Don’t Say “They.”

Why the best B2B research challenges abstraction, sharpens decisions and drives action.

We Live Context

Standfirst

Companies become successful in B2B by understanding a customer truth precisely and responding to it. They lose their edge when, gradually and unnoticed, they stop checking whether the truth still holds.

Staying close to what is real

01 The argument

The hidden danger in B2B shorthand

Real, lasting success in B2B has been built on a single discipline: understanding what makes customers tick, what genuinely differentiates them, and how to deliver the right product, service or solution at precisely the right moment.

Salesforce	understood that sales teams hated the CRM software they had to use.
AWS	saw that companies were over-investing in compute they couldn't reliably predict.
Rolls-Royce	realised that airlines did not want to own engines; they wanted guaranteed flying hours.

Each grasped a specific customer truth and responded to it precisely. Enormous value has been generated this way. The companies that endure are usually the ones that knew their customers better than anyone, and kept refreshing that knowledge.

And yet, most organisations eventually develop shorthand for their customers' needs and desires:

"They want AI."

"They only care about price."

"They prefer self-service."

"They are risk averse."

Every organisation creates internal shorthand. It is unavoidable. Sales teams need speed, marketing teams need categories, leadership teams need summaries, AI systems need patterns. Eventually complexity gets compressed into neat descriptions of "the customer." Over time, these assumptions harden into accepted truths.

Organisations rarely lose touch with their customers all at once. The drift is usually gradual; a little more abstraction here, a little more distance there, until eventually the language inside the business no longer resembles the reality outside it.



But B2B buying decisions are rarely neat.

> **The moment real customers become “they,” specificity starts leaking out of the work.**

The specific, not the average

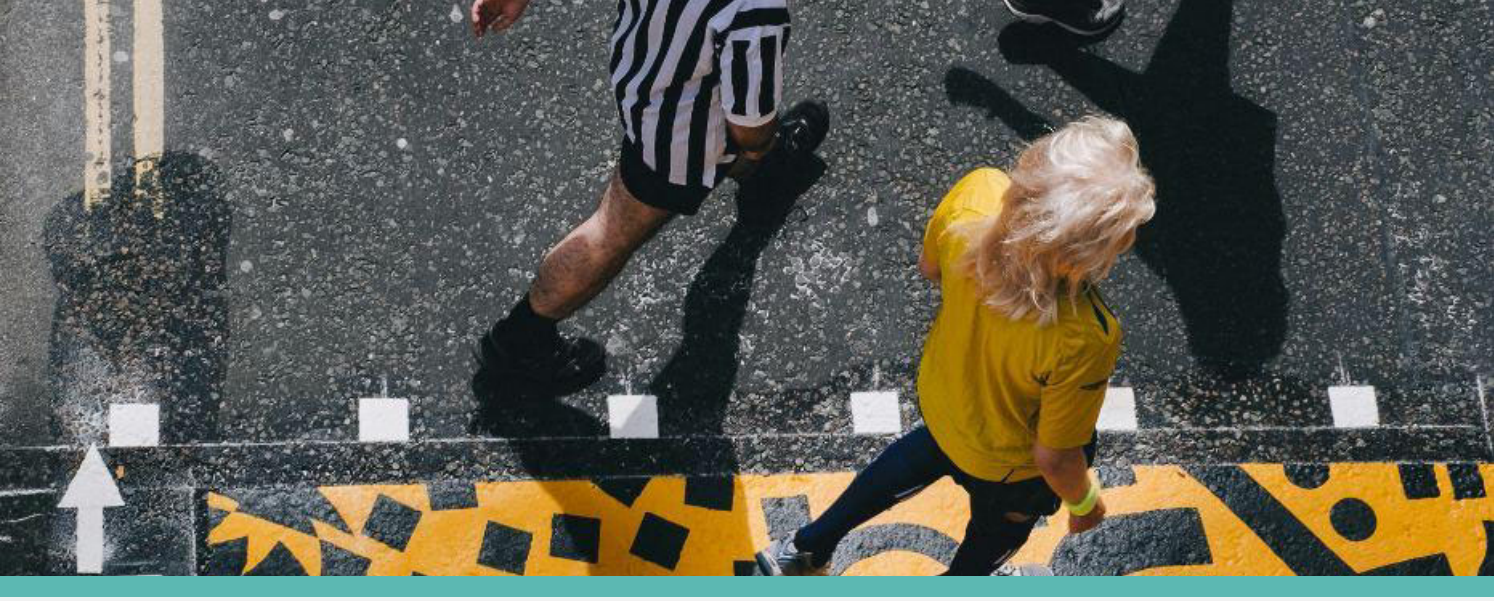
Inside customer organisations, purchases are shaped by competing stakeholders and political realities, by procurement pressure and operational constraints, by previous supplier experiences and the career risk of getting it wrong, by internal culture and the simple question of who trusts whom.

Trust and reputation sit alongside spreadsheets in every meaningful decision. Most B2B customers are not trying to make the perfect decision; they are trying to make a commercially defensible one.

The role of good B2B research is not to collude with that simplification. It is to challenge it. Because the moment real customers become “they,” specificity starts leaking out of the work. And when specificity disappears, decisions become less precise, less differentiated and less effective.



The best B2B insight does the opposite. It stays close to real customers for as long as possible: to real people, to real organisations, to real commercial context. Not just to understand what is happening, but to understand what it means and what should happen next.



Different customer realities exist

The deeper point about refusing “they” is this: different customer realities exist. The customers inside any category, segment or vertical are not the same. They face different pressures, hold different beliefs, work in different cultures, carry different past experiences and respond to different propositions.

The work of B2B insight is to identify the dimensions of difference that actually matter, to find the lines on which one customer is genuinely unlike another, and then to figure out where the richest pockets of opportunity sit.

That work is harder than it looks. While size and sector are the obvious dimensions, they are often not the most meaningful ones. The variables that genuinely separate customers from each other tend to be attitudinal and behavioural, and they only surface when the research is patient enough, specific enough and honest enough to find them.

Many organisations skip that work and then complain that their segmentation is not working. It is not working because it is cataloguing, not insight.

Finding the lines that genuinely divide

02 Labels vs. truth

Definitions are useful. But they are not the truth.



Every B2B category begins with definitions: SME, mid-market, enterprise; CIO, CFO, procurement lead; Financial Services, Manufacturing, Retail. These labels are operationally useful. They help structure CRM systems, sampling frameworks, sales territories and reports. But they are weak explanations of customer behaviour.

Two customer organisations that look almost identical on paper will often buy in completely different ways. Same size. Same sector. Same region. Completely different attitudes to technology, risk, innovation, supplier relationships or implementation.

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The same is true at the level of the individual decision-makers inside those organisations. “The CIO wants…” “Procurement cares about…” “The CFO thinks…” Job titles do not make decisions. People do. Every stakeholder carries individual experiences, incentives, anxieties and pressures into the buying process. Some are trying to accelerate transformation; others to minimise disruption. Some want innovation, others reassurance. In enterprise environments, “yes” is often shared across multiple stakeholders, but “no” can belong to a single individual.

This is one reason the best B2B research has more in common with strong creative practice than many researchers admit. Great creative teams rarely imagine anonymous demographic averages. They picture specific customers in specific situations. The same principle applies to insight. The closer the work stays to real decision-making reality, the more actionable it becomes.

Why do labels at both levels fail? Because the variables that most strongly shape behaviour are usually hidden underneath them, and these can be as varied as leadership mindset and growth ambition, operational maturity and appetite for change, the way an organisation handles risk, the trust it extends to suppliers, and the lingering effect of having got it wrong before. These are the fault lines that actually divide customers from each other.

Job titles do not make decisions. People do.



The easiest way to misunderstand customers is to average them.

This is why firmographic segmentation, comfortable as it is to lean on, rarely does the job by itself.

Company size, industry, geography, turnover, employee count: these are the visible dimensions that organise the world tidily. Useful, absolutely. Sufficient, rarely. The variables that genuinely predict behaviour in B2B are not the firmographic ones. They are attitudinal: how an organisation thinks about risk, how confident it feels about implementing change, what it expects from its suppliers, how urgent its growth ambition really is, and whether its internal culture welcomes new ways of working or resists them.

A segment earns its value when it predicts behaviour better than the administrative categories alone. Otherwise segmentation is cataloguing, not intelligence.

The definition tells you what the customer is. It rarely tells you how they think. Categories are useful for organising databases. They are much less useful for understanding people.



Good B2B research starts with categories. Great B2B research identifies the meaningful differences hidden inside them

03 The role of insight

The best research challenges the brief

Every research brief arrives with assumptions built into it. The client already believes something about their market, their positioning, their competitors, their proposition, their customers and their problem.

Sometimes those assumptions are correct. Sometimes they are incomplete. Sometimes they are the obstacle preventing the organisation from seeing the real issue.

Research that simply confirms existing thinking has limited strategic value. It decorates decisions that were already going to happen. The real value often lies somewhere more uncomfortable: in identifying the customer dynamic the client underestimated, exposing friction in implementation, revealing emotional drivers hidden beneath rational language, uncovering internal stakeholder tensions, or identifying where organisational assumptions no longer match customer reality.

This is not contrarianism for its own sake. It is disciplined, evidence-led thinking. The best B2B insight partners do not lazily collude with organisational shibboleths; they challenge them constructively. That is where intelligence earns its keep.



04 From evidence to action

Most research stops too early

A surprising amount of research stops at description. Here's what customers said. Here's the trend. Here's the segmentation. Here's the score. Useful, but insufficient. The strongest B2B insight works across three stages.

01

Here's What.

Description

What is happening? What are customers saying, doing, prioritising or changing? This is the descriptive layer, which is necessary, but on its own, not enough.

02

So What.

Implication

Why does it matter? What assumptions does this challenge? What implications does it create? What risks or opportunities emerge? What changes if this insight is true? This is where intelligence starts to take shape.

03

Now What.

Action

What should the organisation actually do differently? Change positioning, reprioritise which customers to pursue, refocus sales effort, adapt implementation, equip account teams differently, reconfigure the customer experience, develop different proof points for different stakeholders? Insight only creates value when it changes behaviour.

The gap between Here's What and Now What is where most research loses its potential ROI. The best B2B insight partners work across the full chain from evidence, to implication, to action.

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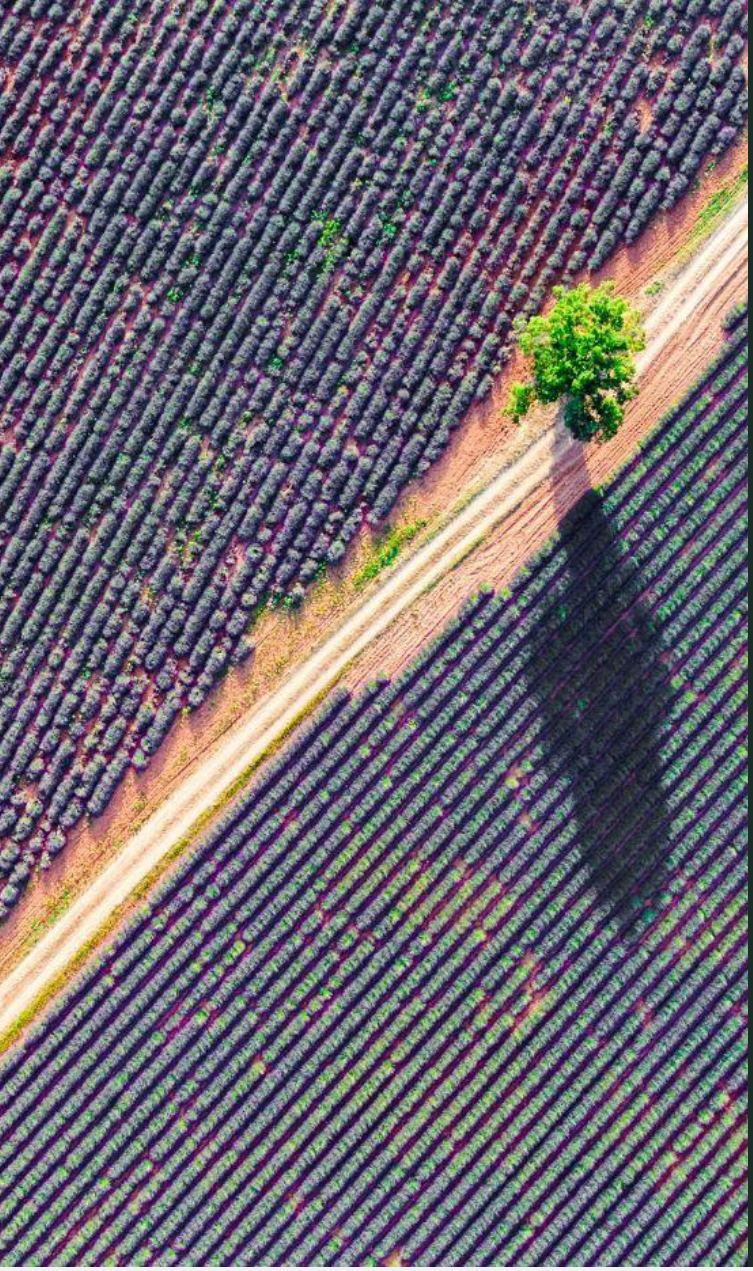

05 Brand is reputation

Partnership is a behaviour, not a slogan

Every B2B organisation claims to be a partner to its customers. Very few define what that means in practice.

Real partnership has observable behaviours: being responsive when called, taking accountability when things go wrong, being commercially honest, keeping the same people on the account, solving problems before being asked, knowing the customer's business well enough to be useful beyond the contract, and being willing to share risk rather than push it back. Partnership is not a positioning statement. It is an accumulated customer experience.

In B2B, brand is reputation.

This connects to another false distinction that still appears in B2B: the idea that brand and reputation are somehow separate. They are not. In B2B, brand is reputation. And reputation is built customer by customer, interaction by interaction, implementation by implementation.

The old distinction between “rational B2B decisions” and “emotional consumer decisions” is equally misleading. B2B customers absolutely make emotional decisions; they simply express them in commercial language. Fear of failure, fear of reputational damage, the need for reassurance, the desire for credibility, the confidence to commit: these are emotional realities wrapped inside operational and financial logic.

Which means understanding trust, confidence and reassurance is not soft thinking in B2B. It is decision-critical, because it is the texture of how real customer relationships actually work.



06 Genericness, not hallucination

Why this matters even more in the age of AI

AI will transform research and marketing. But its greatest risk is not hallucination.

It is genericness.

AI is exceptionally good at generating category averages and plausible generalisations. It is far weaker at recognising which contextual differences actually matter. Every AI system is only as sharp as the data and assumptions it is grounded in. Without high-quality contextual inputs, it naturally drifts toward averages, conventions and category-level patterns. It becomes extremely efficient at producing plausible sameness, and plausible sameness is the opposite of customer understanding.



Poor research gives AI better clichés.

Good research gives it judgement.

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Better conditioning, not faster automation

That is why high-quality, human-led contextual intelligence is more valuable in the age of AI, not less. The future of B2B insight is not faster automation. It is better conditioning. AI does not invent understanding; it extends whatever understanding it has been given. The work of good B2B research is to give it something worth extending: insight sharp enough, specific enough and honest enough about what real customers actually want and do that any AI built on top of it produces judgement, not just generalisations.

AI will make it easier than ever to generate plausible summaries of "the customer." Which means the organisations that win will not be the ones with the most information. They will be the ones closest to reality.

Closest to how decisions are actually made.
Closest to the differences that genuinely matter.
Closest to their customers.

That starts with a surprisingly simple discipline.

The discipline

Don’t say “they.”

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B2B insight / white paper · Context series