

# A Step-By-Step Guide To Finding The **Right** Marketing Firm for Managed Service Providers (MSPs)

*Critical Questions to Get You Started*



# Introduction

Marketing for managed IT services can be a challenge. Many firms haven't clearly articulated their value proposition, which can create confusion for buyers. Marketing and sales alignment is crucial, because the buying cycle tends to be long and complex with managed services often purchased by "committees" of people.

But buyers are people too, and most purchases are driven, at least in part, by emotions. How do you engage on an emotional level with buyers, especially when their preferred customer journey is often devoid of salesperson contact until late in the cycle? And how do you build and sustain trust in your brand, a table-stakes requirement for purchase consideration?

**The flip side of these many obstacles is the inherent opportunities it can afford for managed IT services companies who get marketing right.** Success in today's highly competitive services space takes a paradigm shift – from a services-centric marketing and sales scheme to a comprehensive, cross-channel, customer-centric marketing ecosystem, one that encompasses a whole slew of strategies, tools and skill sets.

To tackle these challenges, you could keep your marketing in-house and build out the capabilities you need yourself. The risk is you can wind up spending the bulk of your budget on payroll and other overhead expenses. And there's no guarantee you'll have the evolving skill sets you need to execute your strategy.

By outsourcing some or all of your marketing to an outside marketing firm, you can easily scale your marketing efforts, and have instant access to an experienced marketing team. Above all, they need to have deep expertise in both marketing AND B2B technology and services (including often cybersecurity), markets and customer personas.



*Before shopping for a marketing firm, it's important to ask **3 critical questions** about your current marketing programs to identify the gaps. Doing so will help you determine what kind of agency is the right fit.*

# Are You Targeting the Right Audience?

The first step when determining how to market your unique offer is to ensure that you're targeting the right audience. This starts with asking questions such as:



What are the **DEMOGRAPHIC** characteristics of companies in our target market?



How does the **PRICING MODEL** of our solution impact the types of companies and roles we should be targeting?



Who is the **DECISION MAKER** and is this the same person who is likely to bring us into the company (our champion or an end-user)?



Who are our direct and adjacent **COMPETITORS** and are there specific markets or customer profiles where our solution can really outshine them?



Who are the **INFLUENCERS** involved in a purchase decision?

To some degree, targeting is generally the same for any industry. While most B2B marketers realize they want to communicate with the decision makers and influencers, this is especially important in technology services since prospect companies have varying needsets. In addition, small and medium size businesses (SMBs) will have different needs and structures than larger enterprises, so it's important to approach these audiences differently.

*When we walk our clients through these types of questions, we're often aiming to hone in on a narrower slice of the market than they typically set out to target. Without access to a substantial marketing and sales budget, starting with a tighter initial focus often yields greater results.*



## Targeting Personas

Most managed IT services firms are targeting small/medium businesses. The key is to maximize total addressable market and manage the sales cycle differences. The biggest issue with tech-focused marketing is it often involves a buying committee or complex internal stakeholder nuances, so really understanding exactly how a solution moves through the sales funnel and who is weighing in on the decision is imperative. When you have tech that is inter-departmental, it's even more difficult. Even if you are ultimately selling to the senior leadership, they still must work the decision internally (and you have a serious role as a vendor to make that part easy for them.)

We've had many MSP clients that needed to target senior leaders, but in fact had positioned their messaging and marketing to a more technical, mid-level person. While still an important part of the decision making, trying to sell upstream after the fact was a grind.

Understandably, this has fueled the rise of marketing and sales programs like account-based marketing (ABM). This approach is designed to reach and influence multiple members of the buying committee in the right way with the right messages.

*Changes in how buying decision are made ramped up in the past 12 months. In fact, **19% of companies formed buying committees for the first time, alongside the 49% of respondents who already utilized them in the past.***

[DEMAND GEN REPORT](#)



# Are You Reaching Your Targets?

**Once you have established your target audience, you need to determine how these buyers make decisions. We frequently use a combination of techniques to identify the target audience and develop strategies to reach them. This analysis typically includes looking at demographics, psychographics, titles, customer interviews and competitive analysis. And it's a qualitative AND quantitative discipline.**

If the budget is available, you can define different personas (profiles of the average target's information and preferences) and target your marketing to each persona. This can be very helpful in defining programs to reach your target contacts.

Adjusting the marketing outreach based on the needs and behaviors of each persona can make or break the success of a campaign. For example, a cybersecurity services client of ours wanted to target security analysts who were generally hyper-focused on the Security Operations Center all day. Had we utilized a 'spray and pray' approach and emailed them during the workday, our program would likely have failed. Instead, we developed highly visual, shorter form thought leadership content that we disseminated via email and LinkedIn during off-work hours, much to our client's success.



The good news is social media posts are one of the least expensive ways for companies to reach prospects and begin a conversation. In our blog, [Nine Reasons for B2B SME CEOs to Invest in Their Social Media Presence](#), we review why and how leaders should use social media posts to establish thought leadership and start communicating with prospects.

The challenge is that unless you have a strong social media following already, expanding your followers through hashtags takes time. One way to increase your audience and awareness quickly is by advertising on social media.

Several social media sites offer fairly granular prospect targeting options for a broad scale approach. Some sites enable you to specify one target company or partner and tailor the message accordingly. The latter option can be very beneficial for technology services sales since there are multiple decision makers and a longer sales cycle. By consistently offering varied thought leadership marketing content, you can build or sustain awareness with a high-value prospect.

For companies more focused on obtaining new sales conversations, we've seen success with highly targeted and personalized email nurture campaigns. Tight targeting, differentiated messaging and thought leadership are key. For companies who attend virtual or in-person events, we recommend having a multi-channel communications plan in place to maximize this investment. Events can have varying degrees of success, and we often advise our clients on how to maximize attendance at a show instead of spending budget on costly sponsorships.

Finally, don't overlook how to use those valuable MDF Funds from your tech partners! We've designed many unique programs for our MSP clients who didn't realize how to fully leverage these funds to their advantage. Many MDF programs also reimburse the agency fees to get the programs out the door!



# Is Your Message Resonating With Your Targets?

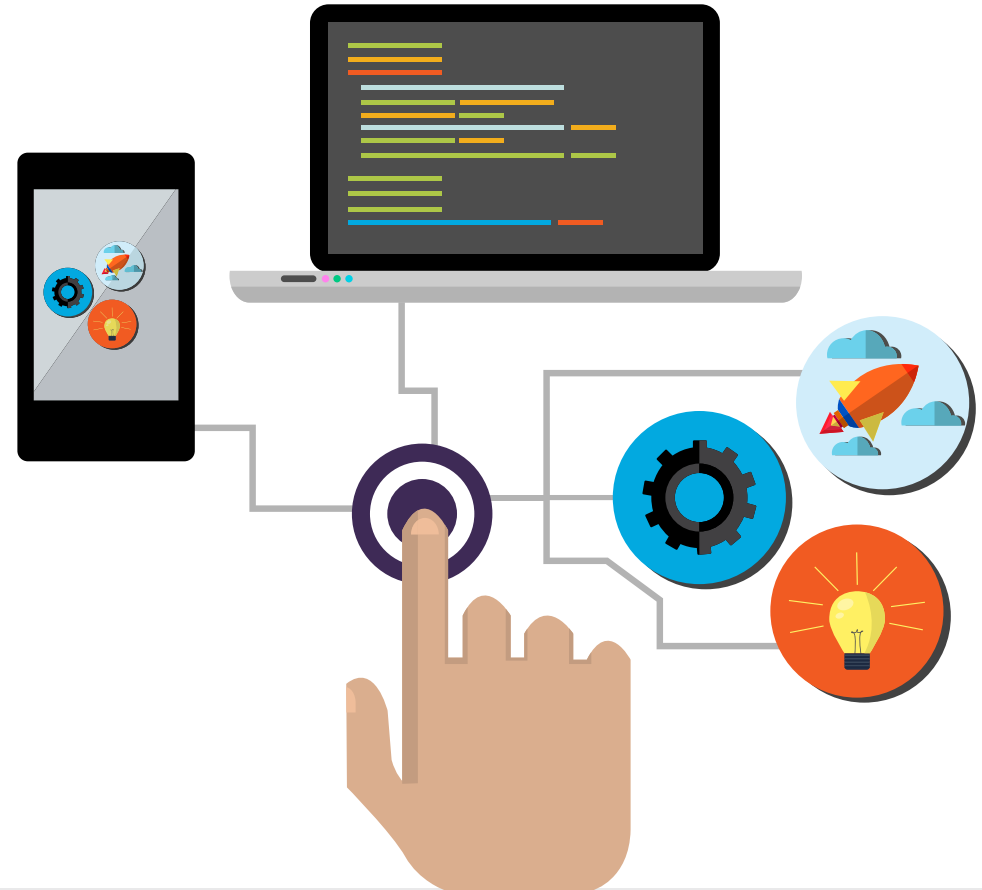
**Messaging is tricky in marketing for managed services. There is the constant allure of diving right into the services ‘features’ instead of speaking to the audience about the pain point or gap you are filling first.**

For some advanced technology services that may be disruptive or a new ‘category’, messaging becomes even more complex since there is an education hurdle first. There is always a need to create succinct messaging for both a technical and a business audience.

To ensure the messaging resonates, time should be spent truly understanding the customer and buyer and what resonates with them – learn their buying behavior, cycle and process. The messaging should feed all the content that is internal and external. Most importantly, back up your promise with external proof points and customer viewpoints.

*Review sites like G2 and Trust Radius have become to B2B tech buyers what Yelp is to consumers: a required step before purchase. In response, B2B vendor’s own promises are decreasing as a significant decision driver.*

FORRESTER





When thinking about a holistic thought leadership program, it's also important to consider the wealth of external information sources that can help deliver valuable trend data to prospects as a means of nurturing your target audience. Analysts like Forrester or Gartner (or more specialized vertical analysts), respected external parties like the World Economic Forum, HBR, or specialized influencers around specific audiences or verticals can round out and support your messaging and solution.



*For example, we worked with a client on a successful program to target CIOs using peer-generated content. Rather than only writing whitepapers and blogs from the company's internal vantage point, we built a program to enable their existing clients to talk about the results they achieved from the solution.*

*For more information on how marketing can support a CEO beyond lead generation, read our eBook, [B2B Tech Marketing & the Role of the CEO: Getting the Most Out of Your Marketing.](#)*

## 13 Things to Look for in a Marketing Partner for your Managed Services Firm

**You've decided you need marketing support. Now how do you find the right marketing firm? Maybe you have existing staff or consultants who support your efforts—how do they fit into the picture?**

What we've come to learn is that some MSPs are hesitant to hire a marketing firm. Some have been burned by agencies or by the wrong in-house hires, while others just don't see how an outside agency can possibly understand the complexity of their solution, audience, and industry. We beg to differ—the incredible results our tech services clients have experienced prove there is more to the story.

*For more on how to find the right mix of outsourced versus in-house marketing resources, check out our eBook:*



No matter what team structure you decide to use, you'll need a marketing services firm that has deep experience in technology and understands the unique challenges of your particular niche of the industry. On top of that, you want a firm that can set you up for success in the short term and drive long term, predictable growth. Here are some questions to ask that can help you make that decision:



**#1: Are they  
FULL-SERVICE?**

You'll want a marketing services firm that has full service capabilities, meaning that they cover all aspects of marketing, not just specific areas. If not, they will have a bias towards whatever area they specialize in (e.g. an SEO firm will push for SEO and a PR firm will push for PR) rather than what will drive growth for your business. Just because they are full service doesn't mean you'll need everything they offer. However, holistic programs deliver better results and yield a stronger brand image than many separate companies with separate programs that don't always align. And managing one firm vs. many takes the burden off of you!



**#2: Are they  
FLEXIBLE?**

Marketing, particularly in the technology space, is both an art and a science. There are proven techniques and best practices, but there is not one definitive solution to the challenges you are experiencing. Find a marketing services firm that is willing to consider multiple strategies and creative approaches. Also, you may have a specific deadline in mind that is dictated by a tradeshow or event, an important sales meeting, or business objectives. Ensure that the company is flexible enough to provide their services in the areas you need for your desired timeframes.



**#3: Are they  
CONSULTATIVE IN  
THEIR APPROACH?**

Choose a partner that considers your unique company and doesn't treat all of its customers the same. Do you feel they understand your needs, style, and goals or are they recommending pre-packaged strategies? Even if you only need help in certain areas, your marketing partner should be concerned with your business as a whole.



#### **#4: Can they EXECUTE THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS?**

Perhaps the most important criteria when choosing a marketing firm is a demonstrated ability to bring a marketing strategy to life with stellar execution. Every agency will say they can do this. Look for those with proven results. The tools and resources an agency has at its disposal will help you understand how they plan to help you meet your goals.



#### **#5: Do they HAVE THE RIGHT EXPERIENCE?**

Does the marketing services firm have experience in your industry, programs, audience, and tools, and can they provide proven examples? Also consider the experience of the team that will work on your account—will they be mostly junior staff or senior professionals? Having a team with years of experience successfully running departments and campaigns will guide not only your programs, but the strategic direction of your business in the most beneficial directions.



#### **#6: How do they ALIGN WITH SALES?**

It's important for marketing and sales to be in lockstep. Ask your potential partner how their recommended marketing strategies integrate with sales. What sales enablement tools and strategies do they advise? Incorporating feedback from sales and prospects on materials and program effectiveness is an important step for any marketing effort.



## #7: How will you TRACK THE SUCCESS of your programs?

Providing visibility into campaign performance is a great way to build trust and buy-in with the rest of the organization. Ask about specific tools and strategies a prospective partner will use to optimize existing systems for better analytics and what you should expect to see in terms of campaign performance metrics.



## #8: Is pricing STRAIGHTFORWARD?

There are many pricing models for marketing firms — retainers, project-based, hourly rates, and more. No matter the model, ensure your future partner's approach is clear to you. Some organizations have different fees for quick turnarounds or premium services. Make sure you understand what services are included and whether there is any fine print to be aware of before you commit.



## #9: Are they CREATIVE?

Having the right expertise, vision and tools can only go so far if agencies don't have creativity as well. Look for examples of their creativity, particularly when it comes to problem solving. You'll want demonstrated proof that they have helped clients in the managed services sector overcome their unique challenges to achieve their goals.



## #10: What will your EXPERIENCE AS A CUSTOMER LOOK LIKE?

This question comes down to whether the company will value your business. Will your account be given proper attention or will you be one of many? Also (and this is important), do you get the sense that you will enjoy working with them? Lastly, ensure that the partner has the tools in place to foster an easy working relationship—from file management and communications to billing and payment.



### #11: Have they set **REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS?**

The old adage “if it seems too good to be true, it probably is” rings true in the business world. Be cautious of marketing services firms that promise immediate, aggressive results. Some programs deliver numbers that look good on paper but don’t result in qualified prospects or business impact. You are looking for results but also building a brand and reputation—never sacrifice one for the other.



### #12: What is their **CLIENT RETENTION RATE?**

While some partnerships may be intended to be short-term, retention rate is a key indication of how well the agency is meeting client needs. Marketing partners that fit well with organizations and deliver results will have long relationships with the majority of their clients.



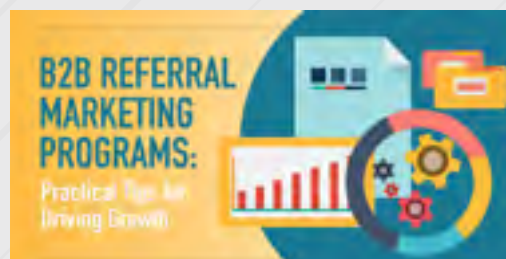
### #13: Are their clients **DELIGHTED?**

Don’t just ask for customer names who are happy with their experience, ask for references if you still aren’t sure you want to engage. These conversations will give you direct insight into what it’s like to work with them, as well as tenure. A great question to ask during reference conversations is how the firm has reacted to changes in the business—from budget to strategic direction. Find a partner who can pivot with the changing needs of your firm.

# Wrapping it up

**The decision to expand your marketing efforts is a critical investment in your company's growth. Many MSPs wish they had made the investment sooner as they begin to experience the vast benefits for their business.**

We hope this eBook is a helpful guide for you as you consider building or augmenting your marketing team. If you'd like more guidance on optimizing your marketing efforts, check out the following three related pieces:



**Interested in hearing more about Magnetude's marketing capabilities?**

**Contact us.**



Magnetude is a B2B marketing firm that pioneered the fractional marketing approach for small to medium tech-related businesses. The firm offers a wide range of strategic and execution-focused marketing services to seamlessly dovetail into client growth goals. The company specializes in growth strategy consulting and fractional marketing department services including marketing strategy, messaging, branding, websites, content development, digital marketing, demand generation, sales and channel enablement, and brand visibility.

Magnetude services clients across the globe and brings specialized expertise in areas including cybersecurity, big data/AI, SaaS products, B2B professional services, and emerging and established technology related products and services.

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