Shaped By

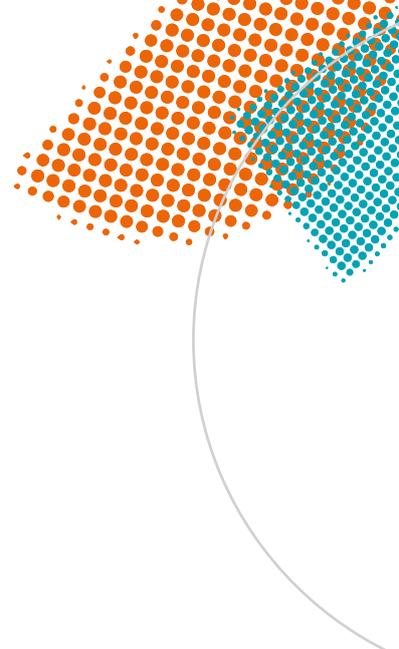# Reaching today's tech buyer:

Why the tech buying demographic has changed, and how B2B marketers can reach them

Contents

Contributors:
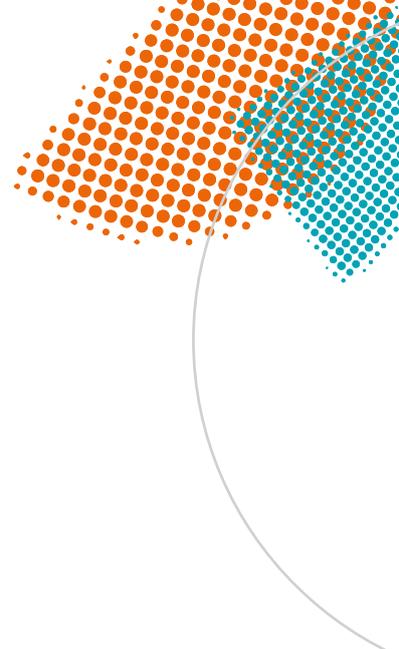
Sally Adam,
marketing director,
Sophos

Lois Smith,
cloud, data and AI
marketing leader,
IBM UK and Ireland

Giles Rhys Jones,
CMO,
what3words

Tulin Green,
senior director, EMEA
marketing, Commvault

Foreword

David Rowlands,
editor,
B2B Marketing

The tech buyer of yesteryear could be found in the IT department, fervently weighing up the options of tech solution A versus tech solution B. What are the pros and cons? What are the features? What are the associated costs? Once our IT person in question had come to a conclusion, the next step was to make a final decision.

In recent times, however, this has begun to shift, with IT buyers located in all different areas of a company. There are several reasons for this, as this report will demonstrate, but what's even more important is that targeting tech buyers is no longer as straightforward as it once was. Technical, heavy, in-depth content may no longer be the best route to a tech buyer's heart.

With that in mind, we spoke to several senior marketers at B2B tech companies to understand just how today's tech marketer can target and engage with this new breed of buyer.

This report will reveal how we got here in the first place, the role of Covid-19 in catalysing the shift in tech buyer demographics, and how you can refine your approach to targeting tech buyers today.
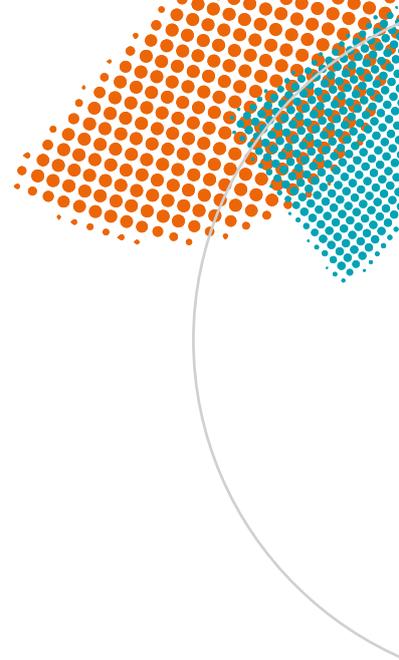
Commentary

Nick Farrar,
co-founder, Shaped By

In the good old days, if anything technical went wrong, you picked up the phone to IT. More often than not, you were told 'turn it off and on again' – and this usually worked. But if it didn't or it involved something more advanced, the mysterious and elusive IT department would be on hand to manage things in ways mere mortals had no hope of understanding. Technology at work was on a strictly need to know basis.

Today, things are completely different. Technology is so pervasive in every aspect of our lives that it's no longer a mysterious force tamed by IT professionals. We might not all be familiar with its inner workings, but the extent to which we manage it ourselves – using it, updating it, even fixing issues – means we're more invested in technology than ever before.

And, as the core of this report alludes to, many of us are also researching and buying it. The tech stack is no longer the exclusive preserve of developers. In today's business, everyone from the HR department to the marketing team is fully stacked. And the likelihood is that individuals within each team will have researched the best options for them, making their own decisions on which vendors should be considered.

This is where we can start to see LinkedIn's research on the dramatic reduction in IT's purchasing influence manifesting itself. Are we all tech buyers now? Possibly not, but many more of us are. We might not always make the final purchase ourselves, but we're very heavily involved. We do research, we interact with vendors and we make decisions based on the experiences they deliver to us.

So, the world has changed, but does your approach as a marketer need to change with it? Well, not as much as some might think. The fundamentals haven't changed. The tasks at hand are still to understand who your audience is, what their pain points are, how your solutions alleviate them and, ultimately, encourage them to change how they currently get things done.

In some ways, though, that's the easy bit. The real challenge in today's overcrowded marketing landscape is getting those messages in front of your audience in creative and memorable ways that challenge the innate behaviour to avoid change.

At the end of the day, you're not really selling technology. You're selling freedom, simplicity, relaxation, a weight off one's shoulders, more time in a person's day… you're selling change.

Whatever your audience looks like today, if you can clearly demonstrate the benefits of change – and get that message to stick – it's much more likely they'll become your customer.
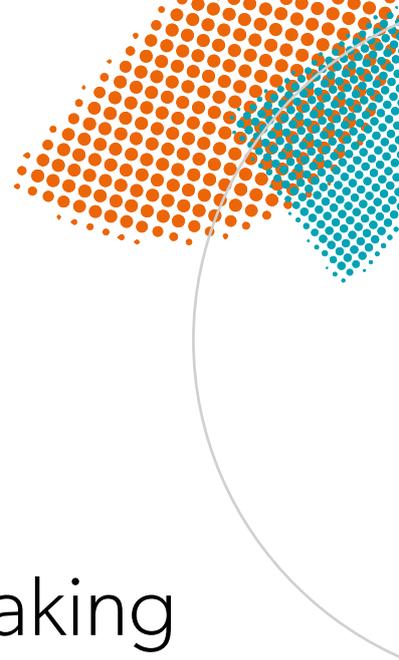
The tech buyer landscape: A democracy, 15 years in the making

The tech buyer landscape used to be such a simple affair. Snag the contact details of a prospect's IT team, and your foot was in the door. Generally, that meant B2B marketers only had one buyer to target, one buyer to personalise their marketing towards – one person who would ultimately make that all-important purchase decision. Simple stuff, right?

But, before you all become too nostalgic for days gone by, with only one person in charge of tech buying, the door through which your foot may once have trod could all too easily be slammed shut. And, if you were dealing with an elusive IT team that's hard to pin down, that single point of contact soon becomes a frustration, rather than an advantage.

Fortunately, the B2B tech buying landscape has undergone an astonishing transformation over the past 15 years, as more teams and business leaders are brought into the tech decision-making process. Indeed, according to LinkedIn research, IT only retains its status as the most influential voice in a third (39%) of technology buying decisions, down from a staggering 75% in 2014.*

Why then, has the tech buyer demographic democratised so dramatically over the past 15 years? And what does this mean for B2B marketers seeking to reach such a rich and varied tapestry of technology decision-maker?

"Indeed, according to LinkedIn research, IT only retains its status as the most influential voice in a third (39%) of technology buying decisions, down from a staggering 75% in 2014"

*LinkedIn, 'The Age of Agility: The LinkedIn B2B Tech Buying Survey – EMEA 20/21'

Why has the tech buyer demographic changed?

4.1 The rise of the cloud

The cloud has undoubtedly been the biggest driver behind the democratisation of the tech buyer landscape. "Technology is no longer the preserve of the IT team," says Sally Adam, marketing director at cybersecurity company Sophos. "Over the past decade, more departments have been taking advantage of the cloud, adopting new technologies to achieve their goals more effectively and efficiently."

Almost every department now relies on technology to do their job effectively, often using bespoke solutions unique to their team (think marketing automation software for marketers, or CRM tools for salespeople). This leaves marketers with a broad and varied tapestry of tech buying prospects to reach. Everyone now has an opinion on which technology will work best for their individual teams, and one single decision-making process can feature multiple stakeholders to charm.

"Almost every department now relies on technology to do their job effectively, often using bespoke solutions unique to their team"

4.2 Security now a key consideration

Despite the efficiency and agility gains of moving more technologies and teams to the cloud, it also creates a number of new attack surfaces for cybercriminals to exploit.

"The move to remote working and the cloud has meant a shift in working habits," says Tulin Green, senior director, EMEA marketing, at data protection software brand Commvault. "It's also shone a light on the need for data protection, especially in the light of more ransomware attacks and data breaches."

For Tulin, this has resulted in the emergence of a new breed of security-minded buyers to consider, namely risk officers and compliance professionals. With security becoming embedded in the technological fabric of an organisation, rather than a last-minute, hasty bolt-on, many companies are prioritising tech security over all other considerations when it comes to their purchase decision.

The fact almost half (46%) of British business suffered a cyberattack last year only serves to thrust this need into even sharper context. And, when combined with the troubling statistic that nine in 10 cyber breaches are attributed to human error – invariably worsened by the rise of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic – it's no surprise that technology buyers are taking security more seriously than ever.

4.3 Shifting consumption patterns and buying cycles

The B2B world has long been synonymous with long, drawn-out buying cycles that can be measured in months, or even years, when compared to the shorter and more fluctuating nature of traditional consumer buying patterns. However, as Lois Smith, cloud, data & AI marketing leader, IBM UK and Ireland, points out, the line between B2B and B2C buyer behaviour is blurring, which is having an interesting effect on how marketers target prospects.

"It's become much easier to access technology through consumer-like 'as a service' models, which help individual teams adopt and derive value from technology quickly to match the pace of change required to be competitive," Lois says. "This means the sphere of influence has extended to include these key business stakeholders, who now have access to IT funding to address their unique business challenges."

"The line between B2B and B2C buyer behaviour is blurring, which is having an interesting effect on how marketers target prospects"

4.4 Increased focus on non-IT considerations

Not all technology purchase decisions are driven by traditional IT factors, such as cost and security, as Sally explains. "Increasingly, brands are incorporating cultural, environmental and ethical requirements into their buying decisions to help drive positive change – for example, actively choosing vendors with clear focus on supporting diversity in the workplace."

With collaboration between sectors and industries a critical success factor for many brands, and the importance of maintaining a strong public image, tech buyers are not only interrogating the utility of the technology itself, but also the cultural efficacy of the people sitting behind it, and whether that reflects their own brand purpose.

In order to successfully propagate this mindset across the entire business, an internal community needs to be established and then communicated to customers, with responsibility starting at the very top, as Tulin explains. "It's about showcasing the community behind the brand, and we're working hard to put the spotlight on our employees, and using our CEO to assist in this effort," she says. "It's important to demonstrate how the brand contributes to society, whether that's supporting a cause, giving back to local communities or, in tech especially, supporting STEM and Women in Technology initiatives."

For Sally, non-IT considerations are one piece of a much wider picture that B2B marketers must paint of their prospects, in order to target, engage and nurture them effectively. "Like IT teams, new tech buyers are looking to get the best solutions to help them achieve their business goals that align with their ethical positions. To enable these buyers to make the right decisions, tech vendors need to understand their needs – what are they looking to achieve, what are their priorities, what is important to them."

4.5 Covid-19, the great accelerator

Of course, we can't continue using words like 'change' and 'disruption' without addressing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic – perhaps one of the most rapidly-changing and disruptive periods in living memory. Overnight, much of the global workforce swapped fully kitted-out office desks for kitchen counters and dining room tables, video calls and spinning wheels of doom replaced face-to-face meetings, and the reassuring presence of physical IT teams and networks were ousted by patchy and unpredictable home broadband connections.

The effects on how businesses run and how employees work have been seismic, and most organisations are still learning 'on-the-go', testing and adapting, with the knowledge that everything could change again at a moment's notice. In many ways, the pandemic has served to accelerate most of the above factors, with the events of 2020 shaping key priorities for many business leaders to focus on in the coming years, as Lois at IBM UK and Ireland explains.

"The reality for businesses has radically shifted," she says. "In the next two years, we should expect another huge shift in prioritisation. Executives are clearly telling us they plan to emphasise workforce safety and security, cost management and enterprise agility."

In Lois' opinion, the pandemic has provided a much-needed wake-up call for many reticent brands, prompting a more agile and proactive approach to technology investment and innovation. "Whether it's while reflecting on current conditions or future plans, the need for flexibility and speed has been amplified dramatically," she says. "Old barriers are being brushed aside under the pressure of unrelenting disruption, rapidly evolving customer expectations, and an unprecedented pace of change. But positively, there seems to be real renewed clarity in the perspectives of business leaders."
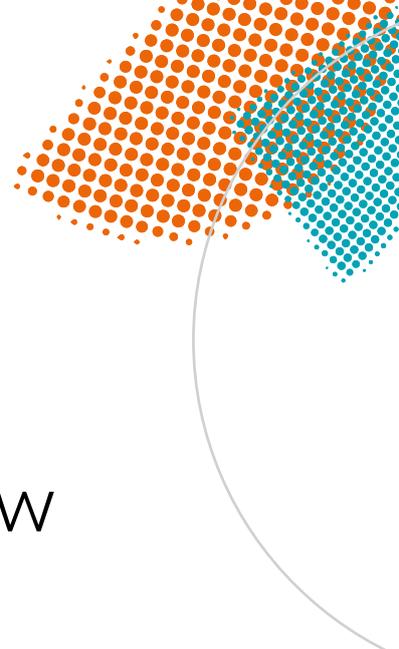
How do vendors reach the new breed of technology buyer?

5.1 A language that everyone understands

At first glance, the diverse nature of today's tech buyer landscape can seem like a daunting and overwhelming venture for B2B marketers. After all, how do you successfully market technology to someone doesn't possess a particularly good understanding of that tech in the first place?

Fortunately, many innovative and forward-thinking marketers are realising that the key to unlocking these audiences is by crafting increasingly creative, sophisticated and human ways to meet, engage and nurture a new breed of tech buyer, regardless of their tech literacy.

For Giles Rhys Jones, CMO of the innovative geo-location system, what3words, the focus always lies in communicating the benefits of the technology, rather than the intricacies of the tech itself. "Our tech is a means to an end," he explains. "It can make the world safer, less frustrating, and more efficient. Showing our buyer this, through the eyes of the people who are affected, in the simplest possible way, makes our message human and inclusive. Everyone, no matter their area of expertise or depth of tech knowledge, can understand."

Tulin seconds the notion, underlining the importance of cutting through the technical jargon, straight to the conversations that really matter. "B2B buyers want their vendors to come alongside them in their buying journey and talk their language," she says. "It's not about features and functions; it's about speaking a language that helps the buyer do their job more effectively and look good in front of their boss."

"It's not about features and functions; it's about speaking a language that helps the buyer do their job more effectively."

5.2 Digital-first content becoming the status quo

But what does 'creativity' in tech marketing actually look like in action, and how does that match up to the expectations of today's decision-makers? As Lois explains, "The modern buyer still wants to interact and consume content, but how they consume that content is fundamentally different." Over the past year, especially, the type of content produced by B2B marketers has changed enormously, with face-to-face engagements, meetings and showcase opportunities at a premium. These have, by and large, been replaced with virtual events and digital content, delivered in short and concise formats that can be consumed at an individual's convenience."

Just look at how readily B2B tech brands embraced the switch from physical conferences to virtual events. One events platform says virtual events skyrocketed by 1000% since Covid-19 first hit in early 2020, and we can see

first-hand how some of the biggest technology vendors, like Adobe (Summit) and IBM (Think), have rapidly adapted to the current restrictions and limitations in order to reach tech buyers through new mediums and channels.

"Our online event programme has accelerated rapidly," explains Sally. "We're now hosting and participating in online events in ways that we hadn't imagined 18 months ago. These online experiences bring many advantages – not least flexibility and accessibility – for our audiences and the feedback has been very positive. We plan to continue to build our online event programmes over the coming year."

And, while virtual events will never wholly replace B2B's fan favourite (the physical event), it does demonstrate that successful B2B buyer journeys should incorporate a number of touchpoints, not just one single roll of the dice at an in-person event. As Sally puts it: "While we look forward to meeting our customers and partners in the flesh in the future, we do not anticipate returning to the same live event frequency as before."

5.3 Telling human stories through creative means

As Giles explains, the sweet spot for him is blending creativity and empathy, using creative methods to tell compelling 'human' stories. "Well-placed and well-executed creativity is the key to unlocking business," he says. "I remember at one of our first conferences, we had a small stand that we covered in imagery showing the benefits of better addressing. When everyone else at the conference focused on numerical evidence, competed on resolution and satellite image clarity, and had reams of copy on their walls, we displayed portraits of smiling faces and told human stories."

Creativity and empathy haven't always been an integral part and parcel of a tech marketer's toolkit, but the events of the last year have served to shine a light on the importance of human stories, even in the remit of buying B2B technology. This is certainly true for Sally, who sees the pandemic as a catalyst for brands adopting a more human-focused mindset.

"The rapid pivot to home working in spring last year has inadvertently had a humanising effect for many people, across all areas of the business," she says. "Suddenly, we were seeing co-workers, customers, suppliers and partners in their homes, with children and pets making guest appearances."

For Sally, regardless of how much our world changes, how far it evolves, and how people's expectations and behaviour shifts, there will remain one constant – our need for human stories. "Everyone is interested in human stories – just think about the content that's stopped you in your social media scroll most recently and I bet the majority is people-focused stories," she says. "As tech vendors, we have an opportunity to share them. Behind every product or service are fantastic people, who all have a part to play in enabling our customers to achieve their goals."

5.4 Really *(really)* getting to know your customer

While this may seem like an obvious consideration, it's surprising how many tech vendors don't practice what they preach when it comes to truly getting to the heart of their customer's pain points and challenges. According to LinkedIn, finding technology that actually matches their needs is one of the most important factors when selecting a new vendor, second only to price.

"As with all marketing, the key to success when technology marketing is understanding your audiences," says Sally. "And, essentially, audiences are really just lots of individuals with differing requirements that vary based on personal preference, geography, business environment, etc."

It's vital, therefore, that tech vendors demonstrate their knowledge not only of the customer themselves, but also effectively communicate their knowledge and experience of tech they're trying to sell. Indeed, according to LinkedIn, even though 76% of decision-makers seek vendors who can demonstrate deep knowledge and experience, they would still swap well-known vendors for more innovative brands, should the technology in question better speak to their unique requirements.

"It all comes back to the needs and challenges faced by the buyer, which require marketers to show business value in a way that resonates and maps to the client's strategy," says Lois. "These needs will vary for different cohorts within a single client, so a tailored approach demonstrating ROI as part of the overall business value will be appropriate for some, whereas detailed technical feature deep-dives will be important for others."

Four lessons for tech marketers, from vendors themselves

1. Give your events a digital makeover, but beware virtual fatigue

"We've found a move to short compelling sessions, with great content focused on market-relevant challenges, has resonated well. Sharing succinct and consumable information with a clear message and enabling buyers to consume that content how and where it is convenient for them." Lois Smith, cloud, data and AI marketing leader, IBM UK and Ireland.

2. Don't just test-and-learn. Be ready to fail

"We have an 80/20 rule where we spend 80% of time and budget on tried and tested methods, working them hard to get good ROI. We also have 20% of our time and budget set aside for marketing investments – things we're not sure will work, but want to try out. We track and measure them, and if they work, we adopt that as part of the 80%." Giles Rhys Jones, CMO, what3words.

3. ABM is a fundamental requirement, not a nice to have

"There's a strong case for the importance of account-based marketing (ABM), with a tailored and personalised approach to engaging with different buyer groups across an entire organisation to develop relationships and a brand reputation that ultimately drives revenue within a targeted account. The creative strategy and customer journey crafted for a specific audience sits at the heart of this, designed with appropriate elements to engage clients wherever they are on their particular buyer journey." Lois Smith, cloud, data and AI marketing leader, IBM UK and Ireland.

4. Peer review sites build priceless trust

"We're seeing a lot of traction with peer-to-peer review sites, such as IT Central Station, Gartner Peer Insights, and G2 Crowd. These types of reviews resonate far better than a vendor content. The hangouts in peer-to-peer review sites, along with targeted paid social channels, are getting the most traction for us." Tulin Green, senior director, EMEA marketing, Commvault.

"Reviews are important for IT and non-IT buyers alike. Even if you know the product ticks your technical boxes, it's still reassuring to know it delivers in real-world scenarios. What's important to recognise is that different buyers are looking for different customer reviews, some more technical, others more business or ROI-focused." Sally Adam, marketing director, Sophos.
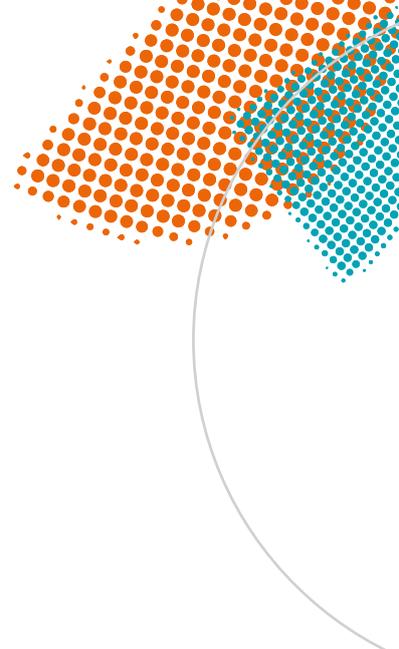
Come what may, always be prepared for more change

While it's true that the tech buyer landscape has been evolving in leaps and bounds over the past 15 years – as we move to cloud-based infrastructures and a more democratised decision-making process – much of that change has been accelerated due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has catapulted the demand for more agile, flexible and autonomous technology, and presented tech marketers with an opportunity to expand into entirely new markets, reach new audiences, and engage with brand new buyers.

The new breed of technology buyer is digital-first (in some cases, exclusively so), craves creative and human experiences and content, and wants to work with vendors who reflect their own brand ethics and purpose. This means marketers must explore new and exciting ways to engage them, exploring innovative new content formats, using data to create compelling and relevant stories, and doing it all with openness and authenticity.

The challenge for tech vendors and their marketing teams, despite the exciting allure of such innovative opportunities, is to remain grounded, remain alive to their customers' unique pain points challenges, and be aware of the need to remain human with their approach to engaging and nurturing customers, new and existing alike.

Above all else, marketers must apply one critical principle to all aspects of their work, while also encouraging the wider organisation to adopt a similar outlook. That one key

tenet? Agility. Without the ability to embrace new business practices, adapt to shifting conditions, and go to market rapidly with new products and services, reticent marketers run the real risk of being left behind, permanently.

It's a daunting step to take, but in a world where it's easier than ever to switch brand allegiance (even in B2B), where customers measure their experiences not by brand, sector, or industry, but by the best experience they've ever received… only the bravest and most agile B2B tech marketers will survive and thrive. As Giles at what3words puts it: "Your marketing doesn't have to beat your competitors. It has to beat everybody else."

"Above all else, marketers must apply one critical principle to all aspects of their work, while also encouraging the wider organisation to adopt a similar outlook. That one key tenet? Agility"
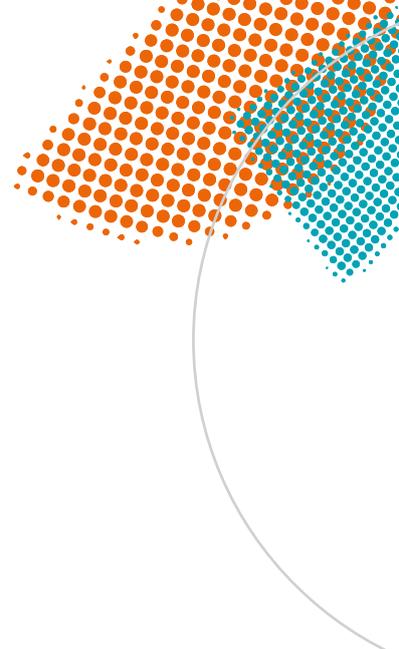
About

B2B Marketing and Propolis

Powered by the community, for the community.
Established in 2004, B2B Marketing is now the number one go-to resource for B2B marketers across the globe.

Right from the start, we had a clear mission that remains as strong and clear today: to provide marketers at business brands with the tools, insight and inspiration they need to grow and succeed – as both individuals and businesses.

To do this, we need to continually evolve to make sure we are delivering what you need.

This is why Propolis was born – our community for B2B marketers.

We're proud to serve as the focal point for the B2B marketing sector, and to be a force for greater connectivity, enabling marketers and leaders to share experiences and learn from one another.

b2bmarketing.net
propolis.b2bmarketing.net

info@b2bmarketing.net
+44 (0)20 7014 4920

Shaped By

Based in the UK, Shaped By is a creative studio for changemaker brands.

We understand the undeniable, unbreakable connection between the degree of creativity applied to a business challenge and the quality of its outcome.

Partnering with the innovators and enablers of change, we challenge them to unleash creativity across their business to drive growth and success.

Many of the brands we work with are 'in' tech. But it's what they're doing with the tech that's important. How they're harnessing it and using it to make a real, positive difference to our everyday lives.

That's changemaking. And that's the story we help them to tell.

shaped-by.com
hello@shaped-by.com
+44(0)117 966 9189

B2B Marketing
Insight · Intelligence · Connection

Shaped By

B2B Marketing
Insight · Intelligence · Connection

Shaped By