A FIELD GUIDE FOR B2B MARKETING LEADERS

First Contact

Why every company in your category sounds the same, and the one position none of them took.

THREE THINGS A COMPANY CAN SAY FIRST

01 ~~The Shortcut~~ TAKEN

02 ~~The Positive Future~~ TAKEN

03 The Negative Present OPEN

DEAN WAYE

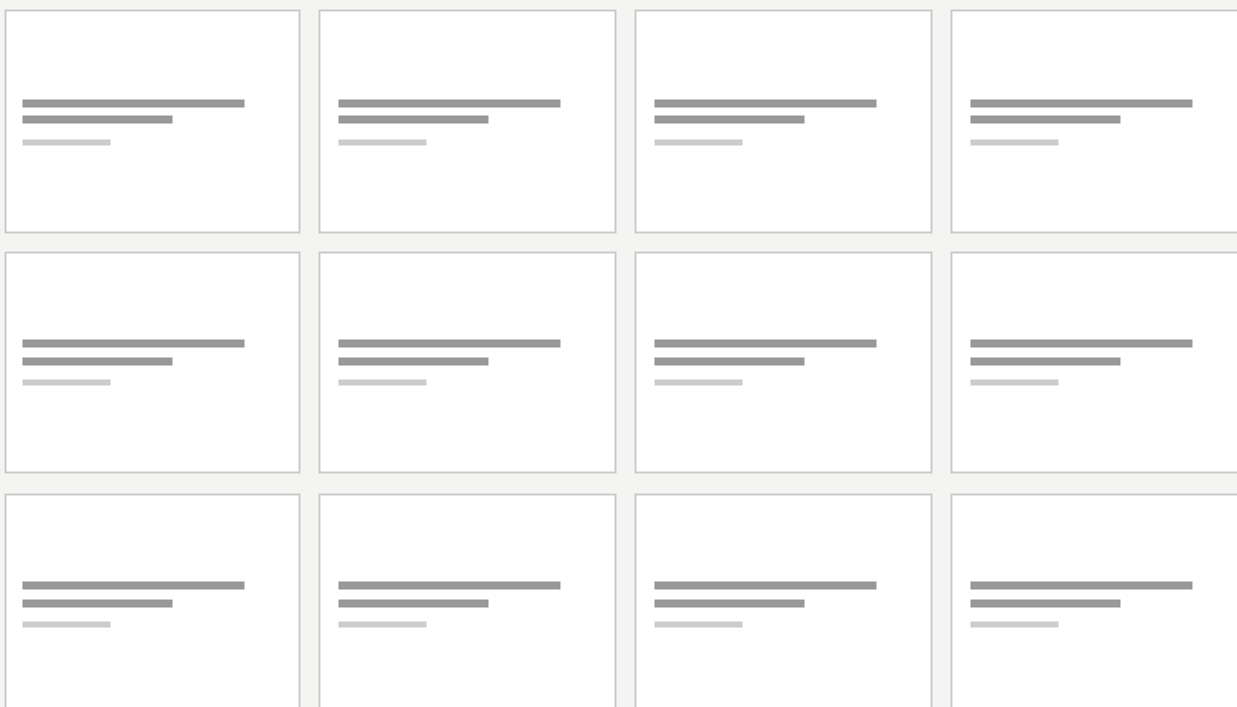
CONTENTS

Before you start

Open twelve homepages

Open your competitors' homepages. Not two or three. Twelve.

Read only the top of each one — the headline and the sentence under it. Give each one four seconds, which is more than a buyer gives it.



TWELVE COMPANIES. ONE CATEGORY. NOTHING HERE IS A SIMPLIFICATION.

By the sixth you'll stop being able to tell them apart. By the ninth you'll have to check the logo to remember whose page you're on. Somewhere around the eleventh you'll find one that's slightly better than the rest and you won't be able to say why.

That's the problem. You just watched it happen in under a minute.

This book is about why it happens to companies with good marketers and real budgets, what the pattern is underneath it, and the one position almost everyone in your category has left standing empty.

It isn't a writing book. There's nothing in here about headlines or verbs. Everything in it is a decision you make and hand to somebody else.

PART ONE

What every company says

One

The three positions

Underneath every first contact your company makes — the homepage, the ad, the trade show booth, the cold email, the voicemail, the one-pager your rep leaves behind — there is one sentence.

> *I understand your negative present and can shortcut you to your positive future.*

You would never say it out loud. Say it to a buyer and they'd back away. But it's the structure under all of it, and it has been for as long as anyone has sold anything to anyone.

Look at what's inside it. Three parts.

There's a **negative present** — the situation the buyer is in. If the present weren't negative they wouldn't be looking. There's nothing to solve.

There's a **positive future** — where they'd rather be.

And there's a **shortcut** — you. The mechanism, the bridge, the specific way you move them from one to the other faster or more reliably than the alternatives.

Three parts. Which means three possible ways to open.

NEGATIVE PRESENT	*We understand the situation you're in.*
THE SHORTCUT	*We're the way out of it.*
POSITIVE FUTURE	*Here's where you could be instead.*

Every first contact in B2B leads with one of these three. Not some. All of them. Once you can see it you can't stop seeing it, and you'll find yourself sorting billboards at the airport.

Now go back to the twelve homepages.

Most of them led with the Shortcut. *This is what we do. This is what we sell. Here's the platform, the process, the network, the team.* A few led with the Positive Future. *Imagine a workforce that. Reimagine how you.* You'll recognize both immediately.

Count how many led with the first one.

In most B2B categories the answer is zero. Sometimes one company tried and didn't land it. That's the finding this book is built on, and the rest of it is about why.

Two

Two of them are free

The three positions don't cost the same.

You can write the Shortcut without knowing anything about the buyer. *We're your partner in enterprise talent acquisition.* Nobody had to research anything. Nobody had to leave the building. That sentence could be written by someone who has never spoken to a customer, and often is.

You can write the Positive Future without knowing anything either. *A workforce built for what's next*. Also free. Also requires nothing.

The Negative Present is the only one that costs something. To lead with the buyer's situation you have to know their situation — specifically, in their words, with enough precision that they recognize themselves in it. That means research. It means talking to people who didn't buy from you and asking uncomfortable questions. It means someone senior spending real hours on something that doesn't ship.

That asymmetry is the entire explanation for what you saw on the twelve homepages. The category is stacked on the two positions that are free and empty on the one that isn't. This isn't a failure of taste. It's a cost curve, and it's producing exactly what you'd predict.

It's also why the position stays open. Every quarter, at every company in your category, somebody looks at the empty position, understands it's the strongest one, prices out what it takes to occupy it, and does something else instead.

A note on the machines

People ask whether AI changes this. It sharpens it.

Large language models are excellent at the Shortcut. That's a summarization problem and they're better at it than most people. They're roughly as good as humans at the Positive Future, which is to say not very — both produce the same shimmering nonsense about reimagined workforces.

They cannot do the Negative Present. Not because the writing is hard, but because the writing isn't the hard part. The hard part is knowing something true and specific about a particular buyer in a particular market this year, and that information doesn't exist in the training data. It exists in a phone call somebody hasn't made yet.

So the cheap positions got cheaper. The expensive one didn't move. If you were looking for a place to put a durable advantage, that gap is the most obvious one available to you right now.

Three

Who's actually reading

Everything above assumes a reader. Let's be honest about who that is, because most B2B messaging is written for someone who doesn't exist.

The imaginary reader is a rational actor. They evaluate options against criteria, weigh tradeoffs, and select the optimum. They read your page carefully. They compare your feature grid to two competitors' feature grids. They arrive at a conclusion.

> *The actual reader is a tired person in the most distracted hour of the busiest day of a bad quarter.*

They are worried about layoffs. They are worried about money — theirs, not yours. They have too many tasks and not enough time, and the tasks aren't distributed fairly; a small fraction of the people in their building are doing most of the work, and they know which group they're in. They have a family situation competing for the same hours. They are somewhere between annoyed and afraid most of the time, and none of it is visible in the job title you're writing to.

They are a hybrid of rational and irrational motivations. Treating them as purely rational is the irrational choice.

The mirror rule

The fastest way to check any piece of first contact you're about to ship: your prospects are exactly as busy and exactly as skeptical as you are. You don't reply to cold emails. You don't watch the forty-minute demo. You don't read past the headline unless something in it stops you.

There is no version of your buyer that behaves better than you do. If the plan requires them to, the plan is wrong.

And they're becoming consumers

Today's business buyer is not like today's consumer buyer. But they're a lot like last year's consumer buyer. And next year they'll behave like this year's consumer buyer.

They watch video at work now. They used to listen to music. They've made their office hours resemble their home-office hours, with the same comforts and the same tolerance for interruption. They're older, on average, every year. Every behavior that showed up in consumer media a year ago is arriving in their working day now.

Most B2B marketing treats consumer behavior as irrelevant — a different species, different rules. It isn't a different species. It's the same one on a delay. Which makes consumer behavior something more useful than a distraction. It's a forecast, and it's free, and almost nobody in your category is reading it.

PART TWO

Why this happens to good teams

Four

Nobody argued for weak language

Every generic sentence you've ever read was produced by intelligent people acting reasonably.

Someone writes a sharp line. It says something specific and slightly risky. Then it goes around the building.

Sales says it excludes a segment they're actively selling into. That's true. Legal says it's a claim you'd have to substantiate. Also true. The head of the second business unit points out that it describes the first business unit's customers and not theirs, and they'd like to be represented. Fair. Product notes that the roadmap makes that language inaccurate by Q3. Correct.

Each of those objections is legitimate. Each one removes one specific edge. Nobody in the room ever argued for weak language — they argued for accuracy, for fairness across business units, for not overclaiming, for legal safety. Weak language is simply what those arguments produce when you add them together.

Internal consensus is the enemy. Not internal alignment, which you need. Consensus, which is the practice of continuing to sand a message until nobody objects to it. The endpoint of that process is always the same sentence, and it's the sentence on the twelve homepages.

When a company sounds generic, the assumption is that the marketing team lacks skill or the agency was mediocre. Usually neither. The team wrote something good and the organization metabolized it.

Which explains something that otherwise looks like bad luck: rewrites don't hold. A company spends two quarters and a lot of money on a repositioning, launches something genuinely better, and eighteen months later sounds exactly like it did before. The process that produced the first generic sentence is still running. It will produce another one.

You cannot fix this from inside by writing better. The writing was never the problem. What breaks a consensus is an outside claim with evidence attached — something that makes the sharp version the safe choice and the sanded version the risky one. Absent that, the room wins, because the room always wins.

Five

The part with no deadline

There's a second reason, and it's arithmetic rather than politics.

Ask a marketing team why they didn't research the buyer before rewriting the site and you'll get an embarrassed answer about intentions. The real answer is cleaner than that: the production work alone barely fits the time available.

> *The homepage has a launch date. The research has an intention.*

The campaign has a date. The deck has a date, because there's a QBR. So when the quarter compresses — and it always compresses — the part that gets cut is the only part that isn't a deliverable. Not because anyone decided research doesn't matter. Because everything else had a date on it and research didn't.

This happens at every company. It happens at the ones doing this well. It's happening at yours right now, and the people it's happening to are not the ones to blame for it, which is worth saying out loud before you walk into the next meeting.

The consequence is specific and it compounds. Without research you can only write the two free positions, because they're the only two you have the inputs for. So the team ships the Shortcut, again, and the category stays exactly as crowded as it was.

There's a version of this problem that's solvable and a version that isn't. The unsolvable version is asking your team to find the hours inside a quarter that's already full. They won't, and asking harder won't change it.

The solvable version is recognizing that research and production are different jobs with different clocks, and that the first one has to be finished — and decided — before the second one starts. Not integrated into it. Finished before it.

Six

The thread you can't find

The third reason is the one most companies are actually stuck on.

You sell to more than one kind of buyer. Maybe four. They want different things, fear different things, and describe their problems in different vocabularies. And you have one homepage.

So the language climbs. Someone tries a sentence for the first buyer; it excludes the other three. Someone tries a sentence that covers two; the remaining two object. Each round moves up a level of abstraction, because abstraction is the only direction that makes a sentence cover more people.

Eventually you reach a sentence that covers everyone. You always do. It's up there waiting — *we help organizations navigate complexity* — and it fits all four buyers perfectly, because it fits everyone, because it's about nobody.

> *A generic sentence is an average. A common thread is a discovery.*

Averaging is what happens by default. You take four buyers, find the abstraction that contains all four, and go up until you get there. The result is guaranteed to exist and guaranteed to be weak, because the height required to cover four different people is above the altitude where anyone recognizes themselves.

Finding the thread is different work. It means going down instead of up — looking at all four buyers and asking what specific, concrete thing is actually true for all of them. Not a category they all belong to. A situation they're all in.

The thread is almost always a shared *negative present*, which is why it hides from teams working the other two positions. Four buyer types who want completely different outcomes will frequently be suffering from the same thing. The CFO, the HR director, the plant manager, and the broker want four different futures. They may all be living with the same problem, and they may all describe it in nearly the same words when you ask them cold.

That's the sentence you're looking for. It exists more often than people expect. But you can't average your way to it, and you can't find it in a meeting, because it isn't in the building. It's in a phone call with somebody who didn't buy from you.

This is where the fear usually lives. Teams avoid the Negative Present because they think it means picking one buyer and abandoning the others. It doesn't. Specific is not the same as narrow. A precise description of a situation four buyer types share is more specific than the abstraction that covers them — and it excludes nobody.

PART THREE

How far it travels

Seven

The Upstream Test

Everything so far has been about what your message says. This chapter is about how far it gets, which is a different question and a more useful one.

You are almost never talking to the person who decides. In B2B the person who finds you is rarely the person who approves you. What actually happens is that your message gets handed upward, by people you'll never meet, in rooms you're not in.

It goes like this. A champion reads something and repeats it to their manager. The manager repeats it to a VP. The VP mentions it to the CEO. If the number is large enough, the CEO puts it in front of the board.

Four hand-offs. At each one, two things happen: context is stripped, and a stranger is added who wasn't in any of the earlier conversations. Your carefully built page is now one sentence, said from memory, by someone with an imperfect understanding of it, to someone who has never heard of you.

The Upstream Test is how many of those passes your message survives.

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1 CHAMPION → MANAGER

It can't be repeated from memory.

MOST B2B LANGUAGE DIES HERE

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2 MANAGER → VP

It repeats fine but carries no reason to act.

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3 VP → CEO

No number, no stake, nothing that reaches a P&L.

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4 CEO → BOARD

It's indistinguishable from what three competitors also said.

Score your own message. Be honest about where it stops.

Most B2B language dies at Pass 1. Not at the board — at the first hand-off, in a hallway, between two people at the same company. *We partner with you across your talent journey* cannot be repeated by a human being who read it four minutes ago. There's nothing there to hold on to. It doesn't fail because it's untrue. It fails because it's unrepeatable, and it's unrepeatable for the same reason it survived legal review: it can't be pinned down.

Could you be challenged on this in court? If there's nothing in the sentence anyone could dispute, there's nothing in the sentence anyone can carry.

Pass 2 is where most of the survivors stop. The sentence repeats fine — it's clear, it's concrete — but it gives the VP no reason to spend an hour on it. Clear and inert.

Pass 3 is where the altitude changes. Below the line, people care about the work. Above the line, people care about the P&L. A message that reaches a CEO without a number attached, or without a stake somebody in the room recognizes, doesn't continue. This is why so much messaging that tests well with practitioners never converts: it was built for the person who finds you, not the person who signs.

Pass 4 is the one nobody plans for. At the board, your message is next to three competitors' messages, described secondhand, and the only question is whether it sounds different from theirs. If it doesn't, the decision defaults to price or to the incumbent.

First, you are not writing to a buyer. You're arming a champion for an internal fight you won't attend. That reframes what a good message is. It isn't the most persuasive sentence. It's the most *portable* one — the one that survives being repeated by someone less invested than you, to someone less interested than them.

Second, the score is a number, which means it travels. When you tell a CEO the messaging is weak, you're expressing an opinion and they've heard it before. When you tell them the category's average message dies at the first hand-off and yours dies with it, you've given them something they can repeat.

Eight

The Safety Question

Before a champion makes that first pass, they run a silent check. Everybody does it and nobody says it out loud.

> *How do I know it's safe for me to vouch for you to my boss?*

That question is asked before the buying question. Before whether your product is good, whether the price works, whether the timing is right. It's about the champion's own standing, and it's decided in the first few seconds, mostly by things you'd consider superficial.

Understand what's being asked. Not *will this work — what happens to me if it doesn't*. A recommendation is a small personal bet with someone else's money and your own credibility. People do not place that bet on companies that feel unproven, no matter how good the offering is.

Answering the Safety Question does not win you the deal. Nothing about it is persuasive. It only keeps you from being eliminated before anyone considers you seriously, which is a smaller prize than it sounds like and completely non-negotiable.

Safety lives in the past tense

Most companies answer it with future promises — what they'll do, how they'll partner, the outcomes they'll deliver. None of that is evidence. What makes a champion feel safe is exclusively what already happened: who you've already done this for, how many times, how long you've been doing it, what you've already survived.

The single strongest version is proof that your prospect won't be the first one down this road with you.

That's why the Negative Present converts. A company that describes your situation precisely has demonstrated something about the past — they've been in rooms like yours before. Nobody accumulates that language by accident. You cannot fake specific, and everyone knows it, which is why specific reads as safe.

Note the sequencing, because it's the useful part. The Safety Question is permission to make the first pass. The Upstream Test measures what happens after. Clear one and you're allowed into the hallway conversation. Clear both and you make it to the room where it's decided.

Nine

The Levels

Every message sits at one of three altitudes, and spotting which one is the fastest diagnosis you can run on a page.

INFORMATIONAL	*This is who we are and what we sell.*
ASPIRATIONAL	*Your company could be better, or different.*
TRANSFORMATIONAL	*You could be new.*

Informational. Roughly 99% of B2B lives here. It isn't wrong — buyers genuinely need specs, SLAs, integrations, pricing, implementation detail, and they need it before they can buy. The mistake is leading with it. Information is what people want once they've decided you're worth the attention. It's not what earns the attention.

Aspirational. This is B2B's sweet spot and almost nowhere near enough companies lead here.

Transformational. This asks for a suspension of disbelief B2B won't extend. There have been about three genuinely transformational messages in thirty years: the web, briefly blockchain, and now AI. Each had a shorter lifespan than the one before. The web ran for a decade. AI stopped being an advantage in roughly eighteen months — everyone assumes your product has it unless you say otherwise, so claiming it says nothing.

If you take one thing from this chapter: lead Aspirational, support with Informational, skip Transformational.

There's a connection worth drawing back. Buyers enter your funnel because of hope, and hope converts into evaluation once they're familiar enough with you to want the details. So the homepage headline is an Aspirational job and the spec sheet is an Informational one. They are not the same job and they cannot be done by the same sentence. Most companies write the whole site at the Informational level and then wonder why the top of the funnel is quiet.

All of it comes from one belief: they'd buy if only they knew everything about it. Well-intentioned, and the murder of an opportunity to persuade.

Ten

The Assertion Band

There's a range your language can sit in, and it runs from timid to hostile.

DON'T-HURT-ME	ASSERTIVE	AGGRESSIVE

Don't-Hurt-Me language is written so it can't be challenged. *Partnering with you on your talent journey. Solutions tailored to your unique needs. A trusted advisor across the employee lifecycle.* It's the natural output of the consensus process from Chapter Four, and it's the safest thing anyone in the room can say.

The test is the one from the Upstream chapter. If a prospect reads it, walks away, and can't say what it means — if there's nothing in it that could be disputed in court — it's Don't-Hurt-Me language. It survives every internal review precisely because it can't be pinned down, and it dies at Pass 1 for exactly the same reason.

Aggressive language is the other failure. *Don't let your current vendor keep overcharging you.* It attacks, it presumes, it puts the reader on guard. It's rarer than the first kind, and it kills trust faster.

Assertive language sits between them. Marketing teams believe the opposite of Don't-Hurt-Me is Aggressive, so they stay put. Given a choice between sounding weak and sounding like a bully, they pick weak every time, which is the correct choice between those two options and a false choice to begin with.

Assertive is neither. Assertive means: we believe this, so we state it as a fact. No hedging, no attacking. It's a narrow band — probably the narrowest part of the range — and it's the only part worth living in.

In practice it's usually one word of difference. *One of the leading firms for healthcare staffing* is Don't-Hurt-Me. *The leading firm for healthcare staffing* is assertive. If you can't defend that, go narrower until you can: *the leading firm for per-diem clinical staffing in the Southeast* is a claim you can substantiate and a claim your competitors can't copy.

Not bigger claims — narrower ones, stated flatly. Find something you can be definitive about and then be definitive about it.

A register note. Assertive comes in casual and serious. For most B2B — long cycles, big budgets, careers attached — you want serious assertive. Casual assertive reads as breezy in a decision that isn't.

PART FOUR

What to do about it

Eleven

Take the open position

You don't have to reposition to fix this. Repositioning is nine months, an agency, a budget line, and a fight with sales about whether any of it worked. It may eventually be the right project. It is not the first move.

> *The first move is choosing which of the three positions you lead with. That's a decision, not a project.*

Change nothing about what you sell, who you sell it to, or how you describe your capabilities. Change only what comes first. Lead with evidence that you understand the situation your buyer is in — and you will be the only company in your category doing it.

It sounds too small to matter. That's why it's still available.

What it actually requires

Find the shared negative present. The concrete situation your buyer types are all in, in language they'd use themselves. Not a category. A situation. This is the research from Chapter Five and there's no way around it — but it's a fixed cost, measured in weeks, not a program.

Say it before you say anything about yourself. Not a paragraph of empathy — a specific description of their situation, precise enough that they recognize it and wonder how you knew. Then, and only then, the shortcut.

Do 90% of their thinking for them. A stranger will not do the work of connecting your capability to their problem. They'll do the last 10%, effortlessly, if you've done everything before it. Do less and you've handed the labor back to someone who never agreed to take it.

Keep the other two positions. You still need the Shortcut and you still need the Positive Future. They move down the page. That's the entire structural change: the same material, reordered, with a new first move.

What it doesn't require

New logo. New name. Sales retraining. Board approval. A campaign.

One caution. This works because the position is empty. It won't stay empty forever — somebody in your category will eventually price it out and decide it's worth the cost, and when they do, the advantage transfers to them and taking it back costs more than taking it now. The window isn't dramatic. But it's a window.

Twelve

Different, not unique

Once you're leading with the buyer's situation, the next question arrives immediately: what makes you the one they pick?

The standard answer is to be unique. That's the wrong target.

Unique demands the reader learn something new before they can evaluate you. A brand-new category, an unfamiliar mechanism, a coined term — all of it asks for labor upfront. A busy stranger will not supply it.

Different is a twist on something they already know. It's understood in two seconds because 90% of it is already loaded in their head, and only the twist is new. Near-zero cognitive cost.

Different beats unique. Every time, in B2B, where nobody has the patience for a lesson.

The second right answer

When you ask a team what makes them different, they give the first right answer — the obvious one everyone in the category has already found. *Deep industry expertise. Rigorous vetting. A consultative approach.* It's true. It's also what your four closest competitors say, which means it isn't an answer at all.

The second right answer is what you get by refusing to stop at the first one. It's non-obvious, usually concrete, and often something the company had stopped noticing because it's just how they do things.

An example of the shape it takes. *Strategy for SaaS firms* is the original. *Get in-depth strategic insight into every player in your market* is the first right answer. *Know their moves, then set yours* is the second. Same offering, three levels of thinking, and only the third one is memorable.

The horse lady

You've decided to find a therapist, so you search around and narrow it to five. A friend asks how it's going.

"Pretty good. With four of them you drive to an office, you sit in a chair, they sit in another chair, they ask you questions and you talk about yourself. And then there's the horse lady. With her you drive to a farm, she puts you on an old gentle horse, she gets on a horse, the horses walk slowly along a path. She asks you questions and you talk about yourself."

Training, licensing, and insurance mean all five are selling the same service. But four of them collapse into one category in your head and the horse lady gets a category of her own. She's executing the identical thing in a different and easy-to-explain way.

If there were only five therapists within a hundred miles, you'd expect each to get 20%. She gets 23% and the rest get 19.25%. For most companies a few points of share is an enormous swing in profitability.

You want to be the horse lady. Not a different service — a different and instantly explainable execution of the same one.

The halo niche

One more piece of leverage, usually sitting unused. Split your customers in two. Group A is the set whose names make everyone else impressed you landed them. Group B is everyone else — usually the majority of your revenue.

Group B chooses you because of Group A. Nobody chooses you because you serve Group B, even though Group B pays most of the bills. Which means the logos you're being modest about are doing more work than anything else on the page, and most companies bury them below the fold out of a sense of proportion.

Thirteen

The kill list

The fastest improvement available to you isn't something you add.

Every company's first contact carries sentences doing no work at all. Not weak sentences — sentences with a value of zero, which have survived because removing something requires a decision and leaving it doesn't.

Cutting them is the easiest internal sell you will ever make, because nobody has to be convinced to stop. There's no new claim to defend, no legal review, no meeting about whether it's overreach. That's why this is where you start when you need visible movement before the real work lands.

What goes on the list:

Anything that fails the court test. If no one could dispute it, no one can carry it. *Committed to excellence. Trusted partner. Tailored to your needs.* Delete on sight.

Anything a competitor could publish unchanged. Take your headline, put a competitor's logo on it, and see if anyone would notice. If they wouldn't, it isn't yours and it isn't doing anything.

Internal repetition. *Currently live. Is now available. Continues to remain.* Words that only restate what the sentence already said.

Anything that describes you before the reader appears. The founding story, the values, the office locations. Not deleted from the site — moved off the first contact point. Nobody cares about your company, and that's freedom: it means you can spend the whole first contact on their story instead of yours.

"**Solutions.**" Along with "leverage," "seamless," "holistic," "empower," "journey," and "partner" as a verb. Each of them is a placeholder someone inserted where a specific word was supposed to go, and then the specific word never arrived.

Teams try to improve messaging by adding — another proof point, another differentiator, another paragraph of context. Addition is why the page is long and unreadable. Subtraction is faster, cheaper, and it's the only change you can make this month without a single approval.

Fourteen

The first date

Take your business on a first date. Walk in cold, as a stranger, and judge the first impression the way a stranger would.

Do it properly. Open your homepage on your phone, not the desktop mock. Give it the four seconds a real buyer gives it. Read only what's above the fold. Then close it and say out loud what the company does and why you'd care.

Do the same with your last outbound email, read in a full inbox. Your last ad, seen while scrolling past. The one-pager, read in a hallway between meetings. The booth, seen from twenty feet at the end of a long day.

It's difficult for one reason: you know too much. You know what the sentence was trying to say. You were probably in the meeting where it was decided. You're reading the intention rather than the words, which means you're the only person in the world who can't see what's actually on the page.

That's what makes the discipline worth imposing. It isn't complicated. It's just genuinely uncomfortable, and there's no substitute for doing it.

Then score what you found:

POSITION	*Which of the three does it lead with?*
LEVEL	*Informational, Aspirational, Transformational?*
BAND	*Where does it sit between timid and hostile?*
UPSTREAM	*How many passes does it survive — one to four?*

That's a number for your own first contact. Do the same for your six nearest competitors and you have a picture of the category, which is where every useful conversation about messaging starts.

Then set a date to do it again. Markets move. The negative present you found this year gets solved, or replaced, or stops mattering. The most common way a well-positioned company goes stale is not that the positioning was wrong — it's that it was right, and then the world moved and nobody rechecked.

So: a first date to see what a stranger sees, and a reconnect date, on the calendar, to find what's changed. Annually is enough. Never is what most companies do.

Closing

The only position that costs something

Every first contact leads with one of three things. Two of them are free to produce and that's where your entire category is standing. The third requires knowing something specific and true about the person you're trying to reach, which costs research, time, and a tolerance for saying something a committee would rather soften.

That cost is the reason it's empty. It's also the reason it works.

None of this is a secret and none of it is complicated. Everyone in your category could read this and act on it. Most won't, for the same three reasons they haven't already: the research has no deadline, the consensus process sands the edges off anything sharp, and the thread across four buyer types is genuinely hard to find and easy to average instead.

Which leaves the position open a while longer.

B2B buyers care less about the pain and less about the future than they do about the shortcut — your specific mechanism for getting them from one to the other. That's true, and it's exactly why leading with your shortcut is worthless. Everyone is already there. It's the crowded position precisely because it's the one that matters most.

You earn the right to be believed about your shortcut by proving, first, that you understand what they're shortcutting out of.

Getting someone to pay attention while you talk about you is hard. While you talk about them is a lot easier.

Appendix

The First Contact Scorecard

One page per company. Do your own first, then your five or six nearest competitors.

COMPANY ____________________ CONTACT POINT ____________________

Homepage / ad / outbound email / one-pager / booth

1 Which position does it lead with?

- ☐ **Negative Present** — we understand the situation you're in
- ☐ **The Shortcut** — we're the way out of it
- ☐ **Positive Future** — here's where you could be

2 Which Level is it pitched at?

- ☐ **Informational** — this is who we are and what we sell
- ☐ **Aspirational** — your company could be better or different
- ☐ **Transformational** — you could be new

3 Where does it sit on the Assertion Band?

- ☐ Don't-Hurt-Me
- ☐ Assertive
- ☐ Aggressive

Court test: could any sentence here be disputed? If nothing could be, mark Don't-Hurt-Me.

4 Upstream score — how many passes does it survive?

- ☐ **0** — Dies on the page. Nothing to repeat.
- ☐ **1** — Champion can repeat it to their manager.
- ☐ **2** — Manager can repeat it to a VP, but it carries no reason to act.
- ☐ **3** — Reaches the CEO with a number or a stake attached.
- ☐ **4** — Survives the board, next to three competitors' messages.

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5 The swap test

Put a competitor's logo on this message. Would anyone notice?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If no, nothing on this page belongs to the company that published it.

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6 In one sentence, what situation does this company claim to understand?

If you can't fill this in, they didn't take the third position — and neither has anyone else on your list.

Dean Waye works on what B2B companies say first — the homepage, the ad, the outbound, the first ten seconds of a stranger's attention. He has run first-contact diagnostics for more than sixty companies across staffing, healthcare benefits, enterprise software, and professional services.

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