an opportunity for us to step up and engage, to ensure we’re providing them with much-needed advice to **thrive amidst change.”**

Mani Dasgupta, IBM Consulting

Having endured multiple waves of disruption throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 was, for most professional services firms, the year of the rebound; pipelines were repopulated, and many firms began operating at capacity as clients unleashed pent-up demand. Then, something shifted.

The war in Ukraine and its associated shocks served as a catalyst on what was already a complex set of recessionary pressures. As 2022 progressed, consumers and businesses alike found themselves being increasingly battered by a perfect storm of disruption. Supply chain challenges, rising interest rates, and growing geopolitical tensions all left their mark.

Greater ambition but reduced confidence

Going into 2023, we anticipate that these negative forces will have a sizeable impact on clients and their demand for professional services, but the picture is a nuanced one.

Based on our research in recent months, clients are being pulled in two seemingly contradictory directions at the same time. On the one hand, having hunkered down

in order to survive the last few years of pandemic-induced disruption, they're more ambitious than ever (see Figure 1). And yet, having watched the bounteous market into which they emerged post-COVID quickly begin to falter, they're also extremely uncertain about what the future holds (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

How would you rate your organisation's level of ambition compared to pre-pandemic?

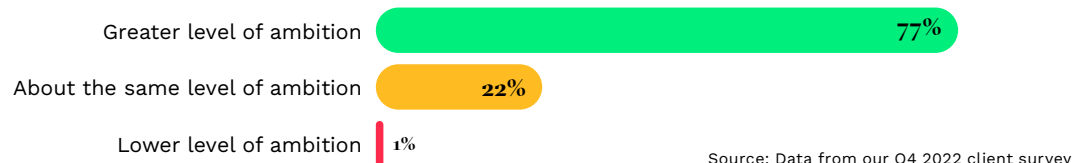
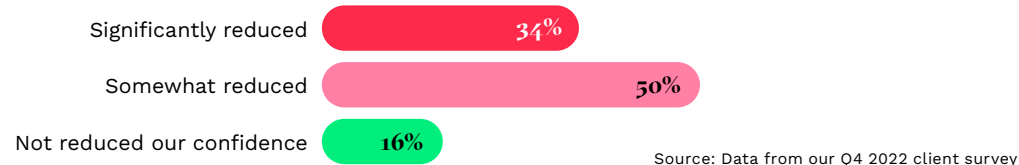


Figure 2

How have the macroeconomic situation and political tensions impacted your confidence in the future of your organisation?





“Clients are looking to us on a much more regular basis for insight around what’s happening in their markets and what their competitors are doing. Nobody knows what’s around the corner, so everyone wants to hear from their peers, and from us, about what’s happening today.”

Lucy Canning, Grant Thornton UK

This is ultimately good news for firms, as it means clients are positioned to spend more on professional services in 2023. But it’s not a straightforward picture, as the underlying needs affecting their expenditure are set to shift.

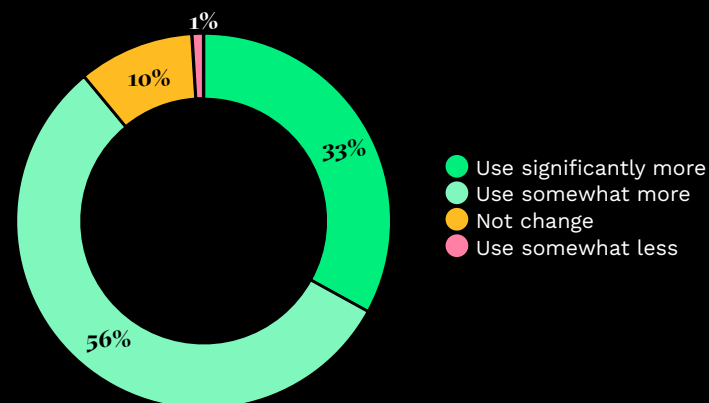
Let’s get real for a moment: We are not suggesting things are going to be easy. During our interviews with marketing leaders, several talked of stalling pipelines, the need to refocus on clogged-up mid-funnels, and pricing pressures that are beginning to emerge. While major transformation projects that are already

in flight are fairly solid, new projects are receiving greater scrutiny before getting the green light to proceed.

Beneath these realities, however, we are finding that clients are leaning into their professional advisers more than ever, due simply to the levels of uncertainty and complex needs that exist. In fact, almost 90% of the clients we surveyed expect their use of professional services firms to increase in the next two years (Figure 3).

Figure 3

How do you think the macroeconomic situation will change the way in which your organisation makes use of professional services in the next two years? Our use will:



89%

of senior executives expect to increase their use of external professional services in the next two years



Where that demand comes from and for which services is a different question: Most major professional services firms are well-balanced and fairly resilient, with a wide portfolio of services that can drive growth opportunities in both an economic upturn and a downturn.

For marketing teams, this typically requires flexibility, and a willingness to adapt to the areas of greatest opportunity and growth given the prevailing market conditions. But, since everyone is chasing personal revenue targets and marketing teams are often deployed within dispersed practice areas, partnerships don't always reflect such strategic logic.

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“My view is that that we’ll see a significant uptick in downside work in 2023, such as restructuring and litigation, which you particularly get off the back of transactions that have gone wrong following an M&A boom, like we’ve had over the last couple of years.”

Adam Soames, Hogan Lovells

CMOs are embracing an unpredictable market



“Changeable markets can be a time of fertility, innovation, and creativity—but you have to let go of the business-as-usual mindset. The client paradigm has changed, and marketing won't resonate if it doesn't reflect this new context.”

Antonia Wade, PwC

While all firms are navigating their way through the same choppy, economic waters, their routes and approaches differ. Steered by the needs of their clients and their own particular structures and attributes, it's a case of same storm, different boats.

The hangover from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine situation hover like dark clouds over the whole market, but the extent to which any one of the many uncertainties at play right now could be easily disentangled from the others is unclear. How, then, are marketers to respond?

We found a remarkably consistent tone and mindset from the CMOs and marketing leaders that we interviewed,

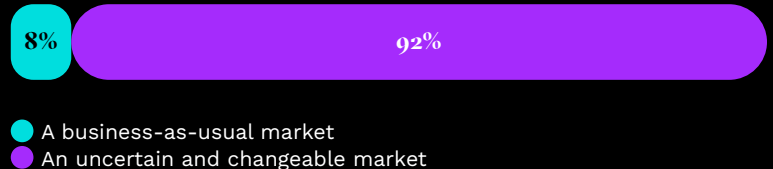
who were reliably realistic, pragmatic, and optimistic (see Figure 4). Rather than shying away from the challenge, our CMOs were very clear that the job is far more interesting and challenging in moments like this, and, almost without exception, they'd choose an uncertain and changeable market over a business-as-usual or steady-state market.

“There's something that's just energising in an environment of change,” said Chris Goodman, CMO of accountancy firm Crowe, for example. “It's more intellectually interesting, but I think it also yields more business opportunity.”

Figure 4

Against the status quo: Marketing leaders prefer an uncertain and changeable market

Do you prefer a business-as-usual market or an uncertain and changeable market?



We think this attitude of embracing uncertainty reflects a predisposition towards open-mindedness shared by many marketers, whose innate creativity allows them to draw the kinds of associations necessary to spot opportunities where others see only disruption. “I think a CMO, essentially, is a strategy leader for the business,” said Mani Dasgupta, Vice President, Global Advisory Partnerships at IBM and former CMO of IBM Consulting. “They’re ahead of the business, watching out for what’s to come, preparing for client needs and helping the business progress.”

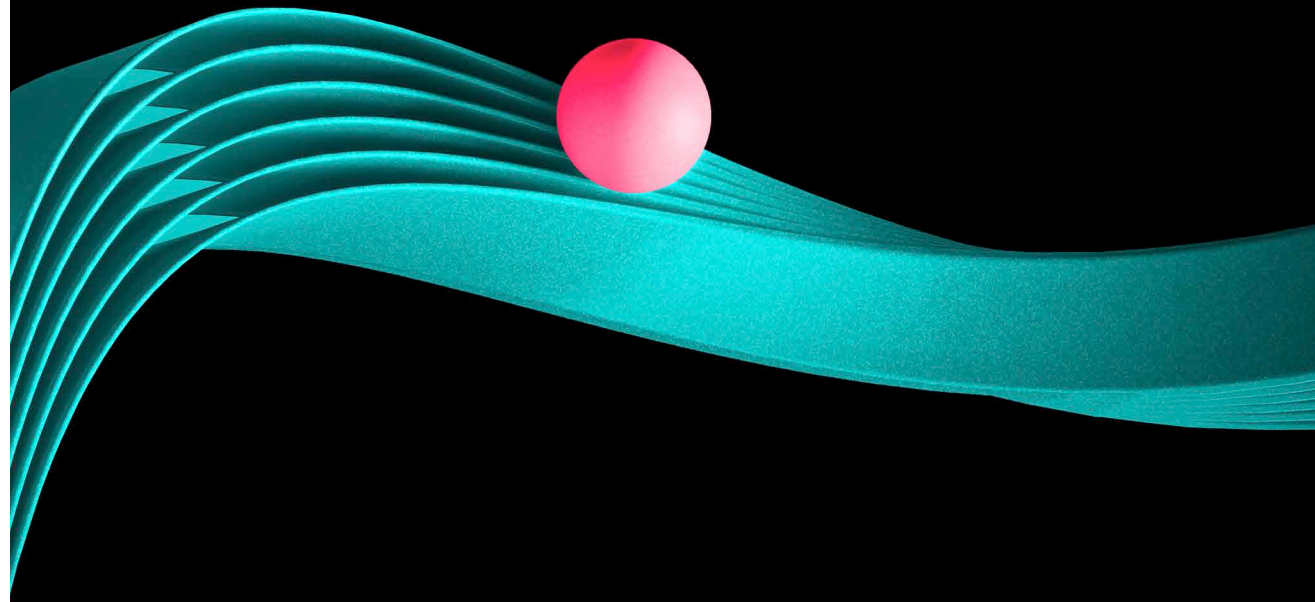
However, this optimism should not be interpreted as a dismissal of the high-stakes environment in which professional services firms are currently operating: If marketers are out in front, bushwhacking a path ahead of the firm, then right now the foliage is dense. Which is why, although leaders consistently described the kind of market volatility at play right now as an opportunity to win work from clients in need of advice, they also saw it as a chance to rethink their efforts across the entire marketing function.

While 2023 may well provide marketing leaders with multiple catalysts for transformation and innovation, it will also force them to reflect upon old habits and leave behind what is no longer needed. When we asked leaders to outline what needs to happen for firms to position themselves optimally and capitalise upon the volatility at play in the market, they consistently landed upon the same word: focus. In the next section, we’ll unpack exactly what that means for professional services marketing moving forwards.

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**“Uncertainty creates a lot of opportunity—
if you’re ahead of the curve.”**

Nicole Petrie, Schulte Roth & Zabel



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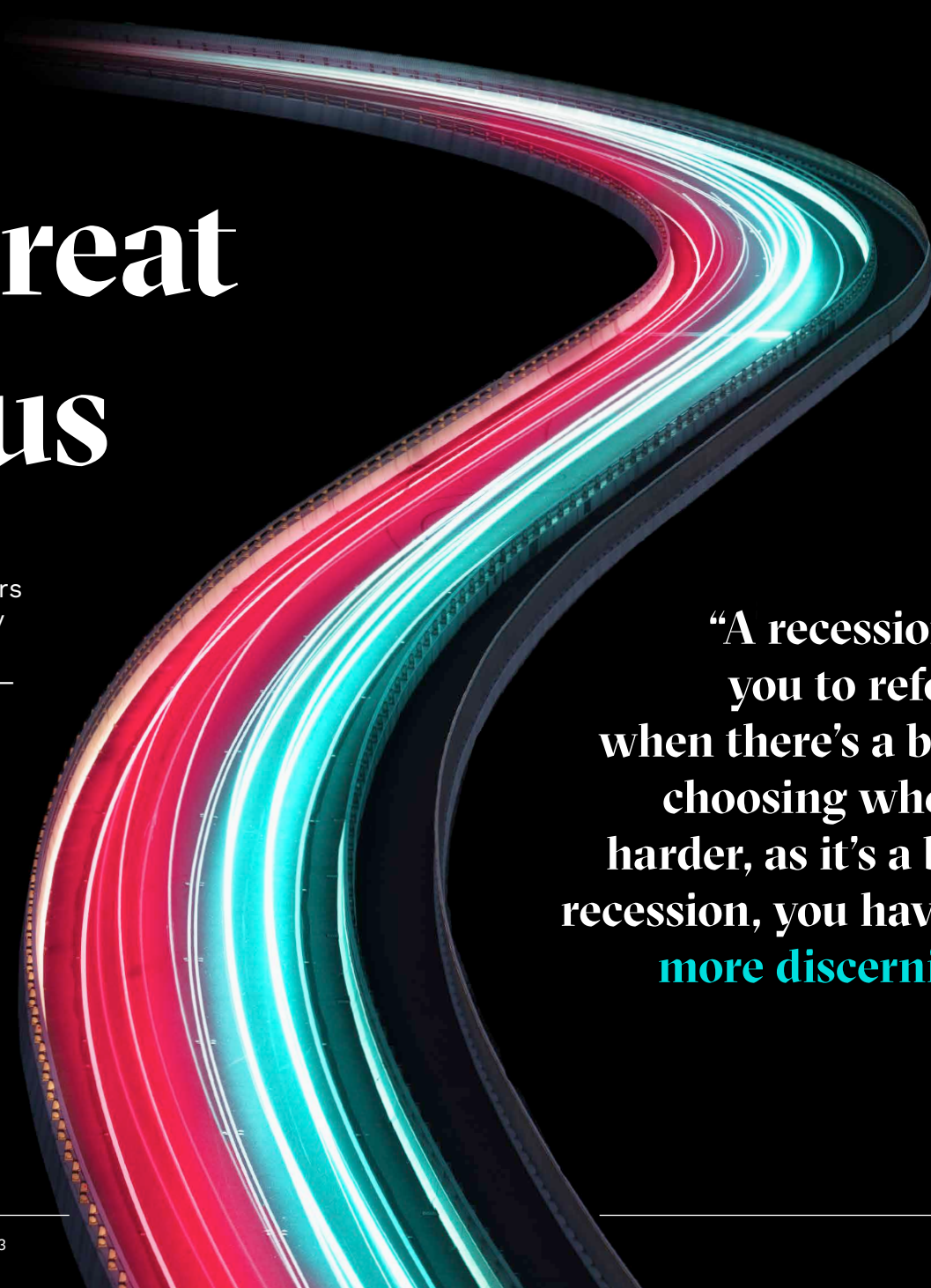
“We saw a lot of evolution and revolution in the last two years, with COVID, post-COVID, Ukraine, inflation, and so on.

“For me, 2023 is about making sense of all of that—trying to find out our way, being more structured, and not just putting out fires. It’s about refocusing on the most important things, which are critical to our brand and to our business.”

Sophie Oberkampff, Kincentric

The great refocus

Broad market uncertainty is driving marketing leaders to think more discerningly about where they concentrate their efforts—and where they don't.



“A recessionary environment forces you to refocus. In times of growth, when there’s a bit more money available, choosing where to spend it is actually harder, as it’s a bit more distributed. In a recession, you have the chance to **reach for more discerning, impactful outcomes. It focuses the mind.”**

John Rudaizky, EY

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“2023 is going to continue to be incredibly interesting for marketers. The past few years have proven to be an amazing time for CMOs. I am approaching 2023 as a great time to **reflect and reset. Ensure we’re watching the environment, continuing to focus on our customers, and leaning into the data to understand where we can drive the most impact for the organisation.”**

Amanda Nizzere, Prophet

If we were to summarise all our interviews with professional services marketing leaders in a single word, it would be focus.

To focus is to concentrate one’s effort, vision, or attention; to put to one side much of what one could attend to and zero in on what really matters. Without doubt, this was the prevailing mindset we encountered when asking leaders to describe the ways in which global uncertainty is affecting their work.

In order to realise this, CMOs are standing back, reflecting and re-evaluating where time, energy, and resources should be best deployed. For many, COVID-19 led to a hardened resolve and steadfastness in the face of the challenges, and most believe they are better, and more discerning, marketers for it.



“

“What we really need to do is get close and stay close to our clients, as we did in the early stages of the pandemic, when we really hustled and took a full-court press approach to outreach. If you **focus on relationships with clients, then you really tap into what’s going on and how the mood is changing.”**

Adam Soames, Hogan Lovells



Bringing the outside in

At its heart, marketing is a discipline that helps organisations to accurately understand customer needs, and then match or exceed them. What we heard from marketing leaders was that, in refocusing their approach, the client was absolutely front and centre of their thinking; that what matters more than anything at the moment is getting closer to clients.

With clients facing such uncertainty and complex challenges, marketers need to be the advocates of being a truly outside-in organisation—listening to what clients need, what their current pain points are, what gains they are seeking, and what is most urgent for them.

As Antonia Wade, Global CMO of PwC, put it: “There will be a shift in the kind of messages we send out to people, because the paradigm has changed, and marketing doesn’t work if it’s not in context. We need to be contextual and empathetic to the environments our clients are in.”

The firms that listen best and talk most directly and usefully to these challenges will be the winners in a difficult market.

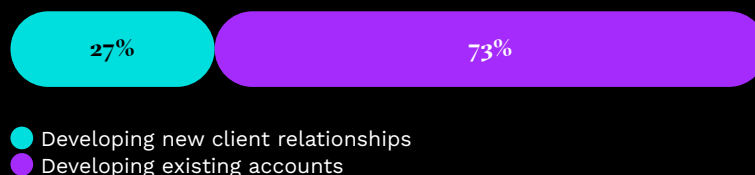
In execution, refocusing on the client often requires strong top-down direction from a firm's leaders. Partners and VPs are mobilised to get into the market, engage in dialogue, and listen carefully. Many firms add scaffolding to this process with explicit targets and goals, while leaning into the supportive mechanisms of client-listening programmes and key-account teams.

In a way, the most successful firms and marketing teams become highly intentional and systematic about leveraging their understanding of, and empathy with, clients. Listening to and understanding client needs and issues in more depth is only the first stage of the process. How these *voice of the client* insights are then captured, processed, and transformed into actionable marketing strategies and tactics is key. Speed to market with marketing initiatives becomes critical when the environment is shifting so quickly, as relevance and context can become moving targets.

Figure 5

Double down: In the face of economic uncertainty, marketing leaders are prioritising developing existing accounts over new client relationships

If you had to choose, would you focus your efforts around existing accounts or new clients?



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“What’s the one thing we’re going to be doing differently because of the economic environment? **Listening to clients. If we are not positioning what we do against the very real challenges that they are focused on, then they’re going to go somewhere else. We are doubling the number of senior executive interviews that we’re doing with clients, because we really need to stay, more than ever, close to clients.”**

Jo Scarlett, PA Consulting

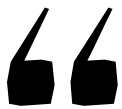
More discerning, more disciplined

One of the biggest challenges in professional services marketing is in the fundamental nature of the matrix and the commercial model—with every service line, practice area, geography, industry, partner, and VP wanting to take a message or proposition to market at any one time. Marketing is easily pulled in a hundred different directions, resulting in an approach that's high on activity, volume, and cost, but low on effectiveness, impact, and brand coherence.

Beyond the discipline of maintaining a client focus, marketing leaders see the challenging market as an opportunity for teams to exercise greater judgement and make better choices about resource allocation. More often than not, this involves being more intentional and strategic, dispensing with anything

that approximates a scattergun approach to marketing.

Paradoxically, marketing leaders feel that having a tighter budget gives them a strengthened hand and greater agency to stick to the strategy—a view shared by clients, according to our research (see Figure 6.) Many marketing leaders we spoke to believe the challenging conditions give permission to draw the line, to call stop, and to say no to things. “We’re approaching 2023 in terms of making sure we’re going deep into specific areas that we know work for us instead of ‘peanut buttering’ tactics across a variety of different areas.” said Amanda Nizzere, CMO of Prophet. “We’re using this time as a chance to get super focused with our marketing strategy.”



“Professional services is a very pragmatic, rational environment to work in. We have to explain our thinking really well and bring a level of **commercial acumen into the team.”**

Antonia Wade, PwC



“Ironically, COVID-19 and a reduction in our headcount and our marketing budget has actually been really helpful. It’s amazed me how little we can spend and still get very good results, but it’s because we’ve been much, much more focused. **You’ve got to be more creative, more strategic.”**

Lucy Canning, Grant Thornton UK

In this way, the whole go-to-market machine becomes more effective and efficient, with more creativity and less waste. “We’re gaining efficiencies in some of our operational and corporate functions that allow us to do more with the same or less,” said Matthew Klein, CMO of consulting firm North Highland, “freeing up funding for additional areas of marketing and sales.”

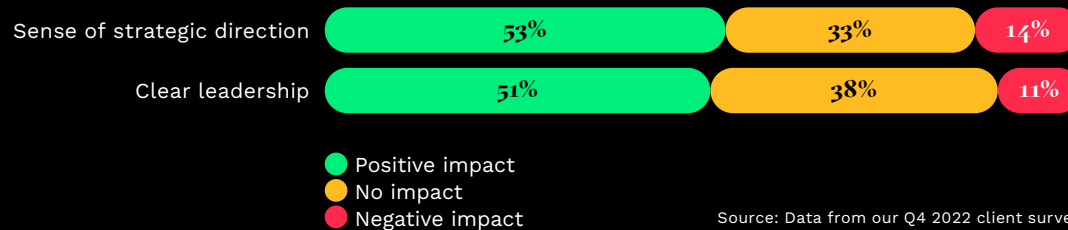
For some leaders this triggered a sense of déjà vu, as they recalled relatively scattered, reactive pre-COVID marketing functions that were forced into alignment,

and to become more proactive, by the pressures of the pandemic. And, with that shift in approach having paid off for many firms, that muscle memory remains. Firms are having to ask themselves what really will give the greatest return on investment and best support the business strategy.

This naturally leads to more discerning marketing leaders, exercising greater scrutiny over the activities and investments they make. Initiatives get questioned, new hires challenged, and pet sponsorships and memberships are put under the spotlight.

Figure 6

Forced into alignment: A majority of clients say macroeconomic uncertainty has had a positive impact on their sense of direction



Source: Data from our Q4 2022 client survey

“We know when downturns occur, it’s hard to keep marketing investment levels up. However, prolonged uncertainty also enables us to apply the lessons we learnt from operating in Covid-19—a renewed focus on fewer bigger more impactful marketing programmes that can cut through. We recognise that we don’t have to market everything we sell and that content sprawl benefits no one.”

Sam Burns, KPMG

“

“Our role as marketing strategists is to stay true to our purpose. [We have to] stay true to the client need, stay true to the strategy, be disciplined. We’ve a stronger role to play if there is pressure.”

Jo Scarlett, PA Consulting

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Marketing fast and slow

While marketing leaders continue to place great stock in the power of brand, an agile, responsive approach is essential when navigating a tumultuous market.



“There is a gravitational pull from sales-related teams to that near-term, but **from my seat it’s very much a balance. Many of the investments we are making have inherently a short- and long-term aspect to them, so we try to balance that appropriately.”**

Matthew Klein, North Highland

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“The knee-jerk reaction [in a crisis] is to cut everything you can: Certainly, cut the brand efforts, and double down on demand. But it’s not actually the wise thing to do. Brand is a long-term play, future-proofing organisations.”

Nancy Leibig, Crowe



Make a choice

At the core of any marketing strategy within a professional services environment, there exists a tension between a responsive, sales-led approach, which seeks to capitalise upon opportunities as and when they arise, and a broader, future-conscious stance which generates long-term demand through building brand equity. Faced with uncertainty on all fronts, we wanted to find out to what extent professional services marketing leaders are favouring—or being pushed towards—one or another of these mindsets in 2023.

The first thing to note is that senior marketers continue to place great stock in the importance of maintaining a long-term strategic view, often doing so against internal pressure to focus solely on the here and now. In a partnership environment, the power dynamics work against most marketing teams, and it is incredibly difficult to push back on a partner’s desire to quickly generate leads and opportunities. This can become even more challenging in down markets when pipelines slow and opportunities fade away.

Sophie Oberkampff, Global VP Marketing of HR consultancy Kincentric, explained how, in a difficult environment, there is a tendency for stakeholders to switch into emergency mode: “It’s easy to go to marketing and say, ‘I want a campaign about this,’ or ‘I want a Harvard Business Review article.’ The challenge for marketing is to advise, to say, ‘Step back—what do you want to achieve? Who is your target audience?’ This is the type of conversation that we need to have, and it’s tough. You cannot satisfy everybody—you need to make a choice.”

“Make a choice”—three small words that cut right to the core of this paper’s thesis: Faced with uncertainty on all fronts, and unable to please all stakeholders, marketers—whose role demands a near-perpetual confrontation with boundless possibility—are perhaps most impactful within an organisation when they are able to say, “No”.

Marketers remain steadfast in their commitment to brand—defending it as a means by which to “hem in” volatility, in the way that the banks of a river seek to define and contain its watery course. This will ensure their firm remains relevant beyond the immediacy of the day-to-day.

While uncertainty around the economy persists, with clients seeing this stretching into the medium-term future (as expressed in Figure 7) few believe that the current instability is here to stay, in the form of a new normal. At some point, uncertainty will decrease, something like stability will return, and clients will seek new strategic partnerships with firms they trust to help them capitalise upon the economic opportunities at hand.

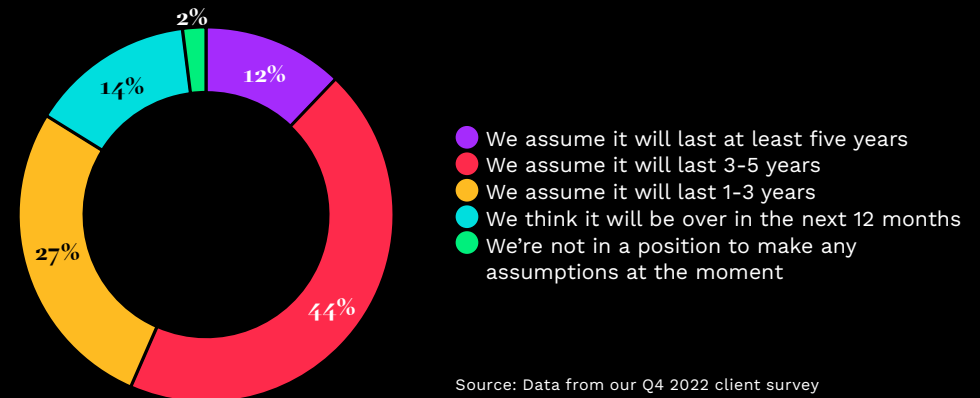


“In recessionary times, there’s a temptation to discount your brand and focus on shoring up short-term sales, but there’s a lot of evidence that shows that companies that continue to invest in their brand in a downturn **come out stronger the other end.”**

John Rudaizky, EY

Figure 7

In it for the long haul: More than half of clients think uncertainty is here for at least the next three years



56%

of senior executives expect economic uncertainty will last for at least the next three years.



“As a sales and marketing leader, I have a responsibility to consider both the short term and the medium term in what we do. I need to understand the current position and our ability to drive immediate sales performance whilst also making the right investments in our brand position, which play out over the next couple of years. The challenge is balancing these timeframes and ensuring that we can meet the immediate objectives whilst taking action that underpins the firm’s strategic vision for the future.”

Sarah Cooper, PwC UK

The importance of agility

While marketing leaders continue to defend the importance of brand, market uncertainty is undoubtedly forcing firms to focus on adopting a more agile stance with regards to their marketing efforts. This isn't about a shift towards short-term thinking but rather being able to respond at pace to new client needs.

"One of the most important things that marketing and business development functions need to have is agility," said Adam Soames, Global Head of Business Development & Strategy at law firm Hogan Lovells. "You have to become more entrepreneurially minded, more agile. If you try something out and it doesn't work, how do you pivot quickly? The pandemic focused people's minds, so I think this is baked in now."

While market volatility is destabilising, the emphasis marketing leaders are placing on having an agile response reflects their predisposition to view uncertainty through the lens of opportunity. PA's Jo Scarlett described the importance of actively carving out space within a marketing function to allow room for the kind of nimble and dexterous thinking deemed so necessary at the moment. "I have a fundamental belief that you should never plan to your full capacity," she said. "Marketers are so passionate about what they do, they'll put their heart and soul into planning every penny if you let them. I'm always keen to keep some powder dry so that we can be agile, flexible, and reactive."

“

"The whole planning process has changed over the last couple of years. It used to be that you'd determine the budget, agree on five campaigns, and roll those campaigns out across the year, optimising as appropriate. There's absolutely still an element of that, but there's also a **much more agile, responsive element, that's almost real-time in terms of addressing and responding to issues."**

Chris Goodman, Crowe

The correlation between the perceived importance of an agile approach to marketing and market instability is clear: In the wake of crisis after crisis, firms and clients alike are worrying less about the specifics of whatever distant horizon they might be heading towards, in favour of getting stuff done and successfully navigating the next stretch of the road ahead.

Research conducted earlier this year by our Client and Brand Insights team confirms that clients are pivoting to place an emphasis on implementation: A firm's "ability to implement" is now the number-one attribute that clients value, up from fourth place in 2022 and sixth in 2021 (see Figure 8).

As Leor Franks, Business Development & Marketing Director at London-based law firm Kingsley Napley, told us: "There's no point in slavishly sticking with long-term priorities while completely ignoring

“Realistically you have to put some things aside, but what you shouldn't do is just react, react, react, because then you're never building something that's sustainable.”

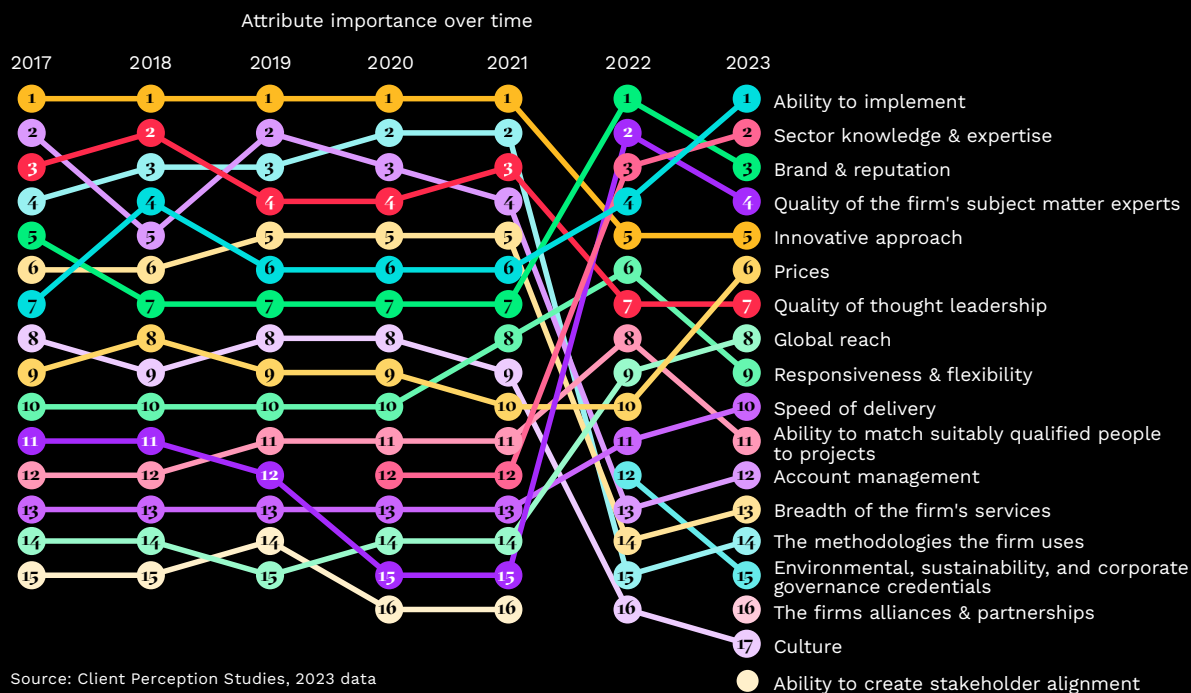
Leor Franks, Kingsley Napley

what's happening around you.” Firms' messaging must therefore reflect this shift, but this observation should be seen in combination with another: That brand & reputation, historically somewhat middling in terms of importance to clients, now ranks third, down only a couple of spots from first place in 2022.

In short, firms should continue to invest in brand, but do so with an understanding that, without translating that brand promise into messaging that showcases implementable solutions, clients will look elsewhere. As Sam Burns, Global CMO at KPMG, put it: “If you structure campaigns in the right way and get the creativity and assets working at different tiers, they can work all the way through the funnel for you, from brand awareness into ABM and lead generation.”

Figure 8

In 2023, clients are prioritising a firm's ability to implement—but brand and reputation remain of key importance



The innovation squeeze

Marketing leaders consistently described the pressurised environments in which firms and clients alike are operating as catalytic when it comes to innovation in marketing. The kinds of limitations that are inherent when uncertainty abounds—whether budgetary, strategic, or knowledge or resource-based—in some sense necessitate an out-of-the-box approach, as firms are forced to look beyond ready-made marketing approaches in order to drive growth.

This focus was unsurprisingly more apparent within firms already geared towards innovation more broadly. Jo Scarlett, CMO of PA Consulting, described past periods of market turbulence as opportunities for clients to get ahead: "We know from history that the smartest clients will use an economic downturn to seize a competitive leap. Because we're an innovation company, and because we're focused on our clients' growth, then actually we see very interesting projects happening during those disruptions in the economy. In challenge, there is opportunity."

Jamie Wallis, Head of Marketing and Business Development at Law&, DLA Piper's in-house innovation practice, described innovation as being on a continuum, with day-to-day process

improvements at one end and radical transformational practices, which open up new markets and revolutionise the way clients approach a problem, at the other. While the former is likely to continue, Wallis suspected clients may begin to stop investing in the latter.

"It will be interesting to see how clients respond to uncertainty," Wallis told us. "They'll want to drive innovation if it's going to make things faster, cheaper, and quicker. But will they have the appetite, the time, and the budget to do stuff that's more radical?"

Meanwhile, Sam Burns, Global CMO of KPMG, argued that firms wanting to drive innovation must be able to clearly communicate the value of said innovation to clients: "The longer the uncertainty goes on in this era of polycrisis, the more important innovation will become," she said. "But that innovation needs to be channelled and have a clear focus that is linked to value and outcomes."

“

“In critical areas like tackling climate change—innovation needs to be supported and funded if we are to have any chance of solving it.”

Sam Burns, KPMG



Our research indicates that innovation does in fact continue to remain a client priority, with clients on average ranking it as the fifth most important attribute when considering a firm in 2023—the same position they ranked it in early 2022. Interestingly, we’ve also found a consistent trend towards underperformance by firms when it comes to innovation, as indicated by the sizeable gap between the blue (perceived strength) and green (importance to clients) lines in Figure 9, taken from our 2022 report, *Delivering Value Through Innovation*.



“With regards to innovation, **clients could go either way**. If they’re really busy, they don’t have the headspace or budget, they might just want the advice, because they can’t see beyond tomorrow. But others might say, ‘I know I need to improve this, and it could make a saving in six months’ time if I’ve got the headspace to do it properly.’”

Jamie Wallis, Law& at DLA Piper

This sizeable disparity represents an opportunity for firm, one which marketing leaders with their eye on the horizon can exploit by embracing the instability inherent in the market as an opportunity to build campaigns centred around innovation. But in doing so they must walk a fine line, crafting future-focused messaging that nevertheless demonstrates an empathetic understanding of the uncertainty clients are facing. Getting this balance right will mean marketers and their firms are well-positioned to capitalise upon the nascent opportunities at hand.

Figure 9

The delivery gap: Even-top rated consulting firms don’t get innovation right



Source: [Delivering Value Through Innovation](#) (report)

Building tighter bonds

Marketing leaders are working to align their function more closely with business development units, the wider firm, and the voice of the client, in a bid to tether the creativity inherent in their remit to solid ground.

“Any marketing person that doesn’t work hand-in-glove with BD—I don’t understand how they can exist. I always begin all my plans with, ‘What are your BD goals?’, and then work backwards from that.”

Gregor Ridley, Alvarez and Marsal

3

It's all in the blend

Just as dynamic and challenging market conditions are forcing most businesses to re-evaluate and transform their core operating models, the same effect can be seen within marketing and BD functions in professional services firms. As teams refocus and double-down on what really matters, the question of how teams are organised and how they approach their work is front of mind for many.

Over the last few decades, with the growing sophistication of professional services marketing and BD functions, we have seen far greater specialisation and more diverse skillsets coming into play. We have come a long way from teams comprised of a few, solid marketing generalists: Marketing teams have diversified into strategists, content and thought leadership specialists, digital and social wizards, campaign orchestrators, and marketing automation enablers.

The growth of business developers and (dare we say it?) sales teams, dedicated pitch teams, key account specialists, account-based marketing experts, and sales-enablement units has undoubtedly sharpened the commercial edge of these operations. But how these different skillsets are deployed within firms has created additional challenges relating to the dynamics between centralised functions and more distributed resources within practice areas. There also exists a general tendency for BD-related resources to be closer to fee-earners, while marketing, at times, can feel a little removed from the action.

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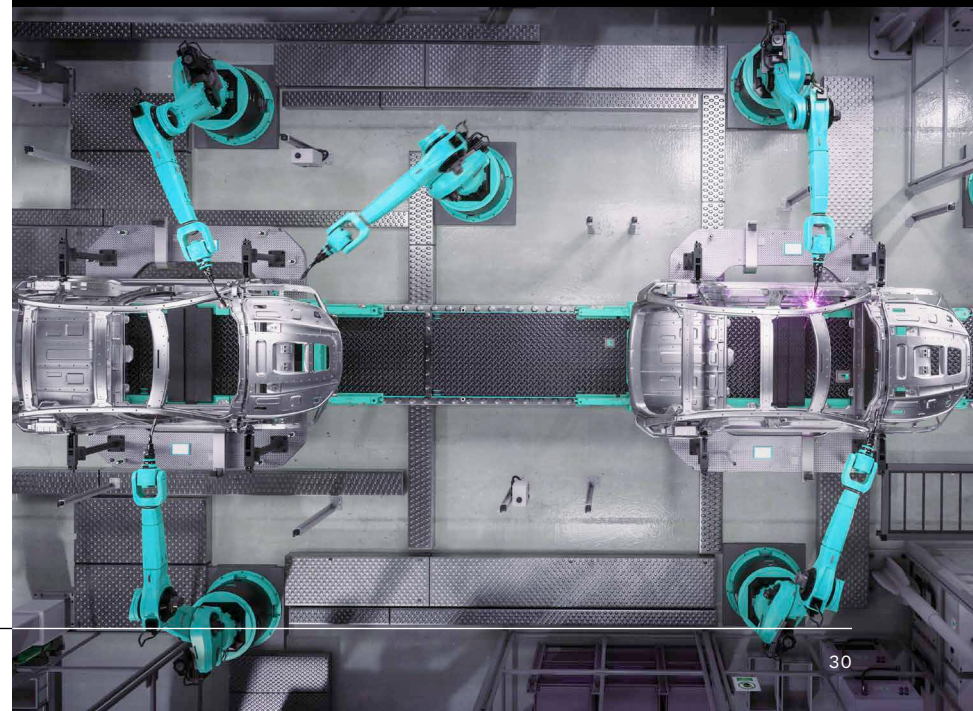
“I don't think there are many generalists today. Everyone's got an orientation, so you need leaders who can have a purview horizontally and **integrate diverse skillsets.”**

John Rudaizky, EY

“

“We can no longer have that traditional funnel approach of handing off from marketing to sales. It has to be hand-in-glove; **it has to be integrated.”**

Matthew Klein, North Highland



In response, a strong theme emerging from our interviews is that marketing leaders are increasingly recognising the importance of building integrated teams, in a bid to push back against compartmentalising forces.

According to the marketing leaders we spoke to, the traditional view—in which marketing's responsibilities are “boxed in” firmly at one end of the funnel, driving awareness and consideration but seeing very little of the client beyond that—is increasingly considered outdated. Instead, brand and marketing are recognised as full-funnel assets, informing everything from lead generation to client experience.

This starts with the blurring of conventional lines between marketing and business development teams. Rather than operate as two siloed units, both should be focusing their efforts on the same goals. This is obviously not a new thought, and has been central to the objectives of most marketing & BD leaders for quite some time. But we sense that something is shifting, and commitments to making it actually happen have grown stronger, as have the systems that enable it.

This process of integration then continues another step down the funnel, with marketing and business development teams getting closer to fee-earners in order to more thoroughly understand the kind of work delivered by the firm, and the types of clients who pay for it. “It sounds so obvious,” said North Highland's Matthew Klein, “but I've seen so many marketing functions that are one or two steps removed from the front office of the client-serving teams.

“Being able to have a marketing team that includes folks that have done the work of the internal stakeholders—in our world, consultants—with a first-hand understanding of the way in which we operate, what we sell, what clients are buying, is of critical importance.”

These kinds of partnerships matter if firms are to drive an effective go-to-market approach. Marketers are often creative, energetic people—but, without a clear commercial focus and close proximity to partners, markets, and clients, their overall contribution to the business can be impaired.

“We live in our own world too much,” said Lucy Canning, Director of Brand, Marketing and Business Development at Grant Thornton UK. “We need to spend much, much more time understanding the fee-earners, how they think, the challenges they're facing, how they're talking to clients.” By working directly with fee-earning colleagues, marketers can harness their creativity more effectively, fuelling it with real world insight and bringing it to life via a fully activated brand experience.



“You can't look at marketing and selling as two distinct things. Client behaviour has changed, and the way that buyers consume content and make buying decisions is shifting. In some circumstances, we see clients doing more of their own research and getting further along the buying journey on their own. So, the role of marketing is changing. Our focus is on our activity **along the customer journey and how we use both marketing and sales skills to shape that.”**

Sarah Cooper, PwC UK

Client-centric alignment

What's prompting this drive towards integration? We believe it is not solely a result of economic uncertainty. It's certainly the case that recessionary headwinds are forcing leaders to think laterally about how to maximise impact and efficiency. Unable or unwilling to simply add more cooks to the kitchen, firms are instead drawing connections between skillsets to drive results, bringing together agile, inter-departmental teams to solve strategic problems more efficiently—what North Highland's Matthew Klein called a "1+1=3 approach."

The reality is, though, that when teams do really focus—when they do genuinely zoom in on what really matters—they end up back at the start, with a commitment to client-centricity and client experience. Everything else flows from that. Aligned and integrated marketing and BD teams are most often highly client-centric teams.

This sentiment was espoused clearly by Nicole Petrie of Schulte Roth & Zabel: "Often, as sales and marketing professionals, we communicate on a tangible, rational level; we observe this when people are pitching their products, it's all about quality, capability, price, service. That's important, but connecting on a deeper level with key clients really

means we need to be talking a lot more about the intangible: How will someone feel on the other side when you're making their life better?"

Crowe's Director of Brand and Insights, Nancy Leibig, agreed: "We need to be mindful of the most important relationships we have. Sometimes, strategy is about an investment; but sometimes it's just about a focus on the clients, and having an unrivalled client experience that puts us more top-of-mind."

Jo Scarlett, Chief Marketing Officer at PA Consulting, put it perhaps most succinctly: "If we are not positioning what we do against the very real challenges that clients are focused on, then they're going to go somewhere else."



"It sounds simple, but we forget the client should be at the centre of everything."

Nicole Petrie, Schulte Roth & Zabel



“Clients used to buy on broader attributes such as scale in a domestic market, global capability, or reputation. But now they're becoming a bit more sophisticated. For marketing and BD, this means that the old way in which we used to run a client program, a sector program, and a brand program in quite distinct streams has had to change. You need to think a lot more deeply about how you can bring those things together.”

Lex Melzer, Norton Rose Fulbright

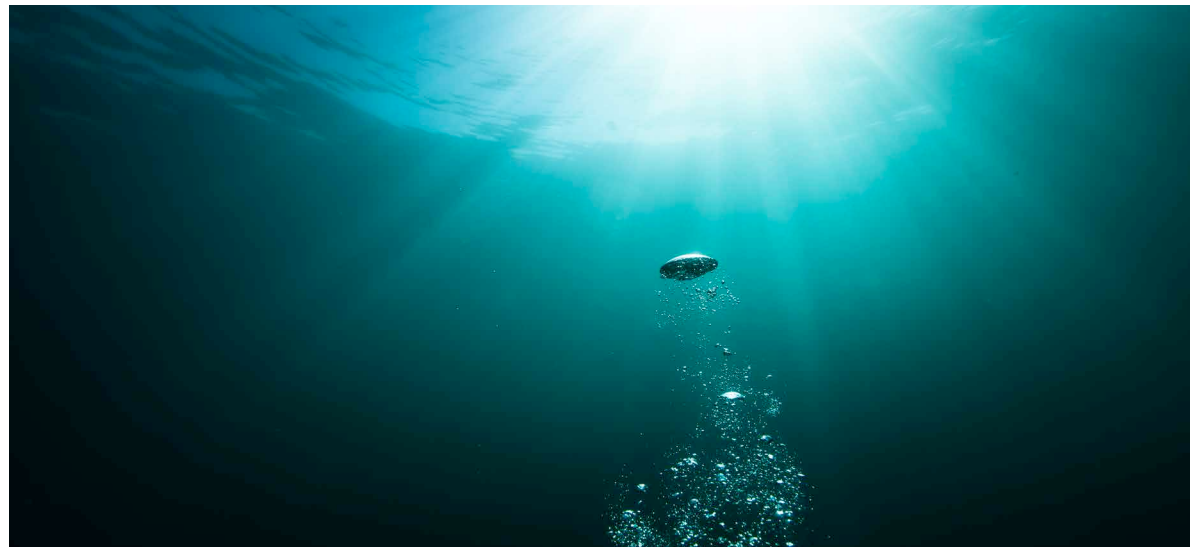
There are seemingly two main reasons for this renewed emphasis on the client: Firstly, clients are, of course, caught in the same uncertainty as firms, leading to greater levels of scrutiny around any investments they make. Antonia Wade, Global CMO of PwC, told us how, increasingly, larger numbers of buyers have been getting involved in individual buying decisions—a trend that was exacerbated by COVID and is not going away. “The price point of buying decisions doesn't actually have to be hugely high for a lot of buyers to be involved,” she said.

Secondly, technology is once again of central importance. Digital transformation has resulted in more readily available data in a buying journey and more transparent client-firm relationships,

forcing firms to innovate in the ways in which they market themselves.

If firms want to stay ahead of the curve, marketing leaders will need to think deeply about the ways in which their brand—ostensibly an expression of their firms' fundamental values—is realised in the minds of clients at every stage of the buyer journey. This will mean curating a considered client experience: “It's in the definition of brand-building that people get confused,” said EY's John Rudaizky. “It's not just about advertising, it's the total experience, the value you bring to a client.”

In order to bring this to life, leaders will need to find and retain individuals with the right future-focused skills and capabilities.



4

A new talent imperative

“Getting to an integrated approach depends on a number of things. It depends on having the right technology in place—you need the right systems. But you also need a different type of marketer.”

Lex Melzer, Norton Rose Fulbright

When we spoke to marketing leaders about the kinds of skills they’re placing a premium on at the moment, there was no one single capability that stood out.

Instead, CMOs and marketing leaders spoke of the qualities and characteristics that will need to be present in the professional services marketing teams of the future; teams which must work in a more integrated fashion than ever before.

Interviews suggested there are five key attributes they want within their talent base in 2023 and beyond.

#1

Impact driven



While still championing the power of brand and content, marketing leaders are seeking action-oriented thinkers who can do more than write a great blog post or design a beautiful PowerPoint template.

Partners and fee-earners want impact. They want a targeted approach to lead generation and brand experience, one that incorporates a deep understanding of the client need and delivers a clear, measurable return on investment. Marketers therefore need to be committed to, and intentional about, commercial success.

“Demonstrating **business impact** gets you a foot in the door—it differentiates you from the woolly marketing types, who like to focus on creative ideas, but not on the analytics.”

Gregor Ridley, Alvarez & Marsal

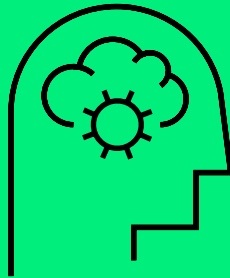
“I’m looking for people to join my team who understand how insight shapes decisions about marketing and sales activity. The marketing or sales professional of the future **has to be insight-led.**”

Sarah Cooper, PwC UK

“From a marketing perspective, **it’s not just about the end product**; it’s about the time spent testing it, getting clients involved, and iterating a product with their feedback. Then, when it comes to comms, you’ve got a clear proposition. That’s where our challenge lies—it’d be really easy to go, ‘Yeah, sure—we’ll do some collateral, we’ll do a video,’ and everyone would be happy. But I’m determined to ensure people realise **there is so much more to good marketing than just the comms output at the end.**”

Jamie Wallis, Law& at DLA Piper

#2 Know your firm



“What do you actually *do*?” might be the sort of question that causes consultants to roll their eyes, but it’s not always without cause. Understanding the complexities of the multifaceted work professional services firms do for clients can be difficult—distilling that knowledge into a comprehensible narrative, even more so.

The marketer of today must genuinely know their firm and grasp the value it delivers to clients. To do that requires proximity to the front-line, and the ability to engage with senior fee-earners in a credible, commercial, and effective way. These are core qualities that CMOs are placing a huge premium on.

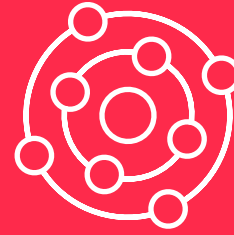
“I want to **embed marketing and communications people into the business**, so that they're as much part of my leadership team as they are the leadership teams of our audit, tax, and consulting businesses.”

Chris Goodman, Crowe

“I'm looking for **people who understand the business**. That, to me, is critical. Because if marketing is disconnected, even if you're an internal comms professional, even if you are a brand specialist, it takes longer and more cycles to get to the right answer. Those business skills are hard to find.”

Mani Dasgupta, IBM Consulting

#3 Collaborators and connectors



At a time of intense cost pressure, where adding more isn't always an option, marketing leaders are looking to desegregate previously siloed teams and build agile skillset ecosystems. From brand strategy to business development, content to client experience, marketers increasingly need to be able to think outside their own box, drawing cross-functional connections to unlock and multiply potential from within.

That includes working more closely with consultants and fee-earning colleagues, who can provide marketing functions historically relegated to “back of house” with fresh insights straight from the most important source—the client.

“It’s not a solo sport anymore. Twenty years ago, you could do a lot of marketing with two or three people. Today, if you think about the touchpoints where a brand is showing up, there’s the need for technologists working closely with creatives—so **you have to be able to team up. Nobody in any function is horizontal and vertical across everything in equal measure; you need to be able to combine a deep, vertical capability with an ability to connect with others.”**

John Rudaizky, EY

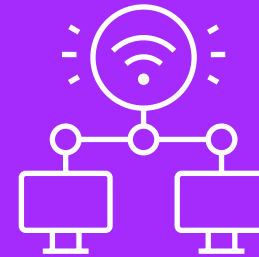
“Insight-led professionals aren’t all data scientists—we need those, but we also need individuals that can translate data and make sense of it against best practice, and people that can assess what that means for performance against our commercial goals. It’s about **balancing the skills of the team to form actionable insight.”**

Sarah Cooper, PwC UK

“We’re forming cross-functional teams of non-dedicated folks—you have consultants, marketers, every area of the organisation represented. And these cross-functional teams are coming together to solve some of the challenges that we have. **It’s a ‘1 + 1 = 3’ approach.”**

Matthew Klein, North Highland

#4 Digitally fluent



Gone are the days when knowing what SEO stands for and where to find All Pages reports on Google Analytics was enough to earn you the right to call yourself a digital marketer. In 2023, marketing leaders are seeking a level of technological capability that goes beyond a few specialists in the corner. They want teams that have digital and data literacy embedded across a diverse range of roles and functions, so teams can better identify the ways in which technology can be best deployed today while identifying opportunities to improve tomorrow (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Beyond mere numbers: Marketing leaders were split 50/50 when it comes to cutting-edge technology and cutting-edge creativity

Would you prioritise cutting-edge technology or cutting-edge creative thinking?

50%

50%

- Cutting-edge technology
- Cutting-edge creative thinking

“Like lots of companies, we feel like we’ve invested a lot in technology. Now, the focus needs to be on realising the value of that technology. We’ve got all the right technology, but now it’s about **orchestrating it in the right way, really embedding processes and training our people.”**

Antonia Wade, PwC

“Finding people who understand both the tech and digital marketing strategy is a gap still. It’s now about aligning **data, design, and digital skills.”**

Sam Burns, KPMG

“Martech and the data that’s available has only gotten more granular. I love it, because there’s so much more available—but it’s also easy to drown in it. One of the ways to avoid ‘analysis paralysis’ is to **understand what data really matters in the context of the moment, and the context of the big picture, in terms of where you’re trying to go and what you’re trying to accomplish.”**

Nancy Leibig, Crowe

#5 The human touch



CMOs are seeking marketers who understand the importance of transcending the technical and the rational, to better connect with audiences on a more human level across the funnel. Within a B2B relationship, the people at the heart of any business are easily hidden behind complex jargon and systematised ways of thinking. But as the old saying goes, “People buy people”, and empathy and EQ will be fundamental qualities for the future marketer to help design and deliver client experience that drive business value.

“The key in professional services is differentiation, it’s achieved through the relationships that you build, not just through your products and services. Look at any professional services firm—we’re all technically terrific at what we do; we’re all credible. It’s hard to find differentiation in that. But **clients ultimately are buying the relationship**, and clients will pay a premium if they like what you do, who you are, and how you make them feel.”

Nicole Petrie, Schulte Roth and Zabel

“I think **we hide behind writing or social media too much**; there’s almost an information overload. When it comes to video content, people are really time-poor, so the question is: Would they rather spend 10 minutes watching a video or having a 10-minute phone call?”

Adam Soames, Hogan Lovells

Action guide



**Five questions
marketers need
to be asking**



1. Are you meeting clients where they stand today?

Professional services is one of the most client-centric industries in the world, but that does not prevent strategic drift as markets move. Losing sight of what clients are thinking, feeling, and desiring is a major risk to commercial performance. It's therefore vital that professional services marketing leaders drive a disciplined client listening and engagement practice that continuously enables firms to position their services as relevant and valuable. It's quite simple: The closest firm to the market wins.



“You need the philosophy, you need the principles, the strategy, the discipline, but you also have to be prepared to really, really, really [listen to your clients](#). And if you have to move, you have to move.”

Jo Scarlett, PA Consulting

2. Are your teams in alignment?

If people are the lifeblood of your business, it's vital they get to where they're needed. Running a successful professional services marketing function means artfully bringing together divergent skillsets to achieve a wide range of goals; in other words, truly creating a total that is greater than the sum of its parts.

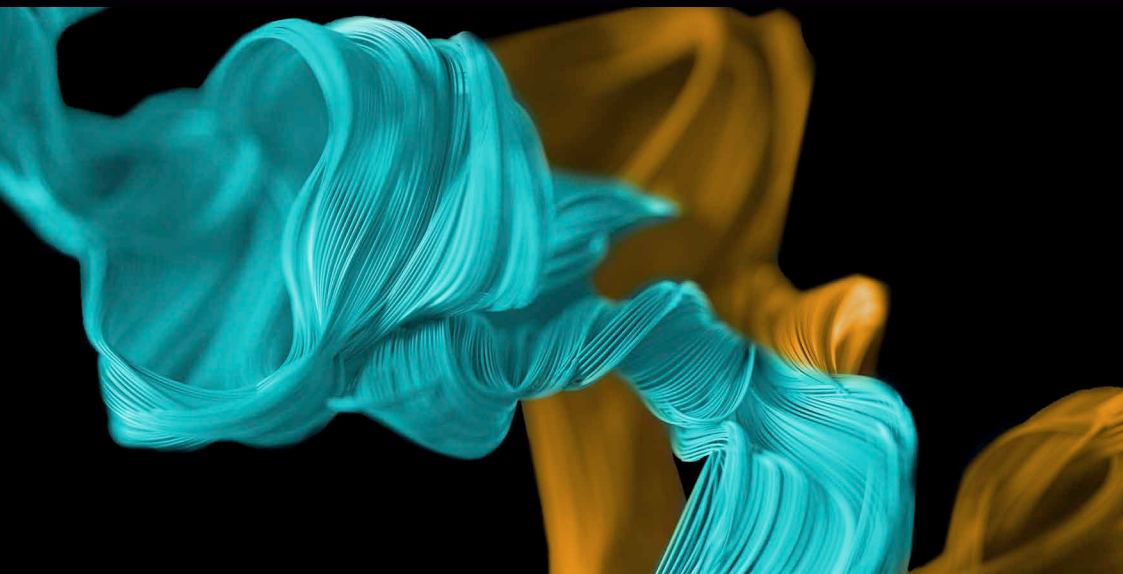
Achieving this depends not only on operational processes and organisational structures, but on fostering a mindset of collaboration and experimentation, even when pressurised environments are driving siloed thinking. Consider an audit that gathers the perspectives of different team members on how things are working, and using that insight to collaboratively craft solutions to the blockages and friction points uncovered.



“A lot of B2B organisations have tended to be much more siloed and discipline-specific, and **that has trapped a lot of the potential within marketing organisations. It’s in part about structure, but a lot of it’s mindset, where you’re just willing to work across the aisle, across the team, you’re purpose-built—and it doesn’t actually matter who people report to.”**

Nancy Leibig, Crowe

3. Are you close enough to the business?



It's an unfortunate reality that the day-to-day challenges of senior marketing roles can pull you away from the front-line. While more junior team members may engage regularly with partners and practice areas, marketing leaders can be accused of being too distant at times and fundamentally not understanding what it is that a firm does.

Just as building closer proximity to clients is critical at this time, so too is building proximity to fee-earners. Being intentional about spending time with practitioners in key areas of the business, to demonstrate genuine interest in their perspective on markets and clients, is time well spent in a difficult market.

“

“Marketing is in the service of the business. The closer we can get to our partners in business to really understand what's keeping them awake, and how we can make them more successful, the better. We are in it for the business to grow.”

Mani Dasgupta, IBM Consulting

4. Are you making space for good marketing?

Being more selective and discerning in a challenging market is tough, but essential. As different practice areas and partners pull and push for money and marketing attention, focus can dissipate. A tighter environment enables marketing leaders to hold the line, push back, and challenge anything that is not fully aligned with the firm's broader strategic priorities. Clearing the clutter and focusing on what matters can also have a sizeable impact on a team's ability to innovate, simply by making space for them to do so.

“

“The key is making sure the team has the agility to respond—you can have all the data and insights in the world, but **if the team doesn't have time to digest, analyse, respond and make necessary adjustments to messaging and creative based on what they are seeing, **it's all for nought.**”**

Amanda Nizzere, Prophet

5. Is your brand more than just a big idea?

Brand and reputation are more important to clients than they ever have been, but in a tough market, big brand investments can be met with scepticism by partner and practitioner teams. If marketing leaders want to create competitive advantage in a difficult market, they need to be creating standout brand experiences that actually connect with the people who matter in the moments that matter. When budgets are tight, can you use this constraint to drive fresh thinking about how best to activate your brand, driving value throughout the funnel?

“

“You’ve got to actually **be able to link**, say, content marketing, that’s giving you a reputational boost, with a pipeline of leads that can be pursued by the business. **Those two things have to work together.**”

Lex Melzer, Norton Rose Fulbright



Meet the authors

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Paul is Director of Marketing Advisory at Source, working with clients on projects to inform marketing, brand, and content strategy. With 20 years of experience as a marketing leader within professional services firms, combined with experience on the ground in over 30 countries in global leadership roles, Paul brings a real-world perspective and pragmatic insights that lead to actionable recommendations.

Paul has also received distinctions and performance prizes from The University of Oxford (Strategy & Innovation) and the Chartered Institute of Marketing.

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About Source

What really matters? We help the world's leading professional services firms answer that question when facing decisions of vital importance.

We see beyond the numbers and beneath the surface to provide firms with clear-cut direction. Drawing upon our deep roots within the professional services sector, we provide firms with a clear picture of their clients' worlds. Through comprehensive research and meticulous analysis, we pinpoint what truly matters and deliver actionable insights that help firms map out the right way forward.

What we do

Growth strategy

We combine our proprietary data with industry-leading expertise to help the world's leading firms **make the right investment decisions**.

[Find out more](#)

Client and brand insights

We provide firms with insight into **how their brand resonates** with the needs of clients, and the ways in which they can shape it to do so.

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We create competitive advantage for firms by **developing and activating standout brands** that connect with the people who matter.

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We identify the challenges and opportunities within firms' **day-to-day structures**, mapping out the best path forwards.

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