

Client-centric marketing

How to make ABM work in professional services

Account-based marketing is a powerful marketing approach but can be difficult to embed in complex, partner-led environments. PM Forum Conference keynote **Bev Burgess** makes the case for ABM, describes the challenges you will face and explains how to maximise your chances of success.

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Some clients are simply more important than others to your firm's success. When Andersen Consulting parted company from Arthur Andersen and launched as Accenture on 1 January 2001, it already knew the importance of its top clients to delivering sustainable value. Over 20 years later, Accenture's Diamond Client programme continues to prioritise the 300 clients (3.5% of its 8,500 clients) that deliver over half of its revenue each year. Within this group, it has partnered with the top 100 clients (c1.2%) for more than 10 years. It's a strategy that is working. In 2023, it saw record new bookings of \$72 billion, and a record 106 clients with quarterly

bookings greater than \$100 million, an increase from 100 in 2022.

Each of its top clients is managed by a Diamond Client Account Leader, or DCAL, all of whom form a global council. The global and regional leaders of the council sit on Accenture's general management committee, chaired by CEO Julie Sweet, to ensure that the voice of the customer is heard at the top of the company. Marketing is aligned to support these top accounts worldwide, with relationship marketers assigned to each DCAL to deliver a client-centric marketing approach.

What can we learn from Accenture's example? Like many organisations, its established client base follows the fractal 80/20 rule; a repeating mathematical pattern that suggests 20% of clients deliver 80% of your revenue, and within that, 4% of clients deliver 64% of revenue, and, crucially, 1% of clients delivers 51% of revenue. If you lose just one client from your top 1%,

you will need 256 from your bottom tier to replace them. Inevitably, this leads to a tiering of clients, with those at the top prioritised, nurtured and protected, including from within marketing. And the best way to do this is to make more of your marketing client-centric.

Understanding the challenges you will face

While marketers in technology corporations around the world have been quick to jump on ABM as a more effective way of building relationships and driving growth with existing customers, even they find the journey from piloting ABM through scaling it across the business a challenging one.

In a recent ABM benchmarking study at Inflexion Group, we learned that the top challenges ABM programme leaders face include a lack of alignment or engagement with the business, the inability to measure results effectively to show value, and difficulties getting the budget and people needed to resource ABM effectively.

But compared to establishing a client-centric marketing approach in a professional services firm, they have things relatively easy. A range of factors make it harder in your context, as shown in Figure 1.

The implications of the partnership model, working in a network of firms rather than a single corporate entity, include an increased need for sponsorship and communication and careful orchestration across lines of business or geographies. One of the biggest challenges I've seen in my work with leading professional service firms is being able to tell one story to the client: to show up as one firm rather than a number of different practice areas or network members and to introduce new areas of capability within a holistic brand proposition. A client-centric approach to marketing can certainly help here by building a narrative that keeps everyone in the account team on message and using language that resonates with the client.

A fee earner's time is money, and their expertise is what they sell, so you need to showcase their credentials while being sensitive to using up too much of their time on internal meetings about marketing.

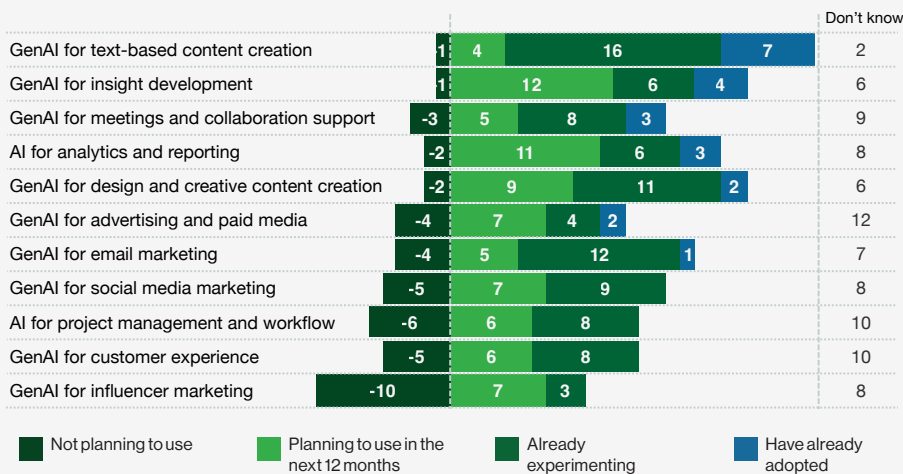
Finally, this is a relationship business, with the goal of your firm being deemed a trusted advisor by the client, so use ABM techniques to

Figure 1 What's different about professional services?

Factor	Professional services partnership	Implications for ABM
Organisational structure	Network of member firms	Engage stakeholders across the network, especially where clients touch more than one line of service or geography.
Ownership	Partners	Understand what partners value, communicate ABM benefits in these terms and get partner sponsorship.
Decision making	Consensus	Map your internal stakeholders and build in time for consultation and consensus building.
Proposition	Knowledge and expertise	Help teams showcase their expertise and build client relationships, creating tangible assets to demonstrate quality.
Sales channel	Client partners and account teams	Become part of the account team and enable them to tell a consistent, powerful story to the client.
Value levers	People utilisation	Use fee earners' time wisely – prepare well for each meeting.
Client relationships	Trusted advisor	Understand what drives the client and deliver only relevant, timely and personalised content and experiences. Describe the value your partnership has delivered in their terms to build advocacy.

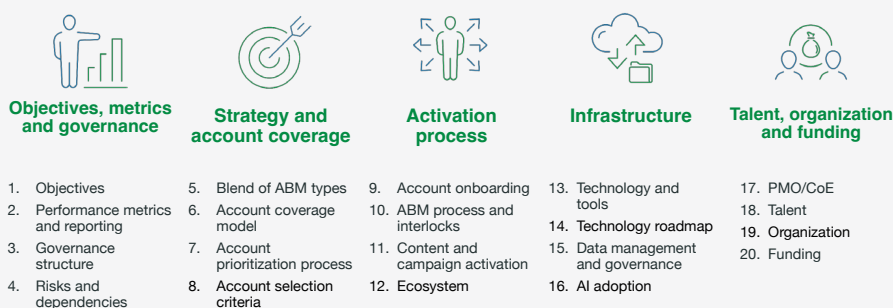
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Figure 2 Attitudes to adopting AI tools are mixed



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Figure 3 Designing the right approach



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enhance your firm's understanding of them and deliver only relevant, personalised content and experiences that will nurture the relationship.

Maximising your chances of success

To make client-centric marketing work for you, there are 20 factors that you need to discuss and agree with key stakeholders as you design the right approach for your specific firm, shown in Figure 2.

As you move from initial design, through piloting, to scaling client-centric marketing, your main issue will be in meeting increasing demand from the firm as the approach is rolled out. All client relationship partners will want their clients to be part of your programme, but they won't necessarily want to invest in more marketing resources. Don't worry, this happens practically everywhere and is where the 80/20 rule comes in again. Think about designing different types of marketing for different tiers of clients, with those at the top getting the most investment.

Could generative AI (genAI) also help? A study by Wharton suggests that marketing roles rank within the top 20% of occupations that will be most affected by genAI, while McKinsey predicts that genAI could increase marketing productivity by 5% to 15%. Inflexion Group research shows that attitudes are mixed today, as shown in Figure 3.

As early adoption is focused on content creation and insight development, it seems AI will certainly help us to do more with less and scale a personalised approach across more clients. But as one global programme leader confirmed, 'AI will shift the dynamics of how we work but nothing will replace relationships at a top level. After all, we are a people business.' ■

Bev Burgess is Chief Executive of Inflexion Group. She is best known as a worldwide authority on account-based marketing (ABM) and has worked with some of the world's largest professional service, legal and management consulting firms. She is co-author of Account-based Growth and A Practitioner's Guide to ABM, and author of Executive Engagement Strategies. Her new book, Account-Based Marketing: The Definitive Guide for B2B Marketers, will be published by Kogan Page in March 2025 and is available now for pre-order.