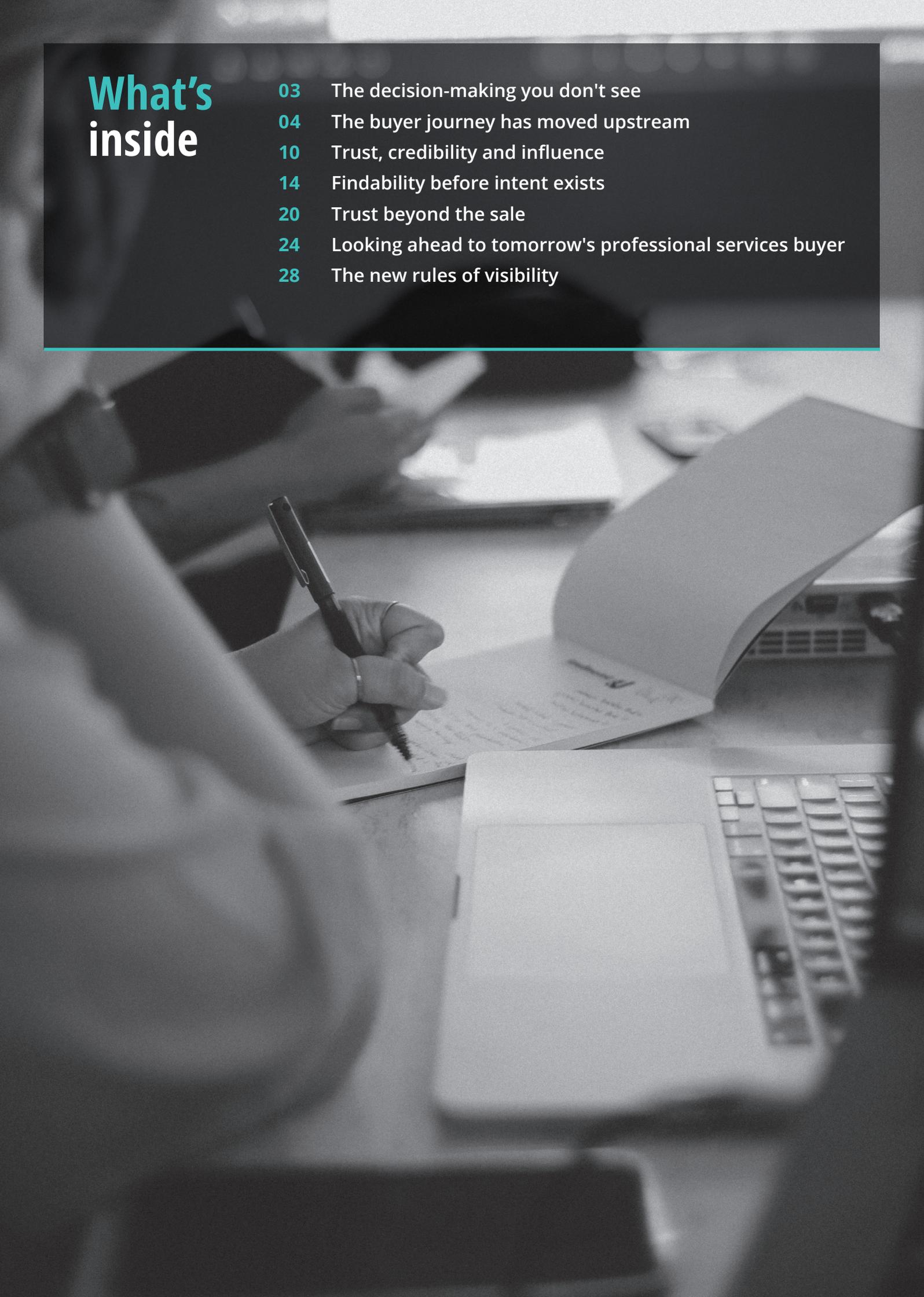


**Findability, credibility
& the new rules of visibility**
How professional services firms can
earn trust and preference earlier



What's inside

- 03 The decision-making you don't see
- 04 The buyer journey has moved upstream
- 10 Trust, credibility and influence
- 14 Findability before intent exists
- 20 Trust beyond the sale
- 24 Looking ahead to tomorrow's professional services buyer
- 28 The new rules of visibility



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Marketing ultimately is about building trust over time... you need to be consistent, you need to be present, you need to be clear about what you stand for.

- Robs Sturmeay, Group Marketing Director - Europe at NFP, an Aon Company

The decision-making you don't see

Over the past few years, something subtle but significant has shifted in professional services marketing.

Most firms haven't stopped investing. Far from it. Campaigns still run, many of them brilliantly. Content calendars are full. Thought leadership continues to flow. On the surface, activity looks healthy.

And yet, in conversations with senior marketing leaders, a familiar pattern keeps surfacing: opportunities tend to become visible only after much of the decision-making has already taken place.

This report is an attempt to understand that disconnect.

According to research from 6Sense, the average B2B buying cycle now lasts 10.2 months. But by the time buyers reach out to firms, they are typically 69% of the way through their decision-making process. In 81% of cases, they have already identified a preferred vendor before any direct conversation begins.

These figures are often quoted. Less often are they truly absorbed.

What they point to is not a failure of marketing execution, but a mismatch between where marketing teams focus their effort and where influence actually happens. Buyers are forming opinions, shaping shortlists, and building confidence long before they surface as 'leads' - and largely without firms being aware of it.

This report draws on conversations with chief marketing officers, commercial leaders, strategists, and end buyers, alongside independent research, to explore how buyer journeys have really changed. What emerges is not a story about broken funnels or failed tactics. It is a story about timing, trust, and visibility, and, most importantly, where decisions are now shaped, and what that means for professional services marketers planning for the years ahead.



Michael Gegg
Founder, PSM Communications



1 The buyer journey has moved upstream





There is this general acceptance now that most new prospects have done much of their research before they get to us.

- Virginia Cook, Chief Marketing Officer, Kreston Global

The buyer journey has moved upstream

For years, marketing has been built around a comforting assumption: that influence begins when a buyer enters a defined journey.

Awareness leads to interest, interest to consideration, consideration to decision. Marketing's role is to guide buyers through that journey.

But in reality, it's now far messier than that, and far more human than we think.

What has genuinely changed in professional services buying

Your buyers have not become impulsive. If anything, they have become more cautious. What has changed is where and when they do their thinking.

Virginia Cook, Chief Marketing Officer at Kreston Global, described a pattern that now feels almost universal: "There is this general acceptance now that most new prospects have done much of their research before they get to us." This early research is not superficial. Buyers arrive having already explored a firm's thinking, assessed leadership profiles, compared positioning, and assessed reputations through networks.

Leor Franks, Chief Commercial Officer at Kingsley Napley, sees the consequence of this upstream shift every day: "Everything feels compressed. People arrive asking sharper questions much earlier." The lived experience behind that line is important. It suggests the starting point for many commercial conversations is no longer education. It's validation.

And data supports this lived experience. The average buying group, according to 6Sense, now consists of around nine to ten people, each bringing a different lens to the decision: initiators, users, influencers, financial approvers, gatekeepers, and, crucially, potential veto-holders. Each of those individuals interacts with vendors an average of 17 times, often across content, conversations, events, and third-party commentary that firms never see in their reporting dashboards.

What has changed is not the importance of trust, but the sequence in which trust is built.

Where decisions really begin

If you ask buyers when they decided to engage a firm, they rarely point to a single moment. It is usually an accumulation of impressions: repeated exposure to relevant thinking, a

TODAY'S BUYING GROUP ROLES

The average buying group, according to 6Sense, now consists of around nine to ten people, each bringing a different lens to the decision

- 1 The Initiator:** Identifies the need or opportunity that the purchase could address.
- 2 The User:** Directly interacts with the product or service on a regular basis.
- 3 Influencer:** Shares expertise and advice through their knowledge or authority on the subject.
- 4 Decision Maker:** Has the authority to say yes or no to the purchase, often senior executives
- 5 Gatekeeper:** Controls the flow of info and access to other members of the buying committee.
- 6 Buyer:** Handles the procurement and purchasing - negotiating terms, contracts & compliance.
- 7 Champion:** Advocate for the purchase internally, rallying support among stakeholders.
- 8 Financial Approver:** Approves the financials of the purchase including the budgetary allocation.
- 9 Sniper:** Has the power to completely veto the purchase and kill the deal.

Source: Steve Kemish, IMG

senior voice that feels credible, a point of view that makes sense of a complex issue, or a peer mentioning a name at just the right time.

Sadie Baron, Interim Chief Marketing Officer at TLT and former Chief Marketing Officer of Reed Smith, summarised it neatly: "Trust is demonstrated over time. You can't say 'trust us'. It doesn't work like that." Before a need is formalised, buyers are quietly assessing whether a firm feels safe.

From the buyer side, Nebel Crowhurst, an experienced Fractional Chief People Officer, explained how heavily early confidence is shaped through human validation: "First-hand recommendation... is really important." Particularly in HR, she added, buyers can be "quite emotive buyers of services." In other words, early decision-making is not only research-led. It is reassurance-led.

That sense of reassurance can be heightened at moments of transition. As Fiona Ryland, HR Consultant and formerly Government Chief People Officer and Chief Operating Officer at UCL, explained: "When you start a new role, you feel very vulnerable. You're building credibility, and that's when how firms approach you really matters."

Early impressions are not abstract brand signals; they are interpreted through the lens of personal exposure and professional risk, particularly when buyers are still establishing their own authority internally.

Eugenio Pirri, Business Partner – EMEA at Telus Health and formerly Joint CEO and Chief People & Culture Officer at Dorchester Collection, reinforced what's sitting underneath that reassurance: "Budgets are tight. You only have so many resources.



If your job, your livelihood, or your reputation depend on a decision, you're always going to buy what you know and trust.

- Kate Mackie, Author and Chief Marketing Strategy & Operations Officer at EY

If you get it wrong, it's very difficult to go back to your CFO or CEO and say, 'I screwed that up, I need more money.'

David Frost, Group People & Organisational Development Director at Dole Plc, described his researching in practical terms: "Talking to my network... to see has anybody used this provider before, what their experience has been... that's definitely something I would do," alongside looking at a firm's website, leadership and LinkedIn profiles.

Kate Mackie, Author and Chief Marketing Strategy & Operations Officer at EY, captured the important psychology underneath all decisions: "If your job, your livelihood, or your reputation depend on a decision, you're always going to buy what you know and trust." Buyers aren't simply evaluating capability. They are managing risk - professional, reputational, and sometimes personal. Familiarity and credibility reduce that

risk long before a formal buying process begins.

The modern shortlist

By the time buyers are ready to engage, the field has usually narrowed significantly. Most buying groups, according to 6Sense, now evaluate four to five vendors, and those vendors are rarely discovered at the point of need.

Virginia Stagni, Chief Marketing Officer at Adecco Group Italy, described due-diligence processes that extend for months, where alignment matters as much as expertise: "The due diligence alone can take two or three months. You need to feel aligned, ethically and culturally, not just technically."

This is where many firms misjudge the role of marketing. Capability alone does not earn a place on the shortlist. Recognition does.



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That recognition is sometimes shaped as much by perceived safety as by fit. As Fiona Ryland reflected: “Sometimes you’re being too risk-averse. You use one of the big firms because it feels safe, even when it’s not necessarily the best decision.” She went on to add, “You never really get fired for hiring a big name, but that doesn’t mean you get the specialism you actually need.” In other words, again, shortlists often reflect organisational risk management as much as genuine confidence in expertise.

And recognition is rarely built during a buying window. It’s also worth noting that shortlisting itself is sometimes driven as much by process as preference. Nebel Crowhurst explained that she’s “not naturally inclined to shortlist” unless the scale of spend or procurement requirements make it necessary. It’s a reminder that marketing influence often happens well before any formal ‘shortlist moment’ appears.

BUYER JOURNEY BY DEAL SIZE	LESS THAN \$100K	\$100K TO £300K	\$300K TO \$500K	\$500K TO \$700K	\$700K TO \$1M	MORE THAN \$1M
Point of 1st contact between buyers and sellers	68%	67%	72%	70%	71%	72%
Buyer initiates 1st contact	85%	83%	82%	73%	71%	78%
Purchase requirements set prior to 1st contact	89%	84%	83%	81%	79%	78%
Buyer contacts the winning vendor first	70%	71%	83%	81%	79%	78%
Buying cycle length (months)	7.9	9.6	13.4	16	17.4	12.7
Number of vendors considered	3.7	4.1	4.9	5.5	6.2	5.1
Buyers have prior experience with the	81%	83%	85%	89%	87%	86%
Number of buyer to seller interactions	13.2	14.5	19.1	23.5	27.1	20.5
Number of people on the buying team	7.9	9.7	11.8	14.9	16.2	13.6

Source: 6Sense



The funnel only recognises a buying process when I, as a marketer, notice you. But what were you doing for weeks or months before that?

- Ashley Faus, Author

Why the funnel no longer explains reality

None of this means the traditional funnel is dead. It remains a useful measurement framework. But it can be a misleading mental model for how influence works.

Author Ashley Faus offers a more accurate metaphor: “The funnel only recognises a buying process when I, as a marketer, notice you. But what were you doing for weeks or months before that?”

She describes the modern buyer journey as more like a playground than a pipeline. Buyers move in and out, explore multiple ideas at once, forget and remember, and are influenced by conversations and content firms never witness.

Robb Sturmeay, Group Marketing Director - Europe at NFP, an Aon Company, describes it even more starkly: “The buyer journey isn’t a funnel anymore... it’s more like a constellation... people move in and out of influence points all the time.”

“From the buyer’s point of view, that feels natural. From the marketer’s point of view, it’s uncomfortable, because so much of the important stuff happens out of sight.”

The implication is not that structure disappears, but that influence no longer progresses in neat stages. It accumulates through repeated exposure, relevance, and credibility, often long before firms believe the journey has begun.



By the time buyers are ready to engage, the field has usually narrowed significantly. Most buying groups, according to 6Sense, now evaluate **four to five** vendors, and those vendors are rarely discovered at the point of need.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 Buyers are forming opinions long before they engage
- 2 Early visibility shapes shortlist inclusion, not just awareness
- 3 Influence accumulates through familiarity, not staged progression
- 4 Much of the buyer journey will remain out of sight
- 5 Control is less important than presence

2 Trust, credibility and influence





Everyone is producing content. Very few are telling a story that actually earns attention or emotional connection.

- Jodie Evans, Global VP of Regional Marketing, HiBob

Trust, credibility and influence

If Section 1 explains where decisions are now formed, let's explore why certain firms earn influence while others struggle to be taken seriously, even when their credentials look similar on paper.

One common theme across our conversations is that trust is not a brand asset. It is a risk-management mechanism..

Trust is about reducing personal risk

In professional services, buyers are rarely choosing a product. They are choosing expertise, and by extension, choosing whose expertise they are willing to stand behind internally.

That sense of personal exposure changes how buyers evaluate firms. They are not simply comparing capabilities or pricing. They are asking themselves quieter, more personal questions: Would I feel safe recommending this firm to my board? Could I defend this decision if things went wrong? Does this firm feel like it understands the pressure I'm under?

That emotional weight is felt acutely on the buyer side. As Michelle Clark, Executive Director of People, Culture and Transformation at The Children's Society, put it: "You're making a call that affects people, budgets, and outcomes. There's a huge emotional component to it."

Nebel Crowhurst agrees. She says bringing in an external partner can feel like "an extension of your credibility in the business." That exposure means trust is being assessed long before formal evaluation begins. Early-stage signals, timeliness, responsiveness, clarity, quickly become proxies for judgement. If a firm is vague, slow, or slippery around detail, buyers don't see that as inefficiency; they read it as risk.

That sensitivity shows up particularly early in the relationship. Eugenio Pirri pointed to timelines as a powerful trust signal, noting that "they don't always understand the knock-on effects of not meeting timelines in the business. That's what really worries me." In this context, follow-through doesn't just feel like good service; it feels like risk reduction.

David Frost framed trust less as persuasion and more as partnership: "I don't want to be sold at... I want to have a partnership... something... that's going to work for both parties for the long term." That sentiment is mirrored on the firm side. As Robs Sturmeay has observed, "We're not trying to convince people to buy from us... we're trying to make them feel safe and confident in choosing us."

Alignment, too, plays a critical role. Virginia Stagni reinforced that trust depends on more than competence alone: "It's really important

that there is a common goal and moral compass. If that alignment isn't there, it becomes very difficult." In high-stakes decisions, credibility is as much about values and intent as it is about technical capability.

This is why familiarity matters so much in professional services buying. Not because buyers are conservative, but because familiarity reduces perceived risk. Trust becomes the shortcut buyers use when the stakes are high and the information is complex.

Credibility is recognized long before it is tested

One of the most persistent misconceptions in professional services marketing is that trust is built during the buying process. In reality, trust is usually recognized during the buying process, having been built much earlier.

As Sadie Baron observed earlier, trust is demonstrated over time. By the time buyers engage, they are often validating a sense of credibility that already exists, shaped by repeated exposure to ideas, people, and perspective, often without any direct interaction.

This helps explain why some firms feel like "safe hands" even before a conversation begins, while others struggle to gain traction despite strong credentials. Credibility is cumulative. It is not switched on when an opportunity appears.

The role of visible expertise

Expertise remains fundamental. But across our conversations, there was a clear distinction between having expertise and making expertise legible.

Jodie Evans, Global VP of Regional Marketing at HiBob, warned against mistaking output for impact: "Everyone is producing content. Very few

are telling a story that actually earns attention or emotional connection."

Rob Sturmeo echoed the same concern from a different angle: "There's a bit of theatre to it all... people are producing content just to show they're doing something, rather than producing content that genuinely adds value."

In crowded markets, expertise alone is rarely differentiating. What matters is how clearly that expertise is expressed and how consistently it shows up over time. Buyers are not looking for more information. They are looking for signals of understanding.

Rob put a sharper edge on the credibility test: "If you're going to be credible, you need to have a fact-based thought process... you need to be able to tell a story that people can trust."

Jodie went on to describe the real test of effective thought leadership: could someone describe your brand in a sentence that doesn't also apply to five other firms? That question cuts to the heart of credibility. Firms that are clear about what they stand for, and confident enough to express a point of view, are easier to trust. Ambiguity creates doubt.

The credibility gap: activity versus authority

Many firms believe they are investing heavily in credibility because they are active. They publish content regularly. They speak at events. They share.

Yet buyers often experience something very different. From their perspective, volume does not equal value.

Virginia Cook described this gap candidly: "You can pump out content, but until you actually apply it and customise it, you're not demonstrating trust." Buyers are adept at spotting content that exists to fill a calendar

rather than help them think. This is where credibility is quietly lost - not through incompetence, but through irrelevance.

Sadie Baron highlighted another, often overlooked, trust signal: restraint. "I'm a big fan of saying no. It builds trust internally and externally." Restraint communicates confidence. Marketers who are willing to challenge a brief with senior partners, narrow a scope, or decline an idea that isn't a good fit can feel more credible than those who say yes to everything.

Buyers recognise the same dynamic from the other side of the table. What undermines credibility fastest is not lack of capability, but lack of curiosity. As David Frost described it, providers who "never ask you a question... they just simply tell you what they do" make it "very hard... to have any traction with them." Without effort to understand context, activity feels generic, and authority never has a chance to form.

Thought leadership as decision support at the C-Suite

Much of the frustration around thought leadership in professional services comes from a misunderstanding of who it is really for.

Too often, content is judged by whether it generates leads, engagement, or visibility in public channels. But when you listen to how senior executives actually use insight, a different

picture emerges, one that has little to do with scrolling feeds.

Research by the FT found that at the C-suite level, thought leadership is a working tool. CEOs and executive teams operate in environments defined by uncertainty, risk, and accountability. Insight is valuable because it helps them think, frame, and explain. They are not consuming thought leadership casually; they are deploying it.

The most influential content at this level is shared internally, forwarded to leadership teams, referenced in board discussions, and used to support major investment cases. It earns its place by creating clarity. That is why C-suite audiences are so intolerant of promotional content. They value depth, judgement, and perspective, ideas that help them act with confidence.

That distinction is clearest when insight is genuinely useful. Fiona Ryland captured this expectation succinctly: "What I love is insight I didn't know, something I can actually use in a business case." At senior levels, thought leadership earns its place when it helps buyers justify decisions internally, not when it simply demonstrates that a firm has done something similar before.

Seen through this lens, the most effective thought leadership doesn't look like marketing at all. It feels like foresight.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 Trust functions as risk reduction, not brand sentiment
- 2 Credibility is recognised, not created, during buying
- 3 Clarity and judgement outperform volume and activity
- 4 Restraint can be a powerful trust signal
- 5 At the C-suite, insight earns its place by creating clarity and conviction

3 Findability before intent exists





Visibility plays a role, but it's less about being loud in the moment and more about being present consistently over time.

- Robs Sturmeay, Group Marketing Director - Europe at NFP, an Aon Company

Findability before intent exists

If trust explains why buyers feel safe choosing certain firms, findability explains how those firms come to mind in the first place.

For many professional services marketers, "being findable" is still shorthand for visibility at the point of demand: search rankings, campaign spikes, or moments when buyers raise their hands. But the reality described by both buyers and CMOs in this report is more subtle, and far more demanding.

Buyers are not waiting to be found when they are ready to buy. They are forming impressions long before that moment arrives.

Visibility doesn't start when buying stops

One of the most persistent misconceptions in professional services marketing is that visibility should mirror buying cycles.

When clients aren't buying, visibility drops.

When clients enter the market, visibility spikes.

It's logical. And it's wrong.

Buyers remember firms that have been present all along, not everywhere, but in the places that matter. As Leor Franks put it: "By the time people come to us, they're not really asking whether they should do something. They're checking

whether we're the right people to help them do it."

As Robs Sturmeay described it: "Visibility plays a role, but it's less about being loud in the moment and more about being present consistently over time."

This aligns closely with 6Sense research showing that 85% of buyers have largely defined their requirements before they contact firms, and 81% have already chosen a preferred vendor. Those preferences don't emerge during buying windows. They form earlier, in the quiet, untrackable moments when no one is actively selling.

Where early preference is shaped

When buyers talk about how they form early views, they rarely mention firm websites or gated assets first. Instead, they talk about people, conversations, and context.

Michelle Clark described the reality bluntly: "There's so much noise. You disengage very quickly. Especially on LinkedIn, it can be overwhelming." What cuts through, she explained, isn't persistence or volume, but relevance - the sense that someone understands the world you're operating in.

"Don't send me something that's going to cost a fortune when I work for a charity. In what world

do you think that's going to work?" That response isn't just about poor targeting. It's about credibility. Buyers expect firms to have done their homework long before a conversation begins. Irrelevant outreach doesn't just get ignored, it erodes trust.

Nebel Crowhurst reinforced this point from the buyer's side: "I can actually deal with the volume of emails... But it's when they don't do the homework."

She described being pitched services she would never buy because she worked for a company providing them already, adding: "If you even bothered to just take one minute to look at my profile... clearly I'm not going to need to buy your services." For her, this lack of attention "grinds my gears."

At senior levels, relevance is amplified by simple structural reality. "The more senior I got, the less I actually saw my own emails," Fiona Ryland noted. "Most of it got filtered before it ever reached me." In that context, volume-based outreach is not just ineffective, it can be invisible.

What survives filtering is relevance, clarity, and evidence that someone has genuinely understood the buyer's world.

Eugenio Pirri described the same frustration in simpler terms: "It would take less than two minutes to look at the website and see what we do. Not doing that really annoys me." For him, relevance is inseparable from credibility: "If you don't understand my business, you lose credibility immediately."

Early preference is shaped in places firms often underestimate:

- informal peer conversations
- internal discussions
- private sharing of content
- observations of how firms show up over time

This is influence without attribution, and it is far

more powerful than anything that can be forced at the point of demand.

The cost of being invisible between buying cycles

One of the more uncomfortable findings from our conversations is how quickly firms fall out of mind when they disappear between engagements or campaigns.

Sadie Baron noted a broader shift: "I've definitely recognised that loyalty in professional services is on the way down." In an environment where buyers are reassessing more regularly, absence is not neutral. When firms go quiet between buying cycles, they create space for others to become familiar instead.

Robb Sturme captured the practical implication "You've got to be there when they're not buying... because that's when they're forming their preferences."

This is why everyday visibility matters. Not the kind that overwhelms, but the kind that quietly reinforces relevance - the small signals that say: we're still here, we're still thinking about the challenges you face, and we still have something useful to say.

Findability in an AI-mediated world

This challenge becomes even more acute as search behaviour evolves.

Buyers are no longer relying solely on traditional search engines to explore problems and providers. Increasingly, they are asking AI tools to summarise markets, recommend approaches, and identify credible firms. As Virginia Cook put it, people are now "just pumping questions into Copilot and ChatGPT and saying, 'Who do you recommend?'"

That shift immediately raises a more



The more senior I got, the less I actually saw my own emails, most of it got filtered before it ever reached me.

- Fiona Ryland, HR Consultant and formerly Government Chief People Officer, UK Civil Service, and Chief Operating Officer, UCL

uncomfortable question for firms. If buyers are outsourcing early discovery to AI, then visibility is no longer just about what you publish, it's about where your thinking shows up. As Robs Sturmey noted: "People are using AI to do their research... so the question is: are you showing up in the sources that those tools draw from?"

In this environment, visibility takes on a different meaning. Buyers may never visit a firm's website. They may never click through to a piece of content. Instead, they encounter firms through summaries, syntheses, and mentions generated by AI systems pulling from multiple sources.

That makes the quality of underlying thinking even more important. As Ashley Faus observed: "AI makes it faster to create content. It doesn't make it faster to create the truth." AI does not invent credibility. It amplifies what already exists. Firms with clear positioning, consistent thinking, and visible expertise are more likely to be surfaced. Those without coherent signals are quietly filtered out.

From the buyer side, AI is increasingly used as a starting point rather than a decision-maker. As Nebel Crowhurst explained: "I don't think any of us can escape ChatGPT now." She uses it for a "quick snapshot of pros and cons" when comparing providers, while recognising you "take all of that with a pinch of salt." The real shift is efficiency: it helps her gather baseline insight faster, before she overlays that with "human intuition and gut instinct and... recommendations." AI is also used to generate

"specific questions... and prompts," which "makes those initial conversations a bit more meaningful."

How marketing feels to buyers

Perhaps the most revealing insights in our conversations came from buyers describing how professional services marketing actually feels from their side.

What comes through first is how quickly persistence turns into pressure. "I really don't like the relentless follow-up 'I'm going to keep going and keep going'," Michelle Clark explained: "When it turns passive-aggressive, it creates a different sort of energy, and I just don't like it." Behaviour intended to demonstrate commitment instead undermines trust. Buyers read it as a lack of understanding, or worse, a lack of respect.

That reaction is echoed elsewhere. In David Frost's inbox, repeated nudges framed as urgency land as something else entirely: "the number of emails I receive that say... 'for the last time'... I'm sure people are doing it under huge pressure... but it just doesn't work for me... it doesn't respect people's time."

What sellers experience as effort, buyers experience as friction.

Buyers are clear that effectiveness lies in focus, not scale.

As Fiona Ryland put it: "Crafting ten



A pitch slap is when... you've had a LinkedIn connection request... you accept it and instantaneously they'll be in my inbox... and they're selling straight away.

- Nebel Crowhurst, Fractional Chief People Officer

5 THINGS THAT FRUSTRATES YOUR BUYERS

1 No homework / poor relevance

When outreach makes it obvious you haven't looked at their role, sector, constraints or context, it doesn't just get ignored - it damages credibility. As Eugenio Pirri put it: "It would take less than two minutes to look at the website and see we already do this. Not doing that really annoys me."

2 Generic copy-paste messaging

Buyers can feel immediately when a message exists to hit activity targets rather than to help them. "Interchangeable" is a trust killer.

3 "Pitch slaps" (sell-first energy)

Connection accepted = instant sales message. The problem isn't selling; it's skipping any attempt at relevance or relationship.

4 Relentless, passive-aggressive follow-up

Persistence quickly tips into pressure. And pressure creates the wrong kind of energy - aversion, not interest.

5 Not respecting time

As David Frost put it, relentless outreach and cold calling "doesn't respect people's time" — and buyers disengage fast.

5 THINGS THAT ENGAGES YOUR BUYERS

1 Evidence-led insight that teaches them something

Practical thinking, data, and perspective that helps them frame the problem — not content that simply confirms what they already know.

2 Personalisation that feels genuinely considered

Not "Hi [First name]" - but "you've understood me, my role, and my world." As Nebel put it: sell to me as me. Or as Eugenio Pirri said, "Show me, you know me."

3 Curiosity over conversion

A low-pressure follow-up that asks what resonated, what's relevant, what's changing — rather than pushing for the next step.

4 Human signals of care

Small thoughtful gestures, well-timed notes, and genuine acknowledgement of their context stand out precisely because they're rare.

5 Clarity and responsiveness

Timely responses, clear parameters, and direct communication. Buyers read these as early proof of how you'll behave once money is involved.

well-researched, personalised approaches is far better than mail-shotting fifty thousand people.” Precision signals respect. It shows intent to engage rather than extract, a distinction buyers are acutely sensitive to.

At its most extreme, this behaviour has acquired a name. Nebel Crowhurst described what she calls a pitch slap: “A pitch slap is when... you’ve had a LinkedIn connection request... you accept it and instantaneously they’ll be in my inbox... and they’re selling straight away.” As she put it, “the minute you’ve accepted, they’re slapping you... here’s my sales pitch.” The problem isn’t selling, it’s skipping any attempt at relevance or relationship.

What cuts through instead is curiosity. Buyers consistently described responding to approaches that lower the pressure rather than increase it. The most successful for Nebel are the ones that, “say, ‘Let’s just have a chat.’ Not push, push, push, but actually just get to know you and what’s going on in your world.”

Robs Sturmeley summed up the tone that lands: “What works is when it feels conversational... when it feels like a human being talking to another human being.”

The clearest buyer instruction of all came down to personal relevance. “Sell to me as me.” Nebel described how certain firms stayed on her radar not by pitching, but by paying attention. When she started a new role, she didn’t receive an immediate sales message. Instead, she received

“a little handwritten note through the post... with a KitKat in it... just little things that make you go, well, that’s an interesting company, a bit different.” The point wasn’t the chocolate. It was the care.

Findability as a state, not a tactic

Taken together, these insights point to a different way of thinking about findability.

It is not something firms switch on when pipeline pressure rises. It is not a channel or a campaign. It is a state of readiness, the outcome of consistent presence, credible thinking, and human engagement over time.

Firms that are genuinely findable are:

- visible before buyers know they need them
- recognisable when buyers start to explore
- trusted enough to be shortlisted without persuasion

This kind of findability cannot be rushed. It is earned slowly, often invisibly, through repeated signals that say: we understand your world, we have perspective, and we will still be here when you’re ready.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 Findability begins before intent and often without attribution
- 2 Visibility will increasingly be mediated by AI systems
- 3 Inclusion in answers will matter more than ownership of traffic
- 4 Buyers may never visit your website
- 5 Everyday presence compounds faster than campaign spikes

4 Trust beyond the sale





The experience of working with a firm tells you far more than anything they said beforehand.

- Michelle Clark, Executive Director of People, Culture & Transformation, The Children's Society

Trust beyond the sale

Another everyday marketing assumption is that trust peaks at the point of conversion.

The contract is signed. The firm has been selected. The hard work, it's tempting to believe, is largely done.

In reality, the moment a buyer becomes a client is not the end of trust-building. It's the point at which trust becomes visible, fragile, and continuously assessed. Across our conversations, senior marketers and buyers alike described a growing truth: trust does not reset after a sale, but it can erode quickly if expectations and experience drift apart.

The myth of loyalty in professional services

For decades, professional services firms have relied on a belief in client loyalty, the idea that once a relationship is established, repeat work will naturally follow. That belief is becoming increasingly unreliable.

As Sadie Baron noted earlier, loyalty is on the way down. This isn't necessarily because firms are delivering poorer work. Rather, buyers are operating in environments of constant pressure, scrutiny, and choice. They reassess partners more frequently. They are more willing to test

alternatives. And they are less forgiving when the experience does not match the promise.

Trust, in this context, becomes less about historical relationships and more about ongoing relevance.

Trust is the loudest trust signal

From a buyer's perspective, the most important marketing a firm ever does happens after the sale, whether the firm intends it or not.

What clients experience once work begins quickly outweighs anything promised beforehand. "The experience of working with a firm tells you far more than anything they said beforehand," as Michelle Clark put it. Every interaction - responsiveness, context, judgement, even the confidence to challenge assumptions - either reinforces or undermines the trust that led to the appointment.

That evaluation, according to Robs Sturmeay, starts far earlier than many firms expect. In fact, the first few weeks often shape the future of the relationship. "Most companies decide what they're going to do next year, and how they're going to work with you, in the first twelve weeks after signing." The implication is stark: trust cannot be treated as a pre-sale concern only. The early delivery phase is where credibility is



Things can go wrong. That's human. What matters is communication and mutual respect.

- Eugenio Pirri, Business Partner EMEA, Telus Health and formerly Joint Chief Executive Officer and Chief People & Culture Officer, Dorchester Collection

either confirmed or quietly questioned.

Once work is underway, buyers are not expecting perfection, but they are watching behaviours. As Eugenio Pirri explained: "Things can go wrong. That's human. What matters is communication and mutual respect." In other words, delivery can be judged by how a firm shows up when pressure appears.

David Frost made the same point through the lens of outcomes: once you've recommended a provider, "what's at stake is a successful outcome... if it has good impact then everybody's happy."

Nebel Crowhurst shared a real example of expectation drift that wasn't about capability, but about clarity. She described once engaging a provider on the basis of an outcomes-based promise ("you don't pay unless outcomes are achieved"), but where "the parameters... were not as clear as they should have been up front." Over time, she said, it became "blurred" and "uncomfortable," creating disagreement around what felt "fair and right." The lesson is simple: trust can be undermined not just by delivery, but by ambiguity.

Why visibility still matters after conversion

It is easy to assume that visibility is only relevant to winning work. In reality, continued visibility plays a critical role in sustaining trust between engagements.

Clients continue to evaluate firms long after a project ends. They notice whether a firm continues to share relevant thinking, remains engaged with the issues they care about, and shows up with perspective rather than promotion.

When firms go quiet post-delivery, they risk becoming invisible, even to clients they have already worked with. As Sadie Baron observed: "You can't assume that because someone's worked with you before, they'll automatically come back."

Trust is reinforced through consistency, not perfection

A recurring theme in this report has been the importance of consistency, not flawless execution.

Virginia Cook described how trust is strengthened when firms apply their thinking in ways that feel tailored rather than templated: "You can have all the content in the world, but until you actually apply it and customise it, that's when trust really shows up."

Consistency here does not mean repetition. It means alignment, between what a firm says, what it does, and how it behaves over time. Buyers are quick to spot when a firm's external positioning is disconnected from its internal reality.



You can have all the content in the world, but until you actually apply it and customise it, that's when trust really shows up.

- Virginia Cook, Chief Marketing Officer, Kreston Global

Feedback as a trust accelerator

Several interviewees highlighted the role of feedback, not just in improving service, but in reinforcing trust.

Leor Franks described how proactively seeking honest feedback strengthens relationships: "The most instructive thing we do is go and ask clients tough questions and get honest answers."

Inviting feedback signals confidence. It shows clients that a firm is secure enough to listen, adapt, and improve.



The most instructive thing we do is go and ask clients tough questions and get honest answers.

Leor Franks, Chief Commercial Officer,
Kingsley Napley

According to 6Sense's B2B Buyer Experience report, **84 percent of buyers** have worked with the winning vendor previously.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 Trust continues to be evaluated after conversion
- 2 Post-sale behaviour reinforces or undermines belief
- 3 Silence between engagements creates vulnerability
- 4 Consistency matters more than perfection
- 5 Relationships must be renewed, not assumed

5 Looking ahead to tomorrow's professional services buyer





AI is making buyers appear more savvy because it gives them better questions to ask.

- Leor Franks, Chief Commercial Officer, Kingsley Napley

Looking ahead to tomorrow's professional services buyer

If the previous sections describe how buying has changed, this final section looks at what those changes are beginning to solidify into, and what they signal over the coming years.

Across interviews, one thing was clear: the future buyer is not a fundamentally different species. They won't abandon trust, relationships, or expertise. But they will have less tolerance for friction, noise, and ambiguity - and higher expectations of how firms show up in their world.

The future buyer is more informed - and more impatient

Buyers will expect to move faster, with less tolerance for unnecessary steps.

Virginia Cook has already observed this particularly in mid-market environments: "People are in more of a hurry to get stuff done. They've often already formed an opinion before they speak to you."

That impatience is often driven by experience rather than entitlement. "I've got massively less patient," Fiona Ryland admitted. "My biggest frustration is feeling that it's just cookie

cutter." As buyers encounter more templated approaches and automated outreach, their tolerance for anything that feels generic continues to shrink.

Leor Franks described how technology is compressing the journey: "AI is making buyers appear more savvy because it gives them better questions to ask."

Nebel brought this to life: she uses AI as a practical accelerator, to compare providers ("a quick snapshot of pros and cons") and to generate "good questions and prompts."

The result, she said, is that early conversations become "more meaningful" because buyers arrive with sharper questions grounded in their real context.

The implication for firms is not that buyers expect instant answers, but that they expect clarity sooner. Vague positioning, generic messaging, or complex routes to information increasingly feel like friction rather than sophistication.

Scepticism is rising - and trust must be earned harder

Alongside impatience sits a deeper scepticism.



Buyers are more values-based and more price-driven at the same time. That tension isn't going away.

- Sadie Baron, Interim Chief Marketing Officer, TLT LLP; Former CMO, Reed Smith

Sadie Baron reflected on this growing scrutiny: "Buyers are more values-based and more price-driven at the same time. That tension isn't going away." Buyers want alignment and meaning, but they also expect commercial realism. They value thought leadership, but dismiss anything that feels thin or opportunistic.

Kate Mackie described the trust tension created by AI and automation: people inadvertently trust technology, and AI can hallucinate, which makes human judgement even more important. Buyers need anchors: voices, firms, and perspectives grounded in real experience rather than synthetic confidence.

AI will not replace judgement - but it will reshape discovery

Looking ahead, AI will continue to change how buyers explore ideas, evaluate approaches, and shortlist firms. But interviews suggest its role is often misunderstood.

AI is not replacing decision-making. It is reshaping how buyers arrive at decisions.

Eugenio Pirri described AI's role as an enabler rather than a replacement: "AI doesn't always give you the right answer, but it gives you enough of a foundation to ask better questions." Used well, it becomes part of the buyer's working toolkit: "It becomes one of your partners. I'll let AI investigate alongside my team, but I still want to pick up the phone myself."

This shift is already changing the mechanics of

early discovery. As Virginia Cook observed: "The purchase process and the relationship process will become very automated." That automation affects how buyers scan markets, compare options, and narrow choices long before any direct interaction takes place.

The risk for firms is assuming that more content automatically leads to more visibility. As Ashley Faus warned: "AI accelerates output, not understanding." Firms that lack clear thinking will simply produce more noise more efficiently. Those with coherent perspectives, by contrast, are more likely to see their signals amplified rather than diluted.

Relationships will matter more - but look different

Despite all the talk of automation, our conversations repeatedly returned to the importance of relationships, not transactional relationships, but relational credibility built over time.

Michelle Clark described what effective engagement feels like from the buyer's side: "The ones that work best feel like conversations. Not pressure. Not pursuit. Just people trying to understand what's going on in your world." The future buyer will still value relationships, but they will expect those relationships to be earned through relevance and curiosity, not persistence. Over-automation and over-nurturing risk undermining exactly the trust firms are trying to build.



AI doesn't always give you the right answer, but it gives you enough of a foundation to ask better questions.

- Eugenio Pirri, Business Partner EMEA, Telus Health and formerly Joint Chief Executive Officer and Chief People & Culture Officer, Dorchester Collection

The shift from visibility to conviction

Perhaps the most important change ahead is the shift from visibility as awareness to visibility as conviction. Buyers are no longer impressed by firms that simply just show up frequently.

They are influenced by firms that help them think more clearly, explain complexity internally, and move forward with confidence, especially at senior levels, where thought leadership earns its place by creating clarity, not clicks.



The ones that work best feel like conversations. Not pressure. Not pursuit. Just people trying to understand what's going on in your world.

Michelle Ckark, Executive Director of People, Culture & Transformation, The Children's Society

83 percent of CEOs report they use thought leadership to help share internal conversations or strategic direction according to research by FT Longitude.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 Buyers will expect clarity earlier and tolerate less friction
- 2 AI will accelerate discovery but amplify credibility gaps
- 3 Human judgement will become a key differentiator
- 4 Relevance will outweigh reach
- 5 Long-term trust will outperform short-term attention

6 The new rules of visibility





Are we findable, credible, and useful enough - long before buyers tell us they're ready?

The new rules of visibility

If there is one unifying insight that runs through every interview, data point, and buyer perspective in this report, it is this: the most important decisions in professional services are shaped long before firms think buying has begun.

Buyers are quietly observing, comparing, and forming opinions, often for months, before any formal signal appears. By the time they reach out, they are rarely starting a process. They are confirming one.

This fundamentally changes how visibility works. Visibility is no longer episodic or campaign-led; it is cumulative. Buyers remember firms that have been present consistently, not aggressively, whose thinking feels familiar, and whose judgement shows up over time. This kind of

visibility is not about being everywhere. It is about being recognisable, long before anyone fills in a form or requests a meeting.

Trust, meanwhile, is rarely built at the point of sale. It is recognised there. Buyers arrive with an instinctive sense of which firms feel credible, safe, and aligned - a judgement shaped by repeated exposure, relevance, and human signals. And in an AI-mediated world, findability increasingly means being part of the answer, not owning the click.

The final question, then, is no longer: how do we generate more leads?

It is: are we findable, credible, and useful enough - long before buyers tell us they're ready?

IN SUMMARY: FIVE PRIORITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MARKETERS

1

Build visibility before demand exists - Design presence for the long periods when clients aren't buying - because that's when preference is formed.

2

Make credibility easy to recognise - Clarity, consistency, and judgement matter more than volume. Buyers trust firms whose thinking they can quickly grasp and defend internally.

3

Treat thought leadership as decision support - The most valuable content helps senior leaders explain complexity and make confident decisions - not just generate engagement.

4

Accept that discovery is now AI-mediated - Optimise for inclusion in answers, not just clicks. Your thinking must be both machine-legible and human-credible.

5

Reinforce trust after the sale - Post-conversion behaviour - delivery, communication, and continued relevance - now does more to shape future opportunity than any campaign.

With thanks...

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- Leor Franks - Chief Commercial Officer, **Kingsley Napley**
- Robs Sturmeay - Group Marketing Director - Europe, **NFP (an Aon Company)**
- Sadie Baron - Interim Chief Marketing Officer, **TLT LLP**; Former CMO, **Reed Smith**
- Virginia Stagni - Chief Marketing Officer, **The Adecco Group (Italy)**
- Virginia Cook - Chief Marketing Officer, **Kreston Global**

Buyers:

- David Frost - Group People & Organisational Development Director, **Dole Plc**
- Eugenio Pirri - Business Partner EMEA, **Telus Health** and formerly Joint Chief Executive Officer and Chief People & Culture Officer, **Dorchester Collection**
- Fiona Ryland - HR Consultant and formerly Government Chief People Officer, **UK Civil Service** and Chief Operating Officer at **UCL**
- Michelle Clark - Executive Director of People, Culture & Transformation, **The Children's Society**
- Nebel Crowhurst - Fractional Chief People Officer

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Let's talk...

If you'd like a more detailed chat about any of the focus areas we've shared in this report, just get in touch. We'd love to hear from you!

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