

R O B I N R O B I N S

TRUST-BASED MARKETING FOR IT SERVICE BUSINESSES

A Proven Guide On How To Stand Out From
The Competition, Stop Competing On Price
And Attract Premium High-Value Clients

*Early Edition
Working Draft*



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About The Author

Hi, my name is Robin Robins.

Yes, that is my “real” name and, no, I’m *not* secretly married to Tony Robbins.

For over 25 years, I’ve focused on one thing: Leading (and sometimes dragging) MSP owners out of the soul-crushing “why did I ever start this nightmare?” daily grind and into actual profitable, recurring-revenue freedom. I help them land High-Value Clients (HVCs), crank up sales and profits, and rediscover that entrepreneurial fire — because nobody should wake up wondering if they can sell their business for enough to afford therapy.

I founded Technology Marketing Toolkit® (TMT) and built it into the largest and most successful MSP peer group on the planet. (“On the planet” is total marketing hype but IS true. If you know of a secret MSP society on Mars with Elon and his robot army, let me know and I’ll update my LinkedIn profile.)

I also founded and built *MSP Success Magazine*, Big Red Media and the *Titans Of The Industry* before selling the business to Kaseya in 2025 for the kind of money that ends all of the “Is Robin is full of it?” debates. Today, I still work with our MSP members under the new Kaseya leadership in an advisory role, but I do it from my yacht that sits off my own private island. (Okay, that last part is not true.)



**What do I think are my greatest professional accomplishments?
Two things...**

First, the community of ridiculously smart, driven and high-integrity MSP owners I was able to build. Doing so has taught me more than any MBA course ever could and proved to me that nice guys and gals don’t always finish last — sometimes they finish with seven and eight figure exits after making millions in profits.

Second, the number of MSP business I’ve help lift out of poverty and “T.E.C.H. with helpers hell,” showing them how to become a “R.E.A.L. entrepreneur.”

Why does my approach work? For starters, I’ve DONE what I teach, unlike a lot of Instagram “gurus” whose greatest expertise lies in selling you courses about the thing they’ve only read about others doing.
Actual experience beats rented Lambos every time.

Everything I’ve done is founded in research, testing and refinement of ideas across multiple clients to spot patterns and build repeatable success blueprints, not just one-off winners.

Bottom line? I won’t just teach you how to grow sales — I’ll show you how to lead your MSP and become a more confident, capable CEO so that you make REAL money instead of living paycheck to paycheck, ugly-crying in the shower when the rent is due.



An Important Note To My Reader

You're now holding in your hot little digital "hands" an early working draft of my book on *Trust-Based Marketing For IT Service Businesses*.

My intention is to finish and publish this by late 2026. While this draft is *incomplete*, I'm confident it will deliver sufficient "meat on the bone" to be worth a read.

Here's what I'd like to ask of you, my valued reader:

1. If you're NOT an MSP (managed services provider), don't dismiss what I've written here. While many of my stories and references will be about MSPs selling outsourced IT support, due to my experience in marketing and selling those services, this book is completely applicable to any B2B service business.
2. After reading this, please write to me at book@robinrobins.com with your thoughts on what you like about this early version, what you don't like and any advice you have for me to make this a highly productive and valuable resource for you. I promise your note comes directly to me – and I will respond.
3. If you are a service marketer of any kind who is effectively using trust-based marketing and selling in your business AND you'd like to be featured in the final published version of this book, I would be most grateful to you for sharing with me what you're doing. Use book@robinrobins.com to share your strategies with me.

Thank you for your time and attention, as well as the TRUST you have bestowed on me by engaging.

Dedicated to your success,

Robin



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Introduction:

Marketing And Selling Services Has Radically Changed – And Is Never Coming Back

As a senior consultant to thousands of MSPs on go-to-market and client acquisition strategies for the past 24 years, I've seen the slow "death" of marketing and selling as we know it coming for some time – *and AI just put the final nail in the coffin.*

There are several growing problems, accelerated by the Covid disruption and more recently by the explosion of AI, that are making it infinitely more difficult for ALL service-based businesses to acquire customers at a reasonable cost. They are:

- **A massive increase in (cheap) competition.** We are unbelievably oversaturated with buying options in ALL categories of business services – and I believe we've finally hit the tipping point, where growth has become a battle of inches. In the IT services industry, where I'm most experienced, I've seen an explosion of new competition in the last five years unlike any other period in our industry's history. Much of this is being fueled thanks to AI-powered tools and vendors offering done-for-you services, AI tools and other turnkey "white label" solutions, lowering the barrier to entry to start a service-based business of any kind. That means that anyone, qualified or not, can push a website live and start a service-based business without heavy capital requirements. And with AI making marketing infinitely easier, they can quickly and cheaply create copy, ads and other marketing assets that make them appear larger and more qualified than they are. Worst of all, the vast majority of these start-ups are what I call "techs with helpers," who are not attempting to scale their business – their main motivation is to avoid having a boss. Therefore, they're happy to offer their services CHEAP as a means for getting and keeping customers. They are unfettered by having to operate a physical office with a highly experienced management team, professional account managers and a service department. While we all know you get what you pay for, this multitude of cheap competitors is sufficient in number to put a thorn in the side of any REAL entrepreneur attempting to grow a true professional services business offering quality services.



- **Competition is no longer the guy down the street.** The Covid shutdowns forced all businesses to adopt digital communication platforms like Teams and Zoom, normalizing work-from-home. That drove many entrepreneurs to implement systems to serve customers remote – and it ALL stuck.

This normalization of working with remote teams has opened the door for entrepreneurs to no longer feel constrained to having a “local” office to service customers. For example, telemedicine has exploded, with one report from the Alliance For Connected Care showing that 73% of patients planned to receive care via remote telemedicine after the pandemic.

In the IT industry, being local used to be a necessity for getting clients. Now, most of what MSPs do is remote work anyway – and while having a local presence still offers an advantage, it’s far less important than it used to be five to 10 years ago, contributing to the proliferation of what I’ve coined “Super MSPs” cropping up.

These private-equity platforms are aggressively expanding across the country to target the small and midsize enterprises that are the bread and butter of the small, privately owned MSP that used to have a “hometown” advantage against these corporate giants.

This is true in all industries, not just in IT services. Small, local CPAs, law firms, financial services and marketing agencies are all now competing with corporate giants (or larger firms) that are marketing nationally with BIG budgets and BIG sales teams, with ONE goal: to cherry-pick the best clients away from the smaller firms.

- **Prospects have become more demanding about your SALES process.** Thanks to this massive increase in competition, all the power is in the buyer’s hands – *and they know it*. Tolerance for mediocrity is ZERO, and prospects have extremely high standards for how they should be treated from start to finish.

Prospects used to tolerate slow, careless and lazy sales follow-up by salespeople. They might even call a company *multiple times* to try to get someone to help them buy. **Not anymore.**

Now they *expect* you to answer your phone live, with a real, knowledgeable and helpful person – not AI and not someone named “Kevin” with a heavy accent who is clearly not on US soil. They expect you to *eagerly* follow up to win their



business. They expect you to SERVE them as they evaluate hiring you – and if you don't, they simply move on and “google” the next provider. Worse, they act like a spoiled brat, trashing you online.

Just look at bad Google reviews for service providers. Often, the people posting aren't even customers – *they're prospects who are angry because the business “never returned my call,” or bungled the sales process in some manner.*

As a service business owner, you have to be as meticulous in building trust in your marketing and sales process as you are in your service delivery. Remember, this is the first “taste” your prospect will have of what it's like to work with you.

Get it wrong, and you'll lose trust, weaken your position as a “trusted authority” and be forced to fight other providers on price.

- **Thanks to AI, all the difficulty and cost of creating marketing assets and content have gone to zero**, *flooding* media channels with a veritable tsunami of content, ads and promotions, and bombarding prospects with automated spam calls, e-mails, texts and messages.

This massive increase in marketing noise is causing consumers to become tone-deaf to ALL marketing promises and install even more barriers to keep marketers and salespeople OUT.

It has also made it massively more difficult to get prospects to consume your content, be it a video, report, webinar or eBook like this one. They are *awash* in content everywhere, which raises the bar EXTREMELY high for information marketers to create content that is entertaining and engaging enough to grab and HOLD a prospect's attention long enough to influence them.

- **We're living in a trust recession.** Political and corporate scandals fueled by social media, the fake news media, big tech's manipulation of content, cyber scams and now AI faking videos, photos and images have all created a rapid movement to a ZERO TRUST world.

In business consulting, there's been an explosion of artificial “gurus” who no longer need talent or experience to present as experts in what they do – they simply need a free AI tool to write a book for them or create a fake picture of them next to a private jet or hanging out with celebrities.

The default is no longer “innocent until proven guilty.” EVERYONE is assumed to be a cheat, liar or con artist – guilty until proven, unequivocally, innocent.



The worse this all gets, the more current sales and marketing tactics fail.

Marketing agencies whose bread and butter depend on pumping out digital advertisements, funnels, websites, videos and all other manner of marketing communications are in a panic, trying to figure out more hacks and tricks to deal with the growing failure of the marketing they produce.

The vanity metrics of fans and followers, likes, clicks and open rates aren't delivering the meaningful results of sales and profits CEOs want as today's overwhelmed, anxious and distrustful prospects aren't falling for their slick ads anymore.

What they painfully don't want to admit is that the approach that *used* to work is failing, and the solution is **not** more ads, more hype, more media, more content, more extreme methods and more NOISE.

The solution requires turning back to the time-honored, reliable business strategies founded in authenticity, generosity and TRUST that most businesses have drifted away from, neglected or simply forgotten.

For those who embrace this new ZERO TRUST economy, there is greater opportunity for growth and acquisition of not only "more" customers, but higher-value, more appreciative and far more loyal clients – but the "fix" is not simple and will require an entirely different approach to marketing, selling and business strategy.

If you're ready for it, this book will change your business forever for the positive and allow you to FINALLY get the quality and quantity of clients you want.



Chapter 1

Earning Trust In A Zero-Trust World

How often have you said to someone, “*Just trust me*”?

How often has someone said that to *you*?

It’s frequently uttered as a shortcut to get someone to take our advice without having to go through a *long* explanation and a lot of “convincing” as to *why* they should do what we’re telling them to do.

“Just trust me” is a personal “seal of approval” that what we’re recommending is truly in the best interests of the person we’re advising and that it’s something they’ll be glad they did.

When we have an established high-trust relationship with someone, simply saying, “Trust me,” is often sufficient to get them to take our advice. But when talking to someone who doesn’t know us – or worse, **when we’re in a situation where we are trying to sell something to someone – expecting the other person to simply trust us because we say so is grossly insufficient and supremely lazy, even if we (the seller) are sincere and providing truly accurate advice.**

Consider the annual Gallup polls on honesty and ethics.

Year after year, salespeople – and now social media influencers and advertising practitioners – are routinely rated as some of the *least-trusted professionals* in society, with only 8% of Americans considering them as “high” or “very high” in honesty and ethics, and those in the 8% are very likely in the profession.

In our own lives, our defenses *instantly* go up when we’re confronted by a salesperson, getting *angry* if they somehow figure out how to bypass our spam filters, gatekeepers, call blockers, social media filters or even our personal space when they come knocking on the door to try to prospect us.

And now, with AI’s ability to fake images, videos, voices and stories, turbocharging scammers and giving them sophisticated tools to separate us from our money, we are entering into an era of ZERO trust that is only going to get worse.

We know this – yet so many businesses just expect their prospects to throw all caution to the wind and simply trust them. To take their call. To click on their e-mail. To accept their arguments for why you NEED what they’re selling.



More stunning? They're shocked when their marketing gets a tiny fraction of a percent response rate – *or worse, no response at all.*

Their logic is as follows:

We offer a valuable, much-needed service at a very reasonable price! We consistently deliver on time and perform as promised, delivering far greater value than our competitors! These prospects absolutely need what we're offering, yet they constantly ignore us and say, "We're fine," when we know they're not fine. If they simply took our advice, they would all drastically reduce or even eliminate a number of costly, stressful and disastrous events! *What the hell is wrong with them? Are they stupid? Ignorant? Cheap?*

While all of this may be true, the problem is that all the prospects they're talking to have been repeatedly disappointed, lied to, cheated, scammed and taken advantage of by fast-talking salespeople and overhyped marketers with a quota.

They are Charlie Brown and you are Lucy, promising THIS time will be different. THIS time, you won't pull the football away. THIS time, they need to listen. THIS time you'll change everything for the better...*and they just don't trust you.*

Overcoming The Trust Chasm

Most marketers attempt to fix falling response rates or difficulty in getting someone to take your phone call or book an appointment by doing MORE.

They shout louder and more frequently.

When one e-mail, phone call, social media post or other outreach doesn't get the results they want, they send two. Then three. Then they're sending messages every hour on the hour until the prospect blocks them.

What they fail to understand is that they are only one of 70,000 fans in a football stadium attempting to get the attention of a handful of players on the field so that the players listen to THEIR message.

And when yelling louder and more frequently doesn't work?

They try another agency. Another guru. Another media. Another "new" approach. They fire the sales and marketing team and bring in some new recruits. They outsource, because if it fails, it's at least cheap. Rinse, repeat.



And when they've failed their way through a few dozen different attempts, pockets empty, they simply give up on marketing and revert back to relying on whatever referrals float their way.

You cannot win trust recession with a shouting match, any more than you can fix singing off-key by singing louder and more frequently.

You can no longer expect customers to "just trust you."

You must implement trust-based marketing and sales systems that are specifically engineered to build confidence in the hearts and minds of your prospects – and it has to be based in authenticity, honesty and generosity.

Is The Juice Worth The Squeeze?

Becoming the most trusted service business in your market will take considerable time and effort. It won't be cheap and it won't be easy. There is no quick fix or cheap hack that leads to trust – so if you're looking for the marketing equivalent of a "sales booty call," this book and approach isn't for you.

Becoming the "most trusted" service business in your market will require you to **fall in love with your customer**, NOT your product, your ideas or even your bank account (although making a lot of money *will* be a by-product of this approach).

And you must be prepared to play the long game, not just "do marketing" when it's convenient or, worse, when you desperately need sales.

But when you build a trust-based reputation with the right kinds of clients, strategic partners and community, it is a strong fortress, built on a solid foundation that will see you through any recession, bad hire, tough competitor or business challenge.

Here are just a few of the benefits you'll reap:

- Prospects will reach out to YOU, not the other way around.
- You'll get exponentially more referrals.
- You'll be able to command premium fees with little to no price resistance.
- The sales process will be easier and less stressful.
- Your close rate will be exponentially higher.



- You won't need to do as much "convincing" to get prospects to buy.
- You'll attract higher-value prospects with more complex needs.
- You'll have more respectful, compliant clients who take your advice.
- Getting free PR will be easier.
- You'll have much lower CAC (customer acquisition costs).
- You'll have fewer collection problems.
- You'll get greater honesty from your prospects and clients.

When clients see you as a TRUSTED AUTHORITY, everything related to client attraction, selling and service gets easier because a big problem for service businesses is accepting and attempting to please low money "problem children" as clients out of desperation.



Chapter 2

Why Everything You Think You Know About Sales And Marketing Is Horribly WRONG

For years, I started keynote presentations to MSPs with a simple question:

“What is marketing?”

After all, the audience is typically there to hear me talk about how to implement some kind of marketing plan – so shouldn't we start by clarifying what great marketing is and what it's supposed to do?

Surprisingly, most business owners have never thought about it.

The first answers shouted out are always the same: “To get your name out there!” “To build brand awareness!” If I let the comments continue, we'll eventually get to answers that make more sense, such as “To generate more leads” or “To bring in a customer.”

Then I'll ask them to describe a marketing campaign. Those answers are very tactical: “Sending e-mails” or “Making cold calls.”

So, let me give you the most *basic* and *limited* definition:

Marketing is the practice of attracting right-fit prospects who genuinely want to hear more about how you can help them.

That's it.

Obtaining *permission* to communicate so you can *earn* trust.

Marketing is NOT spamming thousands of people about your services, hoping some poor schmuck takes the bait.

Marketing is NOT about “getting the word out there” by bombarding people with generic promotions sent out en masse, showing up *unwelcome* in their text messages, LinkedIn account or inbox.

Marketing is not about tricks or hacks or gimmicks.



And GREAT marketing is NOT a department that acts in a silo, disconnected from the core strategy of your business as an afterthought, abdicated to a marketing manager or agency who has zero authority or even input into your company's core values, brand promise or strategic direction.

If you attempt to utilize these selfish, now outdated and incredibly foolish ideas, your efforts to attract new clients will fail. Every time.

The Client-Getting Game Has Changed. Radically.

Most business owners want marketing to do one thing: Deliver a higher *quality* and *quantity* of customers.

But to do this, you need far more than a clever slogan, great SEO/GEO positioning or a professional website. These marketing tools and tactics just aren't sufficient anymore.

Thanks to Al Gore's invention (the Internet), the entire game of "marketing" to influence and acquire customers has radically changed over the last couple of decades, coupled with the massive proliferation of digital media.

And now we have AI.

When I first started my sales career in the mid-'90s, being the biggest or most well-known brand carried a lot of weight because prospects had limited access to information about what companies and options were available.

And because buying media and producing great marketing pieces were very expensive, you could just buy the market by outspending your competition.

Today, the biggest barrier to entry – the cost and complexity of marketing production – has been lowered *dramatically*.

Thanks to AI, even small companies can look "big" on a beer budget.

Social media has opened a line of communication to practically anyone you want to gain access to. The ability to secure lists of prospects and data on your prospects is everywhere. You can buy automation tools that will work 24/7/365 to drip prospecting messages, e-mails or calls to your prospects for pennies.

And an ever-growing number of AI tools has enabled businesses to produce pretty damn good marketing ads, copy, video, websites and more *for free* or nearly free.



It's EASY to *look* like a reputable, *trusted* business. **But while the expense and effort required to *appear* trustworthy and credible have plummeted, the cost and difficulty of acquiring new customers have skyrocketed.**

That's because prospects have become tone-deaf to advertising. They are highly skeptical of everything, incredibly fickle and no longer believe a single word you say. They're being bombarded daily with hundreds of companies trying to sell them something. Your inbound cold call, spam e-mail, junk text or not-so-cleverly-hidden LinkedIn sales booty call is blocked – and if it somehow gets through, it's instantly deleted because they don't know you and certainly don't trust you.

Starting With The Correct Premise

If you want your marketing to actually work, you need an entirely new starting point. Let's talk about MSPs for a minute since it's the market I know the most about.

For an MSP, the starting point of their marketing communications is typically to talk about what they *do*. "We deliver managed IT services and support, vCIO, cybersecurity, VoIP and compliance services."

If you're an MSP reading this, that made perfect sense. But if you're NOT an MSP, and you're the buyer of those services, this sounds like corporate "geek-speak" gobbledeygook.

Aside from confusing the heck out of your prospects, telling people what you do is *grossly* insufficient for gaining trust for two reasons.

First, your prospects are saturated with options. *Good* ones. The world does not need another CPA firm, attorney, marketing firm, financial services firm or MSP. You do tax returns and payroll? Well, whoop-de-do. So do 20, 30 or 50 other people within a stone's throw of my office.

Second, **people don't think in terms of solutions, they think in terms of PROBLEMS** (more on this in a later chapter). You might *think* prospects would automatically understand that they need vCIO services to avoid unpredictable IT costs, cybersecurity risks, excessive downtime and low productivity, but they DON'T – and it's a huge mistake to assume they'll connect the dots.

The next level, slightly above marketing what you DO, is telling people how WELL you do it. While this is better than merely stating what you do, it's only marginally better and still falls flat for one major reason:



GREAT service is not a strategic advantage. It's *expected*.

A restaurant that promises “good food” *should* be able to say that. A CPA that promises reliable and accurate bookkeeping and tax advice *should* be able to do that. And an MSP that promises responsive IT support *should* be able to deliver that.

And since all the most desirable customers are already working with one of your competitors in some capacity, merely telling people what you do – or even promising that you're “better” – just isn't enticing enough for them to entertain the disruptive, risky process of firing them and hiring you.

As I've already established, **prospects don't trust your promises of “better.”**

They also won't be influenced by your old-school “features and benefits” approach to selling.

They *know* there's some kind of unpleasant downside, small print or “gotcha” clause you're not telling them about. They *expect* you to exaggerate. They *anticipate* that the “brochure” is leaving out important details and only showcasing the upside.

And the time, effort and frustration of switching IT providers is just too great for them to take the leap.

If you want to succeed at marketing, START with the premise that nobody NEEDS you or TRUSTS you.

To many, this is a very desperate message. Does that mean all hope is lost? Has the MSP industry become too saturated and too competitive? Not at all.

A Case Study On Starting With The Right Premise

Let me tell you about the founder of the Jones Soda Company, Peter van Stolk. Peter built a multimillion-dollar soft drink company in an extremely competitive environment against well-established and well-funded competitors like Coke and Pepsi who already owned a massive market share and were already selling billions of cans of soda every year.

How did he do it?

For starters, he didn't try to simply make a better version of cola. Pepsi and Coke already owned that space.



He started with an *entirely* different premise. A correct one.

In an interview he said, “I started with the concept that the world doesn’t need another soda company.”

So, he made a product that consumers would *want* to buy because it was fun, entertaining and interesting. He came up with “cool” new flavors, such as blue bubble gum and pineapple cream soda.

He started putting people’s names and photographs on the bottles, evolving into using augmented reality technology on the labels to bring the photos to life.

One soda, marketed as “Dave,” became notorious for containing 1,000 milligrams of hemp, which generated more free publicity than Jones Soda could ever afford to buy.

Peter created limited-edition flavors, such as turkey and gravy, peanut butter and jelly, and green bean casserole, only produced in small quantities to create scarcity.

People bought it in droves despite the fact that customers said the turkey-and-gravy soda tasted like the “greasy residue at the bottom of a roasting pan after cooking a turkey.” This “negative” review created massive curiosity and a “challenge” aspect to drinking it.

But the most important point of this story is the premise. Peter didn’t try to beat Coke or Pepsi at their own game by making a “better” cola. He created raving-fan customers by going in an entirely different direction, delivering value in an entirely different way.

If you want to win at marketing and getting new customers, start with this premise: Nobody needs “just another” MSP, and nobody believes a word you say about being better, faster, more capable and more reliable.

Start by honestly seeing things the way your prospects see them, not assuming they should automatically “trust you” and your promises, thinking they are “uninformed” or “stupid” if they don’t.

They already have an IT company.

Why do they NEED you?

Answer that correctly, and you’ve got the right foundation for a brilliant marketing strategy. Fail to answer it, and marketing will be akin to pushing a rope uphill.



Chapter 3

Tapping Into Your Prospect's Secret, Desperate Desire To Find Someone They CAN Trust

"Robin, I need your advice on something *deeply personal*."

When client consultations start out like this, I take a deep breath and steady myself. I've heard some of the most horrific stories from members who share very personal and often deeply troubling problems during private consultations like this one.

This guy was a long-term member of mine. Someone I had been working with for over a year who had a really solid, profitable and growing MSP. He trusted my advice and was one of my better clients.

"Okay, whatcha got going on?" was my reply.

He proceeded to tell me about his failing relationship with his wife. I knew him to be a good dad and a faithful husband who was working his tail off in his MSP business to provide for his family and build a business that would give them the lifestyle and security he never had as a kid.

But his marriage had fallen apart. His wife said she just wasn't in love with him anymore and told him she was taking the kids and leaving him within the week.

He said, "Tell me what to do to win her back."

At the time, I was married but without kids. I also had never had to deal with a spouse leaving me since I was still relatively newly married to my current husband and had no problems in our relationship. I didn't know his wife other than casually, and I really didn't know any of the details of his personal relationship. I also had zero experience in marriage counseling. I'm in marketing, so I can help you get a *date*, but creating a "marketing campaign" to save a marriage with kids involved was a whole other level of experience I just didn't have.

I told him all of this and suggested he consult a marriage counselor. He said he would, but he still pressed me for my advice.

You might think the above scenario is a singular and very rare occurrence: someone asking me for advice on something that is clearly not in my lane of expertise.



Yet better than 30% of the conversations I have with members are about them seeking some type of guidance from me on a topic that is far afield of marketing, sales and business-related topics.

Why is this?

Why would we ask advice from someone who clearly is NOT qualified to provide advice on a topic we need expert advice on, particularly when the advice is about something *extremely* important to get right?

Because we live in a zero-trust world, people are *desperate* to find someone they CAN trust to guide them. And once they find that person, they follow their advice without question. About *everything*.

This is why being perceived as the most trusted company, service, product or advisor in your category is the single biggest competitive advantage you can have – even if you are not the most qualified for the job (more on this in the next chapter).

Trust And The High-Value Client

I cannot stress this enough: Great marketing doesn't just get you any client by any means. It should be *intentionally* and *strategically* designed to attract the right type of customer – what I call the “high-value client,” or HVC.

While every business will have a slightly different criteria for what constitutes an HVC, there are some commonalities, with the most important one being **they are more discerning buyers who are willing to pay for quality advice or work.**

They *prioritize* TRUST over PRICE.

Therefore, high-value clients represent far greater value to you, both in top-line revenue and bottom-line profits. They not only follow your advice but appreciate and respect what you do. They aren't “fussy” buyers, nitpicking everything – they are happy to fit within your recommended solution and have reasonable expectations because they're typically more sophisticated buyers. They pay on time, don't ask for discounts and favors and are often great sources of referrals to other HVCs (the birds-of-a-feather principle).

Because of this, HVCs have different criteria for who they trust to take advice from and work with. Let me give you a very simplistic example.



If a prospect has an income of about \$70,000 and is living in a house valued at \$250,000 and discovers that the tile in their bathroom is starting to crack and needs to be replaced, they are likely to do one of two things.

- 1) If they're *relatively* handy, they'll go to YouTube to watch a series of short DIY videos on how to lay tile in a bathroom. Then they'll head over to Home Depot or Lowe's one Saturday morning to consult whatever random person happens to be working the tile department that day for advice on what to buy so they can do it themselves to save a buck.
- 2) If they're NOT handy, they'll go online to search "tile guy near me" and reach out to a couple of companies for a quote. They'll pick the one that "doesn't charge too much," likely beating him up on price and nitpicking the *small*, low-money job they hired him to do.

For the company that sells flooring and tile, this is NOT an HVC, or "high-value client." Now, let me give you another scenario...

A prospect is living in a \$5 million, custom-built home with an income of over \$1MM a year. He discovers the tile on the bathroom floor needs to be replaced. He is not schlepping down to Home Depot on his day off to consult the random customer service clerk working the tile department so he can waste his entire weekend doing manual labor to save a buck to fix the floor. He's also not going to call any random tile company he found online – particularly if they're "cheap." In fact, cheapness is a red flag to this prospect.

He is going to go to his builder or a *trusted* handyman or house manager he employs to find someone he feels comfortable inviting into his home who will do a QUALITY job. Price is a consideration, but it's nowhere near the top of the list.

Now, you might argue this is a bad analogy that is unnecessarily picking on "less fortunate" people, claiming they are not worthy of selling services to and cannot be HVCs – and on the surface, I can see how you might come to that conclusion.

After all, I'm 100% certain there are some prospects in that first group who truly are HVCs and are willing to pay for a quality job as well as rich, entitled a-holes who misbehave as well – **but marketing is based on probabilities.**

For a prospect to buy, they MUST have two things: 1) the *desire* to buy, and 2) the *ability* to buy.



That combination is what makes them an HVC: 1) The ability to pay, and 2) a higher perceived risk of hiring the wrong person.

The guy living paycheck to paycheck might have the desire to hire a pro to do the job, but not the ability.

Nobody Got Fired For Buying IBM

IBM dominated the IT services market in the 1960s and '70s by becoming the safest choice. When the phrase “Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM” became a popularized mantra among their buyers, likely fueled by their sales force, prospects got nervous for making a different choice.

IBM used this trusted position to set industry standards.

They used it to push competitors out of major enterprise accounts.

They used it to hold and gain market share from cheaper and better alternatives.

They used it to dominate government, corporate and banking industries, becoming the default provider for mission-critical systems.

When you become the “safe” choice, everything pertaining to marketing, selling, closing, overcoming objections, fee resistance and getting clients to comply with your advice becomes *infinitely* easier.

Here’s Who You’re Selling To

To fully appreciate why owning a high-trust position trumps all, you need to understand the buyer you’re selling to.

They are massively overwhelmed with problems and priorities they perceive as far more important than IT, which means just getting them to meet with you and discuss IT issues is a challenge.

They’re overwhelmed with information but lack the wisdom and experience to make good decisions regarding anything related to IT – and they know it.

They are incredibly time-pressured, lacking the ability to deeply research EVERY decision they need to make.



They're highly indecisive, horrible procrastinators and don't have a process for making decisions, period.

They know that if they make a bad decision, particularly one like choosing the wrong IT company, their choice will carry serious negative consequences beyond just financial losses.

They know that even if they invest time into doing their due diligence to find a more qualified IT company, they STILL could make a bad decision because there is no guarantee the new IT company will do a good job for *them*.

They fear change and often default to the "devil they know," staying with their current IT company *even if* they know that company's not doing a great job.

All of this is why getting someone to meet with you to discuss the possibility of better IT services is so damned difficult – but it's also why being the most trusted IT firm in your market area is the most powerful way to leapfrog over ALL of this.

Your Prospect's Secret Desire

Your prospect just wants someone they can trust to simply tell them what to do.

Read that sentence above again and highlight it. It's a biggie.

Trust is a shortcut. When a prospect or client trusts you, they don't question your advice. They don't question your fees. They don't question every line in your contract. They don't shop you against other competitors.

They simply do what you tell them to do.

They want a financial advisor who they can trust enough to hand over their life savings to preserve and grow.

A doctor they can trust with their life to perform a serious surgery – or the life of their child or other loved one.

A CPA they can trust to give them accurate tax advice so they don't overpay or – worse – underpay and end up with a million-dollar-plus tax bill they weren't prepared for.

And an IT company they can trust that won't sell them more than they need, that truly IS as responsive as the website says and will actually do the "behind the scenes" work of backups and security they're paying for.



When you're selling a service where the "product" is intangible and the consequences of choosing the wrong provider are high, being seen as the most trusted provider in your category is the most powerful position you can hold.

Trust And Differentiation

Many MSPs I've worked with over the years struggle with showcasing differential value and communicating a USP – or unique selling proposition – to prospective customers. But this is not unique to MSPs. I find CPAs, attorneys and financial advisors in the same pickle.

A good USP answers this critical question: "Why *should* I choose your MSP/CPA/firm over all the other services companies vying for my business?"

What most MSPs do is attempt to find or manufacture something unique in the *tangible* services they deliver. A unique service approach. A better, faster help desk. Compliance, security or vCIO services baked in. Today, AI-powered services delivered cheaper and faster.

The problem is, there's no real differentiation in the *delivery* of IT services.

All MSPs are essentially selling the same or very similar services to the same customers with the same problems, using the same vendors, pulling from the same pool of talent under very similar terms, conditions and pricing. And if you DO happen to figure out a unique service delivery, it's only a matter of time before all of your competitors copy it.

And even IF what you sell is somehow truly unique, it's not *perceived* that way in the marketplace with prospects who don't really understand how you do what you do.

To make matters worse, your customers don't want to buy the "Cadillac" of IT services and support. IT infrastructure services, help desk, cybersecurity and IT compliance are just not viewed as "strategic" investments that deliver an exponential return.

They're seen as cost centers that need to be controlled and budgeted (don't shoot the messenger – you know this is how most of the prospects you encounter think).

When your business looks, acts and smells like everyone else AND there is an abundance of options (which there are), you can only win based on two basic things:

1. Price
2. Relationships



Since “low price” is not likely where most of you reading this want to compete, and the customer shopping solely on price is not your definition of a high-value client, we default to relationships.

And “relationships” is the generic word people use to *describe people they trust*.

Problem is, you can’t build a *personal* relationship with hundreds or even thousands of prospects and clients alike – but you can build a *reputation*, which is essentially what a brand is.

Therefore, the purpose of marketing should be to build a REPUTATION for being the most trusted provider to your target market. How do you do this? That is the question we’re about to answer in the remainder of this book.



Chapter 4

5 Questions Your Prospect Needs You To Answer Before They'll Trust You

On my desk sits an old coffee mug with a mantra I coined over two decades ago:

“Nobody knows how good you are until after the sale. Before they buy, they only know how good your marketing is.”

As you know by now, I have an entirely different definition for “marketing” than most people. I also believe that great marketing paired with a horribly dysfunctional sales process is *worse* than no marketing at all. At least you won't fund the process of hurting your own reputation.

Sadly, this industry is awash in worthless, dysfunctional and unproductive marketing and sales efforts, focusing all marketing communications on the services (“We do vCIO, managed services, cybersecurity, etc.”) or maybe features and benefits. The sales process that follows isn't much better and is often worse.

The reason this is flawed is because prospects don't really know what they need, so advertising solutions (the stuff you do) don't give you any trust points or advantages and can actually confuse a prospect into thinking you're “not for them.”

And as we've already established, what prospects are looking for first and foremost is a TRUSTED ADVISOR. **A reliable, credible and honest professional who will just tell them what they need and what to do, without taking advantage of their ignorance and vulnerability.**

To that end, your marketing needs to clearly and succinctly answer certain questions that all prospects have about you and your company, before we can even get into solutions, price, contracts, terms and even the superiority of your services.

It's important to note that most prospects won't ask these questions directly. They'll go to your website and try to get a sense of who you are and whether you're right for them (this is why the “About Us” page is the second most visited page on a website). Or they'll call your office and ask a few questions about your services, hoping to get a better idea about the “type” of company they're dealing with.

This is the emotional part of the sales process: ***How do prospects feel when they interact with you?***



Some of the “answers” to these “questions” are not something you put on a page in your website – they are answered by how you do things.

The way your phone is answered tells me a LOT about your company and whether or not you truly are “responsive” and truly care about “customer service.” A rude receptionist or even a well-meaning but clumsy, untrained employee can wreck your chances of winning a prospect’s trust within minutes, yet most MSPs give this critical aspect of making a first impression zero thought. If they do, the thought is “How can I get an AI bot to handle inbound calls as cheaply as possible?”

Dumb on steroids.

So, as we go into these questions, ask yourself what you’re doing right now, intentionally, to answer them not only with your marketing communications, but also through your actions.

The 5 Questions Every Prospect Wants Answered

Question #1: Will you tell me the truth?

Are you going to tell me the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Witnesses are asked to take this oath in court before delivering their testimony to ensure they will provide accurate answers without omissions or embellishments. *That’s what your prospect wants from you as well.*

Back when I made the mistake of buying Salesforce and signing a 12-month contract I couldn’t get out of, I discovered that most of the automation and systems the salesperson had shown us were NOT included “out of the box” and required custom development – an expense I had not planned on.

They also failed to tell me that their CRM (if you could call it that) would only allow us to e-mail a limited number of people in any given month. I don’t recall now what that number was, but it was only about 5% of our current list. Therefore, I needed to purchase an e-mail broadcasting service to simply send out what I had already been sending out in my old CRM.

I also discovered that the shopping cart system was extremely basic and insufficient for what we needed – there were limited fields, zero automations and no real customer support included.



The demo delivered by their sales rep failed to address ALL these shortcomings and added expenses. *A lie of omission*. I was furious but couldn't do anything about it due to the contract I had signed.

I'm sure you've had a similar experience. We ALL have, including the prospect you're attempting to sell to. Those "ghosts of disappointments past" linger and cause that prospect to automatically NOT trust you.

I'm sure YOU wouldn't do that to a prospect, but some sales leaders and marketers delight in creating a demo or a close that brilliantly sells the prospect despite the fact that the now the customer feels like they need to take a shower after the engagement.

If the Salesforce rep had just been honest with me, I very likely would have bought anyway because I *desperately* needed to find a more robust CRM system at that time and had already identified Salesforce as the only system that could do what we needed done.

I also wouldn't have been so angry over the added expense and work.

But once I discovered I had been tricked and outright lied to, the relationship was burned permanently. After our contract was up, I found another solution (Infusionsoft, now Keap) and never looked back, other than to tell everyone I know to avoid buying Salesforce for this reason.

This brings me to a very important aspect of building trust with prospects: Never attempt to present your services or products as "flawless and perfect."

For starters, nobody believes anything is either "flawless" or "perfect." By admitting the flaws or stating *who your services are not ideal for*, you earn trust points that will actually help you make the sale, not hurt it.

Second, there is no "perfect" product or service for *everyone*.

If I asked you what is the BEST wine to serve on a special occasion, what would you say? You might have an *opinion*, but can you assure me that your choice would truly be "perfect" for *everyone* and *every* occasion?

Would your advice change if the special occasion is a kid's birthday party vs. a wedding? If a wedding, for whom?

An expensive, fine French wine might be best for a wedding where the father of the bride is attempting to showcase his wealth and prestige, but a terrible choice for a



group of people who don't even like wine and are perfectly okay with showcasing their beer budget.

So, "best" is entirely contingent upon the person you're selling to and the situation.

In my practice, I have learned to turn away clients, telling them the truth: I'm not the right consultant for you.

My style is intense – I expect you to keep your commitments, show up on time prepared, with YOUR part done because I know I'll have MY work done. Not many people can keep up, and they will be unhappy, canceling and feeling as if they received "no value" from the engagement or, worse, p.o.'d at me for pushing them "too hard" or making it "too complicated."

In every advisor-type relationship, clients simply have different needs and expectations. You have to be truthful if you don't think you CAN meet the needs of THAT particular prospect sitting in front of you.

I strongly suggest you tell the truth about who your product or services are made for and who they are not made for...and why.

Example: "Our service is best for the business owner who truly doesn't want to be hacked or experience a data breach, but it costs more than others and carries certain requirements, such as forcing good password management, 2FA and quarterly strategy sessions that some business owners see as annoying."

Or: "Our service is for the business owner who wants a bare-bones IT service that is inexpensive – it won't provide a 'Fort Knox' level of protection against hackers and data loss and isn't the 'Cadillac' of IT support, but our clients are willing to forgo that to save a considerable amount on IT."

Showcase your excellence while admitting your flaws.

99.44% Pure

Back in the 1880s, soap was a commodity product. Dozens of indistinguishable brands competed on price.

In an effort to stand out from his competition and preserve margins, Harley Procter, son of Procter & Gamble's co-founder, William Procter, commissioned an independent laboratory to test the purity of their soap and prove its superiority as a skin-care soap over other competitive brands.



The tests showed it was “99 and 44/100% pure” from extraneous material compared to their competitors’ products.

Harley immediately saw the power of using this fact and the odd number in his marketing because it gave him a scientific point of differentiation.

It also demonstrated truthfulness. Wouldn’t “100% pure” be a better advertising slogan? Not if you want to be *believed*.

This campaign drove a sharp increase in sales, pushing them to a national brand instead of a regional one. By the 1900s, Ivory had become one of the best-selling brands in America. This also led to their “So pure it floats” commercial, which continued to shape this brand into the best soap for sensitive skin. Mothers across the country swore by it for their babies and personal skin-care routines.

Question #2: Will you actually DO what you say you can do?

Back in 2013, we bought a lot that would be the location of our “forever home” and we went in search of a builder. The one we picked was actually referred to me by my then neighbor, Dave Ramsey, after he had him build his house.

The builder’s pitch was solid, his online reputation unblemished. And *Dave* had just personally given him a rave review, referring him to me. So, we hired him.

I’ll save you the drama and cut to the chase: It was an absolute nightmare. Since he finished the house, we have spent no less than \$1.5 million on repairs to fix what he and his crew screwed up, with the biggest and most expensive repair being the pool.

Roughly seven years after we’d moved in, our pool started leaking water like crazy. We couldn’t find an obvious leak and had to hire a company that specializes in pool repairs to find the problem: The *entire* pool was cracking, buckling and sliding down the hill we live on because the foundation wasn’t put in properly and the retaining wall was inadequate.

Because it was a *foundation* problem, we were left no other option than to dig up the entire pool, deck and backyard *to start over*. A GIANT, expensive mess that took over a year to fix. And the guy who originally built the pool? Out of business years ago.

We later found out that he wasn’t an expert in pool building like our builder assured us. He was a pool maintenance guy who was just starting out on his own.



I was furious. Our attorney told us we could sue, but the chances of getting any settlement in our favor was low due to the original pool guy being out of business and broke. The builder would have to be provided the opportunity to “cure,” which meant we would have to work with him through the process – something I did NOT want to do. Plus, this would be a long, drawn-out and expensive process that would have distracted me from running my business and delayed the pool repair. I decided to just “eat” the cost.

Everyone has had their own “pool” experience with someone who *profoundly* failed to deliver on an important and expensive project.

In many cases, they hired someone who was referred to them and/or “checked out” in every way, meaning there were no red flags when they hired them for the job.

This is why it’s SO difficult to get someone to trust you.

Zig Ziglar, one of the first sales trainers I learned from, used to say, “If you put your hand on a hot stove and get burned, that’s a painful lesson. But a foolish response would be to say, ‘I got burned in there so I’m never going in the kitchen again.’”

He was attempting to point out that we shouldn’t let one bad experience stop us from moving forward or trying again – a necessary message for salespeople who experience far more failure than success on a daily basis.

But when you’ve been repeatedly “burned” by people who even appear to be “good” at what they do, you tend to not trust *anyone*.

Your prospects are painfully aware that their money, reputation, time and peace of mind are all on the line when they are thinking of switching IT companies.

They’re also painfully aware of all the PAST failures from “being sold” something that was inadequate by shysters who never delivered the goods.

Overcoming these “ghosts of bad decisions past” is infinitely more difficult than most MSPs think. You can’t do that by just saying, “Trust me.” You need to keep the following in mind:

- Your services are “invisible” and *impossible* to compare.
- Prospects don’t know what “good” is when it comes to IT services, support, cybersecurity, backup, etc.



- A prospect can't know *for sure*, in advance, that you'll actually do what you say you will do.
- The consequences are HIGH if they pick the wrong IT company.

That's why a "good" website or a "professional" brochure doesn't cut it anymore. You can't overcome your prospects' fears by telling them about the superiority of your tech stack or years in business or showing them a handful of testimonials.

You need a comprehensive and sophisticated trust-based framework built from the 10 trust drivers and trust tools outlined in this book.

Later on, we'll talk about the trust drivers of SPECIALIZATION and AUTHORITY. These go a long way toward helping a prospect feel like they can trust you

Question #3: Are your services APPROPRIATE for someone "like ME"?

At one of my events, one of the attendees, the owner of an MSP generating over \$5 million in revenue, approached me to share a story he thought I would find funny.

He admitted that he had seen me speak roughly three years prior at an industry event where I was selling my services. At the end of my presentation, I handed out enrollment forms. He said he was very impressed with my speech and decided he needed my help – so he proceeded to start filling out the form.

However, as he was filling it out, he noticed that the two other guys at his table were also filling in the form to buy. He knew both were operating smaller MSPs than he was, generating at or under \$1 million in revenue.

Seeing them fill in the form caused him to stop and NOT buy. He told me it gave him the incorrect assumption that if THEY were buying, then the program was likely NOT right for HIM, a larger MSP.

He sheepishly told me how stupid he now felt about that decision and had since enrolled and was benefiting greatly from the materials.

After he walked away, I was reminded of a critical part of success in selling and marketing: People want products and services they feel are APPROPRIATE for them or "someone like them."



This is the driving force behind the fact that “birds of a feather” DO flock together. Humans are *constantly* evaluating situations, groups and places to determine if they “fit in.”

Call it ego or identity. The simple fact is that people have beliefs about who they are and what “people like them” buy, say, wear and do.

Many wealthy people I know who grew up poor have the common experience of their parents questioning their choices and ethics after they become wealthy. Their parents will say things like “College isn’t *for people like us*” or “People like us don’t live in *that kind of house*.”

The “Appropriateness Factor”

What I’ve described in my story about the \$5 million MSP is extremely common. Prospects DO need to know, with certainty, that your services are appropriate for their unique situation. I call this the “**appropriateness factor**.”

I initially learned this as a marketing strategy from Craig Proctor, a highly successful realtor who was not only the #1 top-selling agent for RE/MAX worldwide twice, but also the top marketing consultant to other realtors across the US and Canada.

In his listing presentation materials, he had a brochure with the headline “Who Works With The Craig Proctor Team To Sell Their Home?”

The list went on to describe customer types, such as “the busy professional” who doesn’t want their time wasted by a realtor who won’t follow through, fails to provide regular updates and forces you to manage them, or “the high net worth individual” who needs a realtor who knows how to list and sell a high-end home, keeping out looky-loo unqualified buyers who just want to tour your private residence.

The list had other person types I now forget, but the point was made. He didn’t leave to chance that someone might look at his company and services and think, “Not for me because my situation is different.”

Everyone believes their situation is “different.” A prospect might believe you are truthful and competent, but still “not for them,” opting for a cheaper or lesser-qualified competitor because they feel “more comfortable” going with them over you. ALL of this I’m sure you’ve heard but never thought about to the level I’m describing here.



In your marketing and sales presentation, describe WHO your services are FOR because your prospect is asking themselves if YOUR company and YOUR services are “suitable for *someone like me.*”

Question #4: Do you actually CARE about me?

Teddy Roosevelt has been credited with saying, **“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”**

The above mantra has been part of the core philosophy and teachings of many sales, marketing and leadership figures over the years, like John Maxwell and Zig Ziglar.

More recently, my friend Chris Voss, author of the best-selling book *Never Split The Difference*, has developed a body of work showing how “tactical empathy,” the strategy of making the other person feel heard, understood and valued, leads people to TRUST you more.

And while the above seems like a manipulative “tactic” used to get what you want, the reality is that to make it work *requires* you to *actually* listen to and seek understanding of the other person’s point of view, even if you don’t agree with it.

Bottom line: We don’t like people who don’t care about us – and we’re certainly not going to trust them to do a good job for us either.

One of the most common (and personal favorite) compliments I would get from TMT members was “They REALLY care about their members.”

Candidly, that wasn’t a marketing tactic I developed, although I’m certain it helped us with referrals, member retention and cross-selling services.

It came from my genuine love of my clients and an absolutely authentic desire to serve them. Employees understood that our “North Star” was “the attraction and development of RAVING-FAN members.” Early on, our BHAG was to “get 10,000 members who were THRILLED to write us a check every month.”

All of this came from ***caring.***

I realize that some of the tough, macho dudes reading this may be put off by this soft and squishy concept of loving your customers – but if you don’t love your customers and are more concerned about your profits than their well-being or doing the right thing, you’ll have a very difficult time in business.



Show 'Em, Don't Just Tell 'Em

So, how do you convincingly communicate “We care”?

In marketing, a preponderance of testimonials that say “they care” is the #1 way to convince someone that you actually do. Also, being able to describe their problem, pain, situation and concerns even better than they can, then using empathetic copy that communicates what an “epic injustice” it is, WILL strongly convince someone that you care (more about this in the Toolbox section of this book).

But mostly, conveying that you care is going to come from your sales process and the interactions prospects have with you and your team:

- How you answer the phone.
- How you respond to a complaint or negative review.
- How you ask good, diagnostic, thoughtful questions.
- How well you listen to what they're saying and how well you respond.
- How careful you are about following up and following through.

If a prospect feels like the salesperson is not listening, is talking down to them, dismissing their concerns and pushing them to buy, trust plummets. They believe you “don't care” about them – you just care about making the sale.

This is why one of the most important skills you can develop is active listening – listening to understand, not just “hear” or, worse, respond. Tactical empathy, so the prospects feels heard, understood and safe to trust you.

Question #5: Am I paying a *fair price*?

Notice I didn't say “cheapest price” or “best price.”

Bottom line: Prospects don't want to be taken advantage of. They don't want to be tricked into paying more than they should or being sold things they don't need.



This is *not* about affordability but about *fairness* and *pride*.

Show them the differentiated value and they'll pay your fees. Fail to do this by either giving the impression that you are merely "expensive" or not sufficiently convincing them that your superior services (cybersecurity, vCIO, etc.) are truly necessary, and you'll lose to a cheaper MSP every time.

The Best Lesson I Can Give You On Overcoming Fee Resistance

Back in 2017, when we built our "forever" home where we currently live, I realized we made the mistake of not putting cabinets and storage in the garage – and we needed them.

Since I didn't know who to call, I did what most people do: I got online and searched for garage cabinets near me.

Up popped no fewer than 25 different companies that could install cabinets and storage for my garage, all with great reviews and good websites full of pictures of cabinets. Most had the word "cabinet" in their name. Brentwood Cabinets. Cabinets To Go. The Cabinet Gallery. You get the idea.

I narrowed it down to two and invited them to come to my home and quote me.

Both used the exact same process for providing me with a quote: Make an appointment to come to the house. Greet the dog and make a fuss about how cute he is. Compliment me on the home. Hand me a brochure and discuss what I'm looking for. Go into the garage and measure all the junk lying around. Ask me some questions about what I wanted to store. Take measurements. Promise a drawing and quote within the week. E-mail the quote.

Both had hundreds of 5-star reviews. Both had been in business for years. Both were locally owned and operated. Both promised "quality" and "service." And both sales reps were polite, professional and easy to work with.

But there was ONE major difference: **their price.**

When I received the quotes, one was nearly double the price of the other. I remember it because it was so odd. It was as if the first rep saw the other company's quote and just doubled it.



Since they both appeared to be competent, reliable vendors, most people would have gone with the cheaper vendor. Not me. I'm weird. So I called the higher-priced cabinet maker and asked why their price was nearly double the other bid.

To her credit, she didn't try to address it over the phone. She asked if she could come to the house and review the other proposal with me to ensure she didn't overlook something.

When she arrived, we sat down at the dining room table and within seconds she started pointing out where the differences were.

She said, "For starters, they didn't add in the delivery fee to the big number you think is the final price. It's down here in the footnotes, so you need to add that in."

She continued, "Do you see how their cabinets are sitting on the floor like your walls do? If you notice, our drawing has your cabinets sitting up on steel-reinforced legs with a no-rust steel bottom under it so it's off the garage floor. You want that instead of having the cabinets on the floor because garages get a lot of water in them, and over time, it can seep into your cabinets, warping them and creating mold. That's why we don't put cabinets on the floor of the garage. It costs more, but you won't be calling me back angry as a hornet in five years after the warranty is up when you need to get them replaced and all your stuff has mold on it."

But then she landed the real zinger.

She said, "They quoted you wood veneer for the workbenches. I quoted you solid wood block, which costs more. If you like, I can quote you for a wood veneer, but you told me this was your forever home – and you don't seem like a veneer kinda gal."

Sooooo goood.

After we adjusted for all of this, her quote was still slightly higher than the other vendor, but not significantly. I signed her agreement right there because it was close enough and I wanted to get going on the installation.

Here's the BIG lesson in this: She was very familiar with that other company's quote, knowing exactly where to look and what to point out, so I'm confident this isn't the first time she's had to deal with this issue.

She *knew* she wouldn't be the lowest-priced.

She *knew* there were cheaper options.



She there were competitors who would undercut her.

She knew I was getting bids from other cabinet companies.

So, why didn't she give me that education about what to look for when buying cabinets and why they charge more BEFORE she gave me a quote?

Interpret The Value

The above story highlights the exact mistake SO MANY service businesses make when quoting a price – they *assume* their prospect knows what “good” is and how to interpret the value of the things they are including in their service.

Your prospects don't know, which is why I coined the phrase “Educational Direct Response Marketing” and incorporated a teaching aspect into all the marketing we’ve given to MSP clients over the years, encouraging them to create buyer’s guides, comparison charts, assessments and scorecards to give to their prospective clients.

It’s up to YOU, the seller, to educate the prospect on why you charge what you charge, particularly when selling an intangible service to an unsophisticated buyer.

If you fail to do this, they’re going to think you’re “overpriced” and attempting to take advantage of them.

Nobody wants to be played for a fool.

As Dr. Nido Qubein taught me, it’s not enough to just create value. You must take the next big step and *interpret* the value by *educating* your prospect on what “good” is and what they should demand from their IT company.

Explain why you charge more BEFORE you give them a proposal.

You must be able to logically explain why your fees are “reasonable” or you’ll lose your prospects’ trust – they will assume you’re attempting to take advantage of them, selling them “more than they need” and charging more than you should.



Chapter 5

The Ridiculous, Irrational Truth About How Prospects Come To Trust Someone

Back in 2014, the Certified Financial Planner (CFP) Board created a brilliant consumer awareness campaign they titled **“Can You Tell The Difference.”**

One of the elements of the campaign was a TV commercial that featured a clean-shaven man in a suit meeting with people in a professional office setting to discuss hiring him as a financial advisor. The customers he meets are not actors but ordinary folks who thought they were meeting with a certified financial planner to discuss their retirement. The consultations were filmed without their knowledge.

During the sales meeting, he uses basic financial buzzwords he was told to say and gives very generic advice he was scripted to deliver. Then he asks the big question:

“Would you trust me as your financial advisor?” To which the unsuspecting prospects say, “I would, indeed!”

The big reveal at the end of the commercial is that the man is actually not a qualified financial advisor but Azmyth Kaminski, a DJ who typically sports long dreadlocks, piercings and nightclub apparel and has ZERO financial knowledge or expertise.

They divulge this to the people who just said they would hire him as their financial advisor, showing them a video of his transformation (getting his hair cut, his piercings taken out and his clothing changed).

The campaign’s tagline emphasized, **“If they’re not a CFP pro, you just don’t know,”** urging consumers to seek out advisors who have met the CFP Board’s standards of competency and ethics.

I love the commercial because it perfectly demonstrates the *irrational* way people come to trust others, even with serious decisions that have dire consequences if gotten wrong.

You’re Irrational Too...And I’ll Prove It

Have you ever sold a home you lived in?



For most people, their home is one of the biggest assets they own. Even if it's not, when you decide to sell your home, you likely want to get it sold as fast as possible for the maximum amount of money you can.

To do that, you need to find a realtor who will not just take your listing and passively meet with people who want to view it, convincing you to lower your asking price so it makes their job easier.

You want to find a realtor with a proven track record for selling the most homes in your area at the highest listing prices. You need to find a professional who actually has a marketing engine and team who will invest time and money into proactively getting buyers to look at your home, who will use *all* marketing media, including calls and direct mail (not just free organic social media), take professional photos and actively promote your home to other realtors. And you need someone who knows how to negotiate with others to get you the best deal possible.

But when most people choose a realtor, they DON'T do the level of research they should. They don't ask them for proof

So, when you sold YOUR home, did you do deep research into the track record of the top realtors in your area, comparing number of homes, time on the market and sold price vs. listing price?

Did you ask them to detail out the marketing plan for selling your home and ask to see the specific strategies they will use?

Did you have each of them do a listing presentation (the industry term for the sales presentation), asking for recent references, checking with your local realtor association and comparing them side by side with two to three other top pros?

It's very likely that you did NONE of this.

You probably asked a few friends who they used. Called one or two of their referrals and chose one of them, nearly "sight unseen."

This demonstrates two things:

1. **Trust is largely emotional and irrational.** As I said in the previous chapter, people are *desperately* looking for someone to trust who *will just tell them what to do* – and since trust is often irrationally bestowed on people, most would trust a friend's recommendation over doing their OWN research and comparing



realtors' track records.

2. **Trust is a giant shortcut.** People are overwhelmed and inherently lazy. They don't want to do all the work of researching and meeting with a handful of realtors as outlined above. A referral from someone is not only a shortcut but **provides an alibi if they hire the wrong person**: "Well, *John* told me that guy was great!"

The above two factors are incredibly important for you, as a marketer and entrepreneur, to understand: Trust is not always given based on certifications, accolades, degrees and years of experience – and if you depend solely on those things to win business over your "lesser-qualified" competition, you're going to be grossly disappointed and endlessly frustrated in marketing.

To be clear, your track record, certifications, awards and degrees *do matter*, and they should be appropriately used to bolster your credibility and build a case for why a prospect should trust you, supplying them with a LOGICAL reason for their EMOTIONAL buying decision.

But on their own, these accolades are insufficient.

We don't always buy from the most experienced and credentialed expert in any profession or service. If we did, there would be a LOT less competition, and everyone would default to a select few.

However, such accolades **must be paired with the following drivers** to really give you the advantage you're looking for.

The 10 Trust Drivers For Service-Based Businesses

Given that people don't come to trust *exclusively* through logic, the natural question becomes "What ARE the handful of things that cause someone to trust you, and how do we incorporate them into our marketing and sales process?"

At a high level, there are a few fundamental trust drivers that have the greatest impact on your success in customer acquisition.

Throughout my work with MSPs, I've used some mix of all of these. Not everyone can use all 10, but the more you can stack and weave into your marketing communications and sales process, the more trust you will earn from your audience.



- 1. Specialization:** What specific problem are you exceptional at solving, or what results are you brilliant at producing? And for whom?
- 2. Authority Position:** When you have the reputation of being *the* authority on your subject matter, you gain the benefits of clients seeking you out, the ability to command premium fees, referrals and partnerships and the ability to be more selective about the clients you take.
- 3. Affinity:** What common connection of background, philosophy, fraternity, origin or experience can you leverage? People trust people who are “like them” more than people they have no “human” connection with.
- 4. Third-Party Validation:** Being recommended by a credible, trusted person (referral) or endorsed by a celebrity or authority (paid or free) is a HUGE driver of trust. In my consulting business, strategic partners (also called “JVs,” joint venture partnerships or promotional partnerships) are by far the most effective means of getting HVCs at a very low cost.
- 5. Familiarity:** The more your prospect is familiar with you due to repeated exposure, particularly using different media over a long period of time, the more they instinctively trust you – even without conscious reasoning.
- 6. Consistency & Congruence:** Doing what you say you will do, repeatedly, over time, along with absolute consistency with all manner of communications, authority position and interactions, manufactures and maintains trust.
- 7. Transparency:** Admit the flaws and who you’re not for. Companies that hide bad news, bury unfavorable terms in fine print, over-promise or intentionally cover up the downsides erode trust fast.
- 8. Celebrity:** Being famous (or *slightly* famous) among your target market increases the trust factor. This is why companies pay celebrities millions to endorse their products and appear in their commercials. *Celebrity sells.*
- 9. Proof:** The more concrete and complete evidence you can present of your expertise, credibility or the results you produce, the more you will cause prospects to trust you over competitors who simply say, “Trust me,” with no evidence or foundation to their words.
- 10. Media:** Where they “see” you. Spam e-mails and cold calls are low-trust media. Seeing you on the morning news station talking about cybersecurity or seeing you speak onstage at an industry conference is a much higher-trust media. A cheaply printed postcard is a lower-trust media than a letter sent via FedEx.



An Insightful Exercise

As you read through these Top 10 Trust Drivers, I'm sure one or two spurred an idea or two for you. Maybe it reinforced some things you're already doing, giving you encouragement to double down on that activity. Or maybe it revealed some things you need to STOP doing, like spamming prospects or attempting to be everything to everyone.

Whatever stood out to you, I would encourage you to make a list, fixing the most obvious (and easiest) to get momentum and continue to build on these trust drivers.

I would also encourage you to change how you view all marketing and sale efforts, asking yourself, **"Is this going to build my authority position and trust factor?"** If not, I would suggest either not doing it or changing your approach to one that will BUILD trust.

This is an entirely different lens to look at your marketing and sales efforts that will help you build long-term value vs. "make a quick buck" hacks that fall flat and hurt your reputation.

Now, let's roll up our sleeves, and into the "Trust Toolbox" we go.



The Trust Toolbox

A Deep Dive Into The 10 Trust Drivers



Chapter 6

Trust Driver #1: Specialization

Let's play a game.

Who gets paid more? A salesperson at a health and wellness store like The Vitamin Shoppe or a nutritionist? In general, a good *nutritionist* should.

Who gets paid more? A nutritionist or a medical doctor? Obviously, a medical doctor will get paid more for their advice, typically earning \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year compared to the \$73,000-a-year income the average nutritionist makes. This is true even though the typical nutritionist spends *far more time* with their clients and puts more thought and effort into their services than the 10-to-15-minute quick meeting with a medical doctor.

Who gets paid more? A general practitioner working at a “doc in the box” clinic or a neurosurgeon? Easy. Neurosurgeons are currently the highest paid medical specialists in the world, with earnings frequently exceeding \$700,000.

Who gets paid more? A neurosurgeon in your town who is good but generally unknown in the world of neurosurgeons or Dr. Henry Brem, Chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins University? Dr. Brem is likely the winner, given he earns an *estimated* \$2 million+ a year. He's published over 350 research papers and 57 book chapters, holds 11 patents and has a high h-index, a metric that measures the importance and impact of a scientist's cumulative research contributions.

Who gets paid more? Dr. Henry Brem or Dr. Sanjay Gupta, neurosurgeon, Emmy-winning journalist and medical correspondent for CNN? While his exact earnings are not known, it's estimated Dr. Gupta is paid over \$4 million a year.

What I just revealed to you is the exact blueprint for becoming a TRUSTED expert authority on your subject matter and securing a much higher income for what you do.

Here are the key points to take away from this exercise:

- **Salespeople** are NOT trusted “advice givers.” As we have already touched on, salespeople are grouped in with politicians and TV reporters as having low ethics and zero honesty. Therefore, you NEVER want your prospect to *perceive* you as a *salesperson* (even though you essentially are and should aspire to be a good one).



- **Specialists** always get paid more than **generalists**.
- **The bigger and more difficult the problem you specialize in solving, the more you get paid to solve it.** Patients visiting a walk-in clinic typically aren't dealing with life-threatening problems. They have foot fungus or the flu – not a brain tumor. If the doc at the minute clinic isn't that great, there's no dire consequence, so patients are happy to see whoever is on call. But if you have a *brain tumor*, a misdiagnosis or poorly performed surgery can have significant, serious consequences, so the "doc on call" is not good enough. You would go in search of a specialist and be willing to pay a premium.
- **Once you become a recognized *authority* specialist, you get paid a LOT more for WHO YOU ARE than what you DO.** The jump in earnings from the average neurosurgeon's salary to Dr. Brem's is more than double, possibly triple. While I can't know this for certain, I would bet that Dr. Brem is routinely brought opportunities for investment, partnerships, business, endorsements and referrals that are not brought to his lesser-known peers – the Matthew Principle in effect (those who have will be given more). Authority status is a success magnet.
- **Celebrity is the trump card that gets you the highest increase in income.** Is Dr. Gupta more skilled and knowledgeable at neurosurgery than Dr. Brem? I don't know. What I DO know is that I've heard of Dr. Gupta but I'd never heard of Dr. Brem until I started researching for this book. Like it or not, *celebrity sells*, and the TOP income earners get paid more for who they are than what they do. I suggest you highlight that and ponder it.

The Power Of Specialization

When attempting to solve complex problems, people do not buy from a generalist when a capable, trusted specialist is available.

That's why the first peg on the trust-based marketing game board is to figure out where your true expertise lies so you can specialize in *something* for *someone*.

Most service businesses are generalists. In the MSP space, they often explain their target market as "anyone with 10 to 100 computers" within some specific geographic area. Their services, messaging and brand promise are essentially a mirror of what they see everyone else doing.

When you're this generic about WHO the customer is and what you do, it causes you to be invisible in a "sea of sameness" and struggle against fee resistance, stalls and



delays in the sales process, higher-than-average customer acquisition costs and difficulty in marketing because you appear to be *interchangeable* with any and every other competitor in your marketplace.

When you specialize, *all of this gets easier.*

One of my long-term clients, Julio Lopez, founder and CEO of IT for Education, specializes in IT services for K-12 schools. This focus has enabled him to really understand that niche, knowing how decisions are made, how they think about IT, what their specific problems are, what regulations they must follow and how the “money” works in their school (meaning how they get funding for IT services). This has fueled his MSP to go from \$500K to over \$6 million in just a few years. That specialization makes marketing decisions easier and fuels referrals, increasing his close rate and opening doors for strategic partnerships he would not otherwise be offered if he was a “generic” MSP offering “generic” services.

If you needed to buy insurance for your MSP, you’d likely trust the advice of Justin Reinmuth, founder of techrug, who exclusively specializes in cyber liability and errors and omissions insurance for MSPs.

Obviously, there are a lot of insurance agents who sell cyber liability and errors and omissions policies. But the majority of MSPs I know trust Justin, who has spent 22 years working exclusively with MSPs to protect their business and personal wealth. He has a deep understanding of how an MSP business works and where the risks are. He also knows where all the “gotcha” clauses and loopholes are in a policy that the generalist agent won’t likely know about. Justin is a true specialist.

If you were going to sell your MSP, there are thousands of advisors, consultants and brokers who can help you. But Reed Warren, founder of iTValuations, specializes exclusively in helping MSP owners with their value creation strategy, mergers and acquisitions and selling their business. Because of his specialization and expertise (as well as his stellar reputation), he doesn’t need to do any marketing or hire a big sales team to get an abundance of new deals coming his way on a consistent basis.

As you think about where you want to specialize, keep in mind that it’s a CHOICE.

Yes, you might have experience, preferences, current clients or a background that directs or strongly influences what direction you choose. Yes, you might have current limitations that restrict you in the short term. And yes, legitimate expertise requires an investment of time and focus.



But at the end of the day, the practice you build and customer you pursue is a decision you get to make. Just be thoughtful and choose wisely, solving a particular problem for a particular client who has the means and desire to pay you a LOT of money to solve it.

Otherwise, you could end up the king of a very poor country.

3 Questions To Determine Your Specialization

Once I get my clients to understand the need for specialization, the next question inevitably is this: “Well, Robin, how do I determine who or what I should specialize in?”

The “right” answer is going to be different for everyone because it depends on your personal experience, goals and current skills. But here are three questions to ask yourself as you work through the process:

1. What **specific problem** are you exceptional at solving? Or what **specific result** are you exceptional at producing?
2. **Who are your services ideal for, and WHY?** Who are you NOT ideal for?
3. What about your approach is **distinct and different from everyone else’s**?

My friend Robert Herjavec, *Shark Tank* star and former CEO of the billion-dollar MSSP Cyderes, chose to specialize in cybersecurity for clients with “complex environments.” His target audience was large enterprises with *sophisticated* cybersecurity needs.

One of his biggest competitors was IBM, and he went head-to-head with them frequently in sales meetings. Given they were an established and respected opponent, he used the only ace up his sleeve that he could: He pointed out that his company SPECIALIZED in cybersecurity, whereas IBM was a *generalist* that also happened to sell cybersecurity solutions.

He also pointed out that his company would support a variety of cybersecurity tools and software, whereas IBM forced you to use their own hardware and software, often creating a “rip and replace” situation. While he didn’t win every deal, this DID give him a huge advantage over IBM because clients with complex, high-stakes environments wanted a specialist on the job.

The Fear Of Choosing

Whenever I talk to clients about “specialization,” the #1 fear brought up is this: “If I choose to specialize in a particular niche, industry or solution, I’ll severely limit the opportunities available to me.”



Years ago, at one of the Roadshow events, I had a very nice husband-and-wife team running a small MSP approach me after I'd gotten offstage talking about picking a specific target market.

The wife said that while picking a specific target audience or specializing in a particular solution made *logical* sense, they could not muster the courage to choose a niche for fear of limiting their opportunities too much and preventing good clients from doing business with them – and they were already struggling to grow.

So I asked, “Who do you think you’ll be pushing away? How many businesses are calling you right now that would stop calling and not do business with you if you picked a niche?”

The wife looked at the husband and sheepishly admitted, “None.” They hadn’t generated a lead all year.

I replied, “Well, who the heck are you afraid of keeping out then?!?!?”

They laughed but still couldn’t bring themselves to take the leap.

I know choosing is scary. I realize it may be a big lift in terms of changing your marketing and sales process, potentially even your service offering. I know that you might need to expand geographically, which leads to a whole other set of problems.

Worse yet? You might need to put a couple of years of effort into marketing to a particular niche or focusing on an area of specialization before you’ll know if you made the right decisions. And I know that all that change comes with ZERO guarantee it will work.

But if you don’t niche or specialize, you WILL have a very tough time standing out from (and even being FOUND in) a very noisy, very crowded marketplace. If you just can’t bring yourself to pick a vertical, then at LEAST pick an area of specialization.

One more funny story...

One MSP, fearful of picking ONE niche, told me he decided to “specialize” in delivering managed services for CPAs, funeral homes and veterinary clinics. I hope you just laughed. I sure did when he told me. Other than the common thread of “death and...



taxes,” there was no way I could connect those three completely different entities in a manner that would effectively position him as the authority on any one of them.

You can’t specialize in everything.

Now, let me share with you how I approached this years ago when I first decided to go independent and launched my own consulting business.

How I Picked My Own Specialization

I had thought about starting my own consulting business for years but didn’t, due to a long list of problems standing in my way.

First and foremost, I had no money and was up to my eyeballs in debt, unable to quit my job, living paycheck to paycheck. Second, I had zero experience in starting a business, so I was scared to take the leap. Who should I target? What should I include in my services? How would I price it? What would happen if nobody bought?

But my motivation to figure this out got ramped up when I was suddenly fired from my job and *had* to figure it out...and *fast*.

One lifesaving advantage I had was a list of prospects I had built over the years who were subscribed to a marketing newsletter I started. There was no rhyme or reason to the list – just a random group of people who I had met and/or sold something to over the last decade working at various companies. It wasn’t a curated, strategic target audience, but it was a starting point.

Next, I had to figure out what I could consult on, so I took an inventory of my then expertise. Here’s what I came up with:

- I had the unique experience of being successful at both outside sales (cold calling, prospecting and closing) and direct response marketing (lead generation). While I was sure I wasn’t the ONLY person on the planet with that dual experience, I didn’t know anyone else who had it. This gave me the unique ability to knit together both sides of the equation (marketing AND sales) and design marketing campaigns, assets and tools that would FUEL the sales team, fixing what they were already doing instead of just throwing more money at the problem.
- I was consistently successful in my sales career, exceeding quota and getting more clients *without* having inbound leads and great marketing to support my efforts. In other words, I knew how to succeed with “poor boy” marketing tactics.



(Side note: Even though I worked for two marketing firms in Nashville, neither of them invested the appropriate amount of money into marketing to drive inbound leads. They mostly relied on referrals, relationships and commissioned sales reps like me to pound the phone to get clients because they lacked expertise in marketing strategy.

Essentially, they were glorified fulfillment shops who could buy media, deliver creative design and handle the production of direct mail and other printed materials, NOT strategic advisors in lead generation marketing. This became an important part of my story, as I'll share in a minute.)

- I was above average in my knowledge and successful application of digital marketing, which is one of the reasons I was able to consistently hit or exceed my quota. As I mentioned, I had my own blog and e-mail newsletter that I used to stay in touch with prospects and clients alike and that I built and managed on my own dime. I bought a CRM system (ACT!) and became a master at using it to segment my list, track opportunities and set up other marketing and sales follow-up systems. All of this is super-basic compared to today's AI-driven marketing tools, but back in the late '90s and early 2000s, it was cutting-edge strategy and something most sales departments weren't using.

Armed with the above, I **decided to specialize** in helping businesses generate more leads and increase sales *without* increasing their marketing spend. My early promise was this:

I guarantee I can help you double or triple the number of leads and clients you're getting WITHOUT spending a dime more on marketing.

While I still lacked a clear target market, it at least gave me a starting point for what specific problem I could solve and the results I could deliver.

This allowed me to conduct "warm outreach" to the list I had and to have productive conversations, giving me an inroad and allowing me to secure my first few consulting gigs.

What was distinct and different about my approach was that it didn't require my clients to spend MORE money on marketing to see results. All other marketing agencies and consultants pushed their clients to spend more because they often made a commission on the media and lists they resold and/or based their agency fees on a percentage of what the client was spending on marketing.



I used this in my “origin story” (or backstory) as follows:

As a top sales representative at multiple marketing agencies, I would repeatedly see clients wasting gobs of money on marketing (printing, postage, list rental, creative design, media buy, etc.) while overlooking the “acres of diamonds” in their own backyard. In every case, I could recommend to my clients simple and easy campaigns they could run or tweaks to their current sales process that would produce exponential returns at zero additional costs.

Many of the companies I worked with had marketing people directing the copy and messaging of their campaigns, creating the offers and deciding on where to spend those precious dollars.

Problem is, nearly all of them were NOT salespeople and had never sold a thing in their life. They were in marketing and had no clue what it was like to sell toe-to-toe with a prospect or make a cold call to open a door. Most had never even talked to a single customer!

Therefore, their marketing was inherently flawed and doomed to fail – and I told them so. In fact, I often advised clients NOT to spend money on certain campaigns because I knew these campaigns wouldn’t deliver results. I would then recommend a different approach and coach clients on how to write compelling copy, offers and follow-up systems to develop those leads into appointments and paying clients.

My clients loved and appreciated my candor and coaching, given I had both sales and marketing expertise. My boss, however, didn’t like it one bit.

When he found out what I was doing, he called me into his office and reprimanded me, saying, “STOP coaching clients on how to get results and just focus on getting another contract signed.”

I suppose he was right to admonish me. After all, I was a commissioned sales rep and he was the boss. That didn’t mean I agreed with it, which is one of the reasons we parted ways.

This story resonated with the CEOs, marketing leaders and strategic partners I was reaching out to with hopes of securing a consulting contract. It was also a completely TRUE story.

Next, I had to figure out my target audience.



For a period of about six months, I secured a number of clients, all in different industries, selling a vast array of different products, services and consulting. The only common denominator among them was that they decided to hire me.

While I was happy to be making enough money to pay the rent, I knew I had to find an ICP, or “ideal client profile,” to build products and services that would scale.

As luck would have it, one of the connections I had was with CompTIA. I had worked with them in the past when previously selling IT certification training (MCSE, CNE and A+) at CGI Systems. I had also engaged with them when I secured a consulting gig with a company that sold self-test software and had helped them with a small marketing project in the past.

Long story short, I convinced them to hire me to deliver a teleseminar series on lead generation and marketing to their members, many of whom were VARs (at the time, MSPs were just starting to emerge).

The series was an absolute home run and secured me over a dozen of their members as customers. After working with them all for a number of months, I decided that THIS was going to be my niche specialization: developing results-driven, low-cost marketing strategies for VARs, MSPs and IT services companies.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Next Steps:

- Put some real thought and effort into answering the three questions outlined in this chapter to define your area of specialization. This may take you a couple of weeks to do. I highly encourage you to discuss this with your employees, trusted advisors and even a few trusted clients.
- Once you have those answers, comb through all marketing communications, particularly your website, to ensure you are truly communicating this loud and clear to all prospects.



Chapter 7

Trust Driver #2: Authority

Many years ago, I hired a cybersecurity “expert” to keynote one of our early Boot Camp events. Out of respect, I won’t name him, and it’s not important to getting the lesson of the story.

He was sold to me as a cutting-edge, “in the know” cybersecurity expert based on his work with the LA Police Department, where he headed up the cybercrime unit, working with the FBI to investigate cybercrimes against individuals and businesses alike.

He WAS a great speaker, with entertaining stories and shocking details on what was happening in the cybercrime rings. He had left his job as a police officer to pursue a more lucrative career selling courses, speaking and private consulting to large corporations and government entities attempting to handle these emerging threats.

Excited to partner with him, I asked him for access to the course he was selling on cybercrime prevention. After watching it, I was stunned. Here was his advice on how to cut in half your chances of getting hacked: *Turn your computer off at night.*

NOT install antivirus, a firewall or use strong passwords. Apparently, the “bad guys” only came out when the sun went down, so all you had to do was turn your computer off for a few hours a day.

If you’re an MSP reading this, it’s obvious that this is stupid advice. *But he wasn’t selling to experts.* He was selling to and consulting with nontechnical people who knew NOTHING about cybersecurity, and because he was a great speaker, with compelling stories and a brilliant “origin story” as a beat cop, people trusted him and hired him to help with protecting their organizations from cybercriminals. It’s SO true that in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

Why am I telling you this?

Because being perceived as an authority is about intention and marketing as much as it is about true expertise.

I wish that wasn’t true.

What is ALSO true is that if you fake expertise, *eventually* you’ll get figured out, as he did when he ran into someone who knew more about the subject than he did (me and



my audience of MSPs). Candidly, I don't think he was intentionally scamming people. I simply think he was grossly incompetent and didn't know it yet.

What he was *actually* great at was marketing himself to be an authority in the field of cybercrime, which was getting him dozens of paid speaking engagements and high-fee consulting gigs.

So, let's dig into that.

What Is “Authority”?

The definition of an authority is someone with the right to give orders, make decisions and *enforce* obedience.

A police officer is an authority who has the right to stop your vehicle, demand to see your driver's license and question you. A CEO has the authority to direct their employees' activities, standards and behaviors while at work. A judge has the authority to sentence a person based on the crime they committed.

In a client-consultant relationship, an “authority” is someone who others defer judgment and decision-making to. **Therefore, authority is not appointed but earned through developing trust and being seen as a credible expert on particular subject matter.**

Earning an authority position with a client or prospect is founded on three things:

1. Expertise: Deep and practical knowledge about a particular subject.
2. Credibility: Your track record, results and reputation.
3. Trust: People believe you will use your expertise in their best interests.

You can have expertise but lack credibility and trust. You can have both expertise and credibility but lack trust. And being trusted but lacking expertise or credibility will only get you babysitting jobs.

How To Gain Authority Status

If you go back to the game we played in the previous chapter on specialization, you'll note that Dr. Brem's compensation was double and possibly triple that of other doctors who, like him, specialize in neurosurgery.



The difference is that Dr. Brem is considered a global LEADING AUTHORITY on brain tumor care using advanced therapies, so he's compensated far greater than the majority of his colleagues, many of whom are also highly competent surgeons.

As I've already said (but it bears repeating), **the higher you rise in compensation, the less your fees and income are tied to what you DO, but instead to WHO YOU ARE.**

At the bottom of the compensation ladder, your value is tied to time, task and what your competition is charging. At the top, it's tied to your reputation, connections, experience and perceived authority status.

Here's a list of five commonalities shared by all leading authority figures in their field.

- **Authority figures INNOVATE.** This is why they are called "industry leaders." They *lead the field* in finding new methods, approaches and innovations to solving problems. They perfect their craft and publicly promote the results they're producing. You can't be a "leading authority" if you're simply doing what everyone else does, in the same way.
- **Authority figures PUBLISH.** Dr. Henry Brem and Dr. Gupta (also mentioned in the previous chapter) have both been prolific in publishing books, research papers and articles. They routinely give lectures and speeches on the topic of neurosurgery and health. This is an extremely important part of becoming an authority: You MUST publish useful, engaging and *respected* content on your chosen area of expertise.
- **Authority figures showcase their ACCOMPLISHMENTS.** While trust and authority positions are not *exclusively* earned through awards and accolades, having them is a tremendous advantage in establishing yourself as an *authority figure*. That's why a doctor is paid more than a nutritionist. They must earn a higher degree of training, including a medical degree, completion of residency training and a state-issued medical license.
- **Authority figures are CONFIDENT.** Much of what makes someone perceived as an authority is how they conduct themselves when interacting with clients. An authority would never appear needy in a sales meeting. They're not readily available to anyone. They aren't shy about telling clients what they need to do. They're also not CHEAP and they don't apologize for it. Another trust driver, CONSISTENCY and CONGRUENCE, insists that IF you are positioning yourself as an authority, you cannot be inconsistent by acting like a timid, desperate, needy salesperson.



- **Authority figures MARKET THEMSELVES.** It's possible to be a "real" authority on something but fail to get the recognition, client flow and pay you deserve because you suck at persuasion and marketing. And, as I pointed out in the opening story, it's possible to fake it to a certain degree (although I do NOT recommend this).

What "Authority Marketing" Looks Like

Let's suppose there are two IT services companies that are operating in the same market, delivering essentially the same services, using the same tools and pulling from the same pool of talent.

However, the CEO of one decides to put the time and effort into positioning himself as the leading authority on cybersecurity for midsize enterprises in his market.

He writes the book *The Cybersecurity Crisis: What Fast-Growing Companies Must Do Now To Shield Their Organization From A Devastating Cyberattack* and does lectures on the topic at various events in his area.

He is affiliated with the cybercrime department of the FBI and police department in his city and frequently posts articles and social media posts about new and emerging threats. He is a regular contributor to industry magazines and has won multiple industry awards.

He sits on an advisory council for several cybersecurity vendors. He is frequently contacted by news outlets to talk about major cyberattacks and AI. He also publishes a magazine dedicated to IT and cybersecurity for executives and IT professionals. And his website and other marketing materials are written to showcase ALL of this to his prospects in a compelling way.

The other IT services firms he's competing against have none of these assets or accolades. No marketing, no outreach, no content. He keeps to himself, focuses on doing a "good job" for his clients and waits for the occasional referral to float in.

Which IT services company do you think can command higher fees? Which one do you think generates more inbound leads? Which one is able to close more contracts, faster and as prescribed (not picked apart by the client)?

Obviously, the one led by the CEO who has positioned himself as THE authority on cybersecurity and compliance is going to secure more high-value clients, faster and easier than the other one.



How To Develop “Symbols” Of Authority

If you want to be perceived as the leading authority in your field, you don't do it by proclaiming yourself the “leading authority” in face-to-face meetings with clients. That's just not what top professionals do, and it will make you seem egotistical. Not good.

Instead, you convey your authority position in your *marketing* by showcasing symbols of your expertise and proof of your credentials. Below is a **short list** of ways to convey to prospects you ARE the leading authority in your field. The more of these you have stacked, the higher your authority score goes.

- High-level certifications and degrees on your topic
- A hard-copy book (ideally a bestseller) or eBook (not as good, but powerful)
- Prolific publishing of research reports, articles, white papers, industry data and trends, as well as predictions
- Media appearances (TV, radio, newspapers)
- Owning media (magazine, radio or TV show, YouTube channel, podcast, etc.)
- Frequent public speaking on your topic, especially from big stages
- An abundance of quality, relevant testimonials and case studies
- Being a source for data, polls, trends, market research
- Sitting on boards and associating with credible entities (FBI, MGMA, etc.)
- Being recognized by, and associated with, current authorities
- Inventing breakthrough methods and technologies
- Receiving industry awards and certifications, particularly well-known ones
- Being the largest in your area of specialization
- Celebrity clients (“real” celebrity or niche celebrity)
- Celebrity endorsements

How To Build Your Authority Status

Becoming a leading authority takes several years and requires real work, investment and commitment. Unfortunately, there's no “quick fix” to this.

I realize this can be daunting, particularly if you lack the marketing “know-how” to publish books, write compelling content, give lectures and talk to the press. Add to all



this a lack of funding (meaning you're working on a very modest budget), and most people would just give up and accept that they'll never be "the leading authority" in their market.

However, there is a way you CAN get started and build the foundation of credibility you need to start establishing yourself as an authority. I know because I did it myself back in 2002 when I started TMT.

If you recall from the previous chapter, I decided I was going to specialize in marketing for VARs and IT services companies. I had a compelling story to tell and a compelling promise ("Hire me and I'll show you how to double or triple your leads and clients WITHOUT spending a dime on marketing").

Now I needed to start building my list, expertise and street cred.

Back then I *decided* that my USP, or unique selling proposition, would be that I had more client success stories than anyone else. I knew that if I could point to dozens or even hundreds of tangible, measurable results I had achieved for my clients, my credibility would go up exponentially.

I *couldn't* position myself as the most experienced because I had no experience.

I *couldn't* position myself as the "biggest" because I was far from it.

I *couldn't* position myself as an "expert" on MSP marketing because I never owned or worked at a *small* IT services firm or VAR (I had worked for CGI Systems, but that was NOT the target audience I was talking to).

I *couldn't* position myself as much of anything because I hadn't done sh*t yet.

So, I took the only path forward I could see: guaranteeing tangible, measurable results for my clients. I made that my obsessive focus and sole mission in life, going above and beyond for every client and taking a "whatever it takes" hands-on approach to ENSURE they would get results, documenting the numbers and establishing a "before and after" case study for each one.

I also spent real time and money learning how MSPs (then VARs) got clients and did marketing. I went to industry conferences and talked to anyone who would let me bend their ear to understand what was working in sales and marketing.



I walked the conference floor of these events, talking to vendors who had far more experience in working with MSPs, picking their brain to understand MSPs and attempting to form strategic partnerships and secure speaking opportunities.

For the IT services clients I did have, I invested HOURS into talking to *their* customers about how they felt about IT and why they liked working with my client. This not only allowed me to understand the buying motives and viewpoint of their customer but also produced amazing testimonials and case studies for my clients.

I used every scrap of knowledge I could and poured that into producing RESULTS for my clients.

Over time, I earned the trust of thousands of IT services companies and vendors in our industry, growing the largest peer group and marketing firm, starting a hugely successful media company and magazine and eventually establishing myself as THE authority on MSP marketing.

Let me end with two important points:

#1: Your USP (unique selling proposition) and authority position need to be decided upon and BUILT. There's a good chance that you cannot articulate what your true area of expertise is today, much less what differential value you bring to a prospect that your competition can't. That's okay.

Know that building your reputation and USP takes effort and it builds over time with a relentless pursuit of becoming THE leading authority in your area of expertise.

#2: Invest time into choosing a lucrative target market. Let's not forget we're trying to build a business that makes money, not just become an authority on a useless topic or hobby. *Choose wisely.* You will need to invest considerable time and attention into developing new skills, deeper knowledge and greater abilities to further your authentic expertise.

Next Steps:

- Go through the five commonalities of leading authorities and start making a list of things you can start doing to further position yourself as a trusted, leading authority in your field. You might find you have some of the five working for you but aren't marketing and promoting them as well as you should.
- Go through the list of "Symbols Of Authority" and pick out two or three you can start working on first. Pick the ones you WILL do or that will come easiest for you. Momentum always beats meditation.



Chapter 8

Trust Driver #3: Affinity

In our private member portal, clients can post questions and communicate with other members through our QUE – an interactive newsfeed that stands for “Questions, Updates and Exchanges.”

What would you guess is the most *frequently* asked question?

If you’re not a member, you’d likely think the most common questions are about marketing, sales and growing your MSP. After all, that is what our membership is all about.

It’s not. *By a long shot.*

The #1 type of question asked and responded to is a trust question about the vendors serving MSPs. Some version of: ***Who do you trust for _____?***

As I was writing this, I went to the QUE for some examples, and the FIRST question that was trending was the following:

“What type of VPN solutions have you had success with?”

The next most trending question: “I’m currently using Axcient x360Recover, but we’re considering moving to Datto. Anyone have any experience with Datto in their stack?”

Over and over again, the #1 type of question asked is some form of “Which vendor can you *actually* trust to be the BEST solution, despite the fact that there are hundreds of reviews online for each and every vendor in our space and each of the vendors have spent a considerable amount of money and time on building websites with detailed information and the ability to watch demos, and many offering free trials?”

The problem is, we all know that online reviews can be manipulated or bought. The sewer known as Reddit is an online community that cannot be trusted due to the *anonymity* of the people posting.

We also know that the product rarely works like the demo.

And none of us can learn everything there is about the efficacy of a product or service with a limited-functionality free trial.



Because of this, members ask for reviews of products in our portal for two reasons.

First, they *trusted* me not to allow fake members to post fake answers. They also knew, before the sale of the company, I was truly vendor neutral.

But the bigger factor at play here is that they trust that the other members who will respond with their insights are small to midsize MSPs like them.

They have *affinity*.

People Like Us Are Trusted More

As I pointed out in a previous chapter, people trust for reasons that aren't always logical. Just because someone is just like you doesn't mean they will give you better advice than someone who is *not* quite like you.

Moms trust advice from other mothers, particularly when they have similar life circumstances and their children are of a similar age. Immigrants to this country disproportionately trust other immigrants who came from the same country over everyone else. In fact, that's why every immigrant group that has come to America ends up congregating in its own neighborhood.

My teenager thinks I'm an idiot, but she will trust her girlfriends who are her age, going to her school, for life advice. (How scary is that?!?!)

Bottom line: We trust people who are just like us far more than "strangers" or outsiders who aren't like us. It should not be this way, but that's a logical argument – and, as I said in an earlier chapter, trust is not always founded in rational thought.

Going back to the example above, let me point out that ***NONE of the people posting their opinions about a particular vendor are true experts, nor do they have the depth of experience or information needed to make a good recommendation.***

Yes, they run an MSP and, yes, they *may* have experience with the particular vendor in question.

But to truly provide an accurate answer to the question "Which is the best _____?" the person answering would have to:

1. Have direct experience in working with the vendor in question. Very often, people give their *opinion* about a vendor with no direct experience in using their



services or products.

2. Have direct experience in working with ALL the other competitors of that solution in their business, not just getting a demo or having formed an opinion based on limited information.
3. Fully understand the specific situation and needs for the person asking, providing a list of pros and cons for each vendor for their specific needs since there is no one “best” of any product or service category. Best for whom? And what? A company on a tight budget? Serving a particular market or customer? For operating in a complex environment?

This is the power of affinity: We disproportionately trust people who are “like us” more than outsiders.

Using The Power Of Affinity To Gain Clients

When clients seek me out to help them in marketing, one of the biggest gaps in their strategy is a lack of clarity about WHO their ideal client is.

Often, they’ve gotten clients by accident or luck, stemming purely from referrals. This makes their client list look like a random Frankenstein monster made up of unrelated individuals stitched and patched together without any consistency.

Sometimes when we really dig in more deeply than just a surface look, we DO find that consistencies and a target market will reveal themselves. However, if we cannot find a common thread to focus on, the next path I’ll take is the affinity path: Who do they have the most *natural affinity* with that we could target? Let me give you an example...

My long-term friend Michael Attias founded a catering software company called CaterZen to help restaurant owners market and manage the catering side of their business.

In his previous professional career, he ran a BBQ restaurant called Corky’s here in the Nashville area where the majority of his profits came from catering – which is why he started the software company. He built it to do what no other catering or restaurant management software could do.

When Michael markets his software to *BBQ restaurant owners* and tailors the messaging specifically for them, telling his origin story of running a BBQ restaurant, he gets a giant leap in response rates over any and every other type of restaurant he markets to with a similar promise and offer.



In fact, he has *seven* times more BBQ restaurants as clients over all other types, despite the fact he doesn't just focus on BBQ joints.

This is the power of affinity at work.

They trust him because HE is just like them.

Is marketing BBQ catering *radically* different from marketing Italian food or Asian cuisine? Not in the least. But in the eyes of the owner, THEIR business "is different" from everyone else's.

When he used to run events for restaurant owners, he noticed they would end up huddling in groups based on the type of restaurant they ran. All the sub shop owners would be hanging out at one table while all the pizza places would be at another.

If they were smart, they would sit with someone who is not like them. Maybe the guy running a five-star steak house has an idea you haven't thought about implementing in your Jewish deli that might work brilliantly because no other delis in your area are doing it (they're too busy *copying from everyone else just like them*).

This type of affinity marketing works even if the products and services you're selling are disconnected from the affinity ties.

A friend of mine, David Phelps, started a company called Freedom Founders that teaches dentists how to become financially free in retirement through real estate investing. Why dentists? Because he used to be one. Is the advice he provides *ONLY* relevant if you're a dentist? No, but his affinity with this group gives him a huge strategic advantage in building trust and gaining customers.

Another excellent example of the power of affinity in marketing is Evan Hafer of Black Rifle Coffee.

Evan served for over 20 years in the US Army as a Green Beret. After retiring from service, he started a business of roasting coffee beans in his garage – a business that has grown into a nearly \$400 million success story.

Think about it: How on earth do you start and grow a business to \$400 million selling *one of the most commoditized and competitive products in America*? There's no place in the good ol' U.S. of A. where Americans are saying to each other, "Man, I wish I could find a place around here that sells *coffee*."



When Starbucks was in full build mode, the joke was that they were opening new Starbucks locations in the restrooms of Starbucks.

Evan's success is not due to having a superior coffee that only he can acquire or some unique roasting process that nobody else knows about. Yes, the quality of his product is very good, but the real root of his success stems from his affinity marketing.

Black Rifle Coffee has a very distinct brand identity rooted in pro-veteran, pro-service values. His "coffee + culture" positioning resonated deeply with military, law enforcement and first responders. His marketing is not timid in supporting the Second Amendment and is highly patriotic. Their YouTube videos and other ads would send the average "woke" Starbucks customer into a blind rage.

But his core customers are loyal to a fault and love his brand because of it. They have an affinity with him and his brand.

Looking For Affinity Hooks To Build On

In the examples I just provided, all the owners were in the same business or industry as the customer they were targeting. However, affinity can come in many forms and doesn't have to be tied to the profession or industry you're in.

I was working with an MSP owner on his origin story and "About Us" page on his website. He was frustrated because he couldn't figure out any affinity hooks to his current clients. After talking with him, here's what I uncovered:

- His dad started the business many years ago and had him working part-time after school in the business.
- His dad was a "from scratch" entrepreneur who started the business entirely under his own steam – no investors, no advantages and no help.
- His dad taught him the importance of customer service, doing the right thing and hard work.
- His father had a key employee embezzle hundreds of thousands of dollars from his business, nearly forcing him to close the doors and putting his family's home and personal wealth at risk.
- His dad took full responsibility for the debts and chose to repay all of them instead of claiming bankruptcy to get out of paying his vendors.
- He (my client) took over the business at a very early age and more than quadrupled its size by applying his personal skill set of management and finances, building on his dad's passion for service and quality.
- His own son is now helping in the business, continuing the legacy.



You might think the above has nothing to do with providing quality IT services – and you’re right. **But there are many affinity hooks in his story.** When he shares the above details in a story about his company, called an “Origin Story,” people who have been in similar situations or with a similar background trust him more.

Turns out the large majority of his current customers started their business “from scratch” just like he and his dad. Many have experienced bankruptcy or embezzlement. And many have their kids working in the business with them, hoping that someday their sons or daughters will take over like he did.

ALL of these are affinity hooks that cause prospects to trust him MORE than the nameless, faceless “corporations” attempting to take their money.

Further, a person doesn’t have to match EVERY affinity point to gain trust, but the more “hooks” there are, the higher the trust goes.

Here are additional affinity hooks you can use:

- You are a first-generation entrepreneur who started your business from scratch – no investors, no help.
- You run a family business with the spouse and kids working with you.
- You are a multigenerational company.
- You grew up poor.
- You grew up rich.
- You came from a different country.
- You are of a certain gender, religion or ethnic group (women-owned, Orthodox Jews or Christians, African American, Asian, etc.).
- You’re a veteran or grew up in a military family.
- You’ve gone through bankruptcy or some other catastrophic life event.
- You’ve accomplished something that most never have (selling a business, completing an Ironman, starring on a TV show, etc.).
- Your business is of a similar size (enterprise vs. small).
- You held a similar job to what your clients are doing (ran an IT department).
- You have a hobby you’re passionate about.
- You’re active in charitable organizations.



- You belong to and serve in a well-known and respected group, like Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, Big Brother, etc.

Using Clients To Get More Like Them

And finally, another powerful way of building an affinity bridge is through an abundance of client case studies and testimonials.

When I started TMT, I was not running an IT company, nor did I ever start one. I did work for CGI Systems in their sales department, but that hardly qualifies as an “affinity” connection with the MSP business owner.

So, I used an abundance of client testimonials and case studies, using endorsed mailings, referrals and, eventually, the Spokesperson model to successfully build an affinity bridge with other MSPs.

A big key to my testimonials working is that I don’t just get “surface-level” testimonials; I engineered systems to get clients to tell their full story. Stories about how they went through one or more major financial crisis. How they almost got divorced (or GOT divorced). How they were dealt a blow by one or more of their children getting sick or having a major illness, which is far more common than you might think.

I get them to talk about the misery, the doubt, the lack of confidence and the struggles they went through, because people connect in hardship.

I have also been extremely diligent about showcasing my clients’ stories online, in webinars, in testimonial books, on social media, at our events and in the magazine I started, *MSP Success*, as well as in the Titans Of The Industry event we initiated.

If you have no other starting point for affinity marketing, know this: ONE brilliant client case study or testimonial is sufficient to get more clients just like them.

Make those clients thrilled, document their successes in case-study format and in testimonials, then rinse and repeat.

Next Steps:

- Take a closer look at your best customers and try to figure out what affinity hooks you have in common. This may require you taking them to lunch and understanding them on a more personal level, asking about how they got started in their business, what their early years were like, what kind of family they came



from. People generally like to talk about these things, so it should be a natural conversation.

- On your website and in your blogs, start telling your own “Origin Story” of how you started the business and grew it. Talk about your early years and other meaningful affinity hooks. Tell about your struggles, since people connect in misery far more than in success. And share interesting, quirky details about you, your family, the hobbies you have, the things you’ve done and the trajectory of your life.
- Start building a book of brilliant client testimonials and case studies that emphasize the “kind of clients we do our best work for.” Be sure to share the details of their stories beyond the results you’ve produced for them.



Where Do We Go From Here?

As I said in the opening, I plan on continuing to revise and complete this book late in 2026. If you like what you've heard so far, here are some additional next steps:

1. Give me your opinions, thoughts and ideas on how to make this book a brilliant, helpful tool to client-getting. Just send your ideas to book@robinrobins.com. If you want to be ADDED to the book, send me examples of how you are using the principles outlined in this book in your business.
2. If you would like to work with me one-on-one to develop a trust-based marketing plan for your business, and/or revise your sales process to one that centers on building trust, I do offer private consulting services. Go online to www.RobinRobins.com and request a meeting.

Thank you for your time and attention – as well as the TRUST you have bestowed on me by engaging.

Dedicated to your success,