

# Marketing consulting firms in the new decade

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# Foreword

Relationships with clients have brought the consulting industry a long way, but today's market is not the benign one it used to be. That's not to suggest that looking after clients shouldn't still be a consulting firm's highest priority, or that sticking close to trusted sources of knowledge isn't, in itself, an eminently sensible strategy. It's more that what has worked in the past might not work now.



Effective marketing is one solution to that problem and Dow Jones is delighted to be associated with this report on the subject. The picture it paints of how marketing currently works is as fascinating as its vision of the future is compelling. Supporting marketing, and acting as another solution to the broader issues facing consulting firms, must be effective sources of information about existing and potential clients, and the markets in which they operate. That will help firms, in the lexicon of this report, to move upstream: to be armed with information that allows them to suggest, rather than simply react, to clients. To create opportunity.

It seems strange to suggest that sticking close to trusted sources of knowledge is so important when information is everywhere now. But too much information, presented in the wrong way, can be counterproductive. For consulting firms it means having to spend precious time searching for the information they know they need to know whilst missing the things they don't know they need to know. Dow Jones Consultant is our answer to that problem. It's a new service that brings together 28,000 sources of actionable information – about clients and markets – and provides you with a range of intelligent filters to help you get to the information you need as quickly as possible. That means you can be more proactive in the way you market, sell and deliver your services. We'd be delighted to talk to you about it.

## **Ken Sickles**

Director of Product, Dow Jones

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# Executive summary

The consulting market is in a state of flux. Economic volatility, the relentless pressure of commoditisation and clients who are rewriting the rules by which they engage consultants, all contribute to a sense that the only certainty at the moment is change. Consulting firms are responding in as many different ways as they're being affected but there's a broad consensus around one thing: marketing is becoming more important.

However importance doesn't necessarily translate into effectiveness.

Our research, based on the input of around 50 firms ranging from the small to the very large, looks in detail at how marketing – and people's view of it – changes from one size of firm to another. It reveals what works when, and what doesn't. What emerges is a picture of change: one in which priorities are being reassessed and resources redeployed, and in which information in its many forms looks set to play an increasingly important role.

It shows that the bigger a firm grows, the more it struggles with how to differentiate itself. Indeed, for the largest firms included in our study, this challenge has eclipsed all others.

The problem is part external, part internal. Fierce competition and cynical clients go hand-in-hand with confusion about what marketing teams do and should be doing, along with lack of support for marketing from the rest of the firm.

At the heart of all this, we argue, is an imbalance of resources, with too much attention directed at 'downstream' marketing activities; that what's needed is a shift in the marketing paradigm itself, from one that focuses on differentiation to one that delivers it.

# Introduction: the case for changing the marketing paradigm

Given that it's roughly comparable in size to the UK's soft drinks sector and has more than 200 players competing for less than three-quarters of the total market, you'd expect some pretty sophisticated marketing from the management consulting industry. Yet while many of the skills required to succeed in mature, competitive marketplaces are those at which consulting firms excel, effective marketing is an art that often eludes them. Indeed while it may be a crude measure of capability (if not commitment), were the average Coca Cola executive to be shown the size of the marketing team at even the largest consulting firm, his first response would likely be 'is that it?'

Of course necessity is the mother of invention and for many consulting firms being sophisticated at marketing just hasn't seemed all that important. Theirs is an industry whose astonishing growth between 1990 and 2008 owed less to marketing ingenuity and more to the benign conditions in which they found themselves operating (more specifically to the success of banks and the surge in demand from the public sector). For the consumer electronics sector to achieve those levels of growth would require a collective marketing effort of the highest order. For the soft drinks sector it would probably be impossible. Either sector would emerge at the other end of a similar period of growth sporting new products, new propositions and new brands. The consulting industry didn't need to do any of that. If it ain't broke...

Except now it is a bit broke and consulting firms know it. That probably explains why the number of people responding to our survey who agreed with the statement that "marketing is seen to be more important than it was five years ago" was more than double the number that disagreed. So, what has changed?

## The market

The events of autumn 2008 need little introduction but their effect on the consulting industry, like every other, have been profound. Panicked by the need to cut costs fast, some clients simply shut up shop on their consultancy expenditure. Others were more measured, preferring to subject spend to new levels of scrutiny in an effort to bring it down as sharply as possible without causing further damage to their business. The result was probably a downturn of about 5% in 2009; not as painful as some

may have feared but deeply uncomfortable for consulting firms that had become so accustomed to growth. Just as troubling as the downturn itself was the uncertainty it caused. Clients were talking but not buying. Some areas of consultancy (operational improvement) were performing well while others (HR, strategy) weren't. Sectors were entering and emerging from recession at different times (and still are). But perhaps more than anything else, firms have found themselves fighting for market-share in a shrinking market, sometimes with unfamiliar adversaries, in a way they just aren't used to. The notion of the incumbent supplier suddenly feels a bit dated.

## Client behaviour

The downturn may have hastened things along but the fact is that the buying behaviour of clients was changing beforehand, and appears to show no sign of abating as their fortunes recover. For many large clients, consultancy accounts for as much as 5% of their entire cost base. Many have supplier lists that read like a who's who of the consulting industry and most are no more able to explain (to themselves) what they get for their investment than they are able to account for their choice of suppliers. If anyone is surprised that procurement departments get invited into the mix, or that the initiatives they're rolling out have a life beyond the downturn, they shouldn't be.

What clients are doing is consolidating their supplier base, building – or at least refreshing – preferred supplier lists, scrutinising rates, segmenting consulting firms, building knowledge management capability and asking stakeholders to justify the decisions they make about the firms they appoint. They may not be doing it in the most sophisticated way yet, but for every fist hammering on the negotiating table there's someone else looking at the longer game; one in which procurement become a source of value rather than just control; where decisions about which consulting firm to use are based on their own merits and those of the firms themselves.

## Commoditisation

If marketing is needed to counter one issue, this is probably it. While future market conditions can never be certain, any more than client behaviour can accurately be predicted, commoditisation – which we'll define for the purposes of this report as falling prices and the growing ease of substitution – remains the biggest threat to a consulting firm's ability to differentiate itself from its competitors. The idea that it can affect even the most cerebral of consulting disciplines – strategy consulting<sup>1</sup> – demonstrates its pervasive nature and the threats it poses.

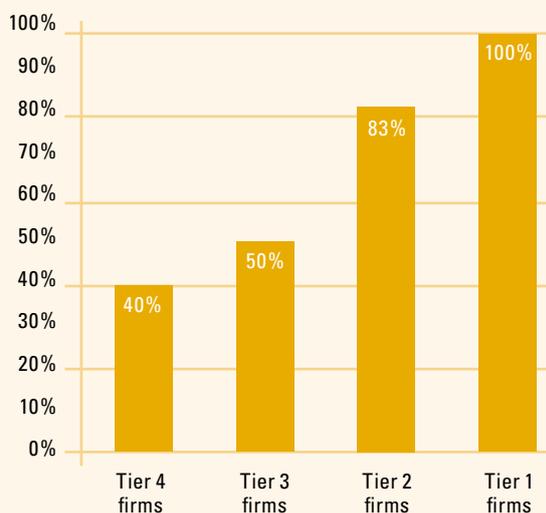
## Finding something distinctive to say

Finding something distinctive to say is, according to our survey, the single biggest challenge consulting firms face in their marketing activity. More than three times the number of respondents said this was the biggest challenge they faced than said that the growing role of procurement or preferred supplier lists (second and third biggest issues) were their primary concern. By comparison the cynicism of clients and the poor reputation of consultants in general are trifling matters.

The challenge grows as firms get bigger. Some 40% of respondents from Tier 4 firms (which, for the purposes of this report, we assume to be firms with 50 or fewer full-time consultants) considered it to be the biggest issue. This rises to 50% for Tier 3 firms (50-200 consultants), 83% for Tier 2 firms (200-1000 consultants) and 100% for Tier 1 firms (more than 1000 consultants). How challenges

**Figure 1:**

Proportion of respondents saying that finding something distinctive to say is the biggest marketing challenge their firm faces



generally evolve as firms grow is something we discuss in greater detail later in this report: the central point for now is that finding something distinctive to say starts off being the *biggest* challenge and, and least if our survey is to be read literally, ends up being the *only* challenge.

Why? Perhaps the answer and the solution lie in a fundamental misunderstanding about what marketing is in the first place. Let's start with the idea that so much of a consulting firm's marketing efforts go into explaining why clients should *choose* them and not into why clients should *use* them.

At the moment most consulting firms focus their marketing efforts on that precious moment when a client, having defined the issue they want to solve and having already decided they need a consulting firm to help them solve it, turns to the market to choose a supplier. At which point, unless the client already knows who they want to use, consulting firms, like eager school children, thrust their hands into the air and shout 'Pick me! Pick me!' They whirl into action to answer the inevitable next question (why?) and all come up with answers that sound remarkably similar.

**"We take a holistic approach..."**

**"We put our clients' needs first..."**

**"We're results-focused..."**

Which are all perfectly admirable things, but aren't really an effective way to describe how one firm is different from any other. In fact, an interesting test at this point is whether anyone could reasonably reverse the statements you make and put them to clients.

**"We take a blinkered approach, ignoring other issues that impact the one we're trying to solve..."**

**"We put our own needs first and our clients' second..."**

**"We're not really bothered about results..."**

Of course the language can be improved, as can communication between consultants and marketing departments which might lead to there being something more distinctive to say in the first place (in fact, a simple appreciation of the fact that everyone else is likely to be saying the same thing would be helpful in itself) but the issue is that it really is hard to differentiate one firm from another when they're all lined up in a row trying to explain how they're different.

Perhaps there's a bigger issue though, which is that the more firms focus their efforts on explaining how they're different, the less different they actually become. If that's the case, a more fundamental reappraisal of what marketing is, and what it's for may be required.

*Finding something distinctive to say starts off being the biggest challenge and ends up being the only challenge*

<sup>1</sup> See Source's March 2010 report on strategy consulting - <http://www.sourceforconsulting.com/news/48>

## Moving marketing upstream

Commoditisation can be an irresistible force and the effect it has on marketing departments can be profound. Like a powerful river, it pushes marketing agendas downstream, to a point where it is a matter of choosing between products, and from where it's very difficult to return. As a product becomes increasingly commoditised, the need to explain to customers what makes yours different becomes ever greater and ever less connected with the product itself. Campaigns focus more and more on the experience of the customer and less on the product itself. Mobile networks scramble to explain the emotional significance of their products. Insurance companies simply try to make sure you remember their name. Marketing – a broad discipline, at least for its most effective practitioners – becomes focused on one thing: communications.

What Figure 2 attempts to show, albeit in a very simplistic way, is that the more a product becomes commoditised, the greater the reliance on marketing communications to differentiate it. Were it to end up completely commoditised, the need for effective communications would disappear completely. But of course many organisations, and the marketing agencies which support them, are highly adept at operating in the space just before complete commoditisation. Indeed this is arguably the space in which the art of marketing communications is at its most refined and certainly where it's at its most celebrated. Coca-Cola amply testifies to that. So, effective marketing communications can hold commoditisation at bay, in some cases indefinitely. The question is: at what cost? Keeping a product in that space – just like holding a canoe upstream of a waterfall on a fast-flowing river – takes an enormous amount of effort. That's fine for consulting firms which have sufficient resources to do more than communications, but most firms don't.

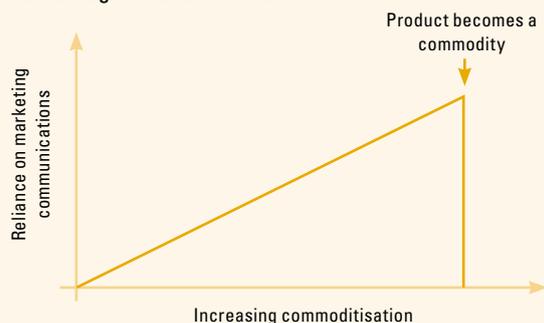
Instead they shore up their position as much as they can by deploying their last lines of defence: distribution and price. Relationships allow them to lock in their distribution, to hold their position, to some extent. Discounting comes in when even those defences fail. Yet, in contrast to a soft drinks manufacturer, the marketing teams in consulting firms rarely have access to decisions about distribution and price – although in fact they should. The reason the marketing guy from Coca-Cola would be asking 'is that it?' is because his understanding of what a marketing function is would likely be very different from that of the average consulting firm, and he'd be wondering how so few people could possibly do everything an effective marketing department needs to do.

*What's needed more than anything else is an understanding that marketing needs to move upstream*

The 'pick me, pick me' approach of downstream marketing means consulting firms constantly having to find new and exciting ways to describe what they do, rather than putting their efforts into uncovering the real differences between themselves and their competitors, or even into changing what they do in the first place. Perhaps what's needed more than anything else is an understanding that marketing needs to move upstream. By 'upstream' here, we mean points where:

- Consulting services are still being developed; where embryonic ideas and insights are being converted into outputs and benefits for individual clients, but have yet to be converted into consulting products.
- Clients are starting to weigh up the possibilities of using consultants but where their needs have yet to crystallise around specific projects.

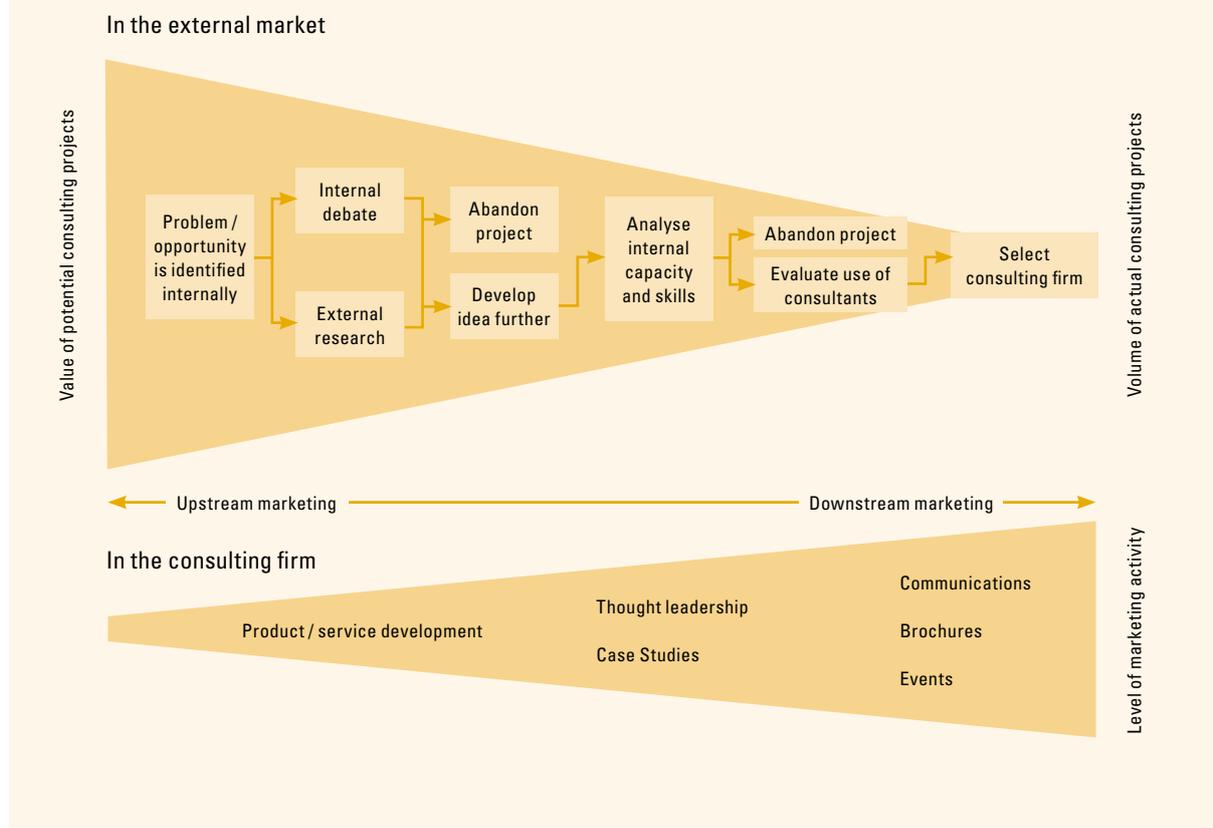
**Figure 2:**  
The effect of commoditisation on the need for marketing communications



Independent research carried out by Source suggests that about the ratio of client projects that end up as a consulting project is about 20:1. In other words, as many as 19 of 20 projects never get anywhere near a consultant. As the top part of Figure 3 illustrates, clients go through several stages of soul-searching before committing even to speak to a consulting firm. Initially, having identified a problem or opportunity in their organisation, clients are seven times more likely to bounce their ideas off their colleagues internally than canvas the views of consultants. Thereafter, they'll look for information – case studies and thought leadership – which may reinforce their emerging view that there is something worth pursuing. Only after all of this, do they approach consulting firms.

**Figure 3:**

The current marketing and sales cycle for consulting firms



Contrasting this with the typical marketing activity of a consulting firm (the bottom part of Figure 3), shows that the vast majority is focused on the far right hand side, on communications and other downstream tactics. Moreover, even 'midstream' marketing activities – the publication of thought leadership and case studies – are influenced by this downstream bias. How much thought leadership has been commissioned from external market research companies, rather than reflecting the practical experience of a firm's consultants? How many case studies are couched in generic terms and have lost the human element to them?

There are two ironies in this situation. First, for all their aggressive language around differentiation, firms are actually being remarkably passive in the face of huge opportunity. Imagine what could be achieved were they to move upstream and to engage with clients *before* they make the decision to appoint a consultant. Second, while the services consulting firms sell can be easily commoditised, and while the formal differences of approach and methodology are rarely unique, the consultants that deliver them can never be anything but unique. Finding an effective way to market those people might not be easy but it presents consulting firms with a problem that they really ought to be pleased to have: unlike consulting services, consultants are too different from each other.

Moving marketing upstream also opens up the potential to do something more, although – and here's a third and final irony – doing so may well challenge the accepted definition of 'marketing' within a consulting firm. Marketing teams need to work much more closely with consultants as they actually deliver services to clients in order to understand what creates value. Their role is to 'productise' and convert it into collateral – intellectual property, case studies and thought leadership – which will genuinely differentiate their firm.

But that's not what's happening today....

# Marketing today

This section of our report draws on the results of an extensive survey into marketing within consulting firms. The survey was answered by marketers themselves, but also by senior managers/partners and consultants, providing us with a number of different views about marketing, both as a business function and as a discipline. The differences of opinion that it reveals are fascinating, as are the areas of consensus; our analysis highlights both.

Our survey also suggests that there are significant differences in the challenges that firms face, and the ways they respond to those challenges, according to how big they are. With that in mind, we've provided analysis on four different sizes of firms which, for the purposes of this report we have called:

- **Tier 4: small firms with 50 full-time consultants or fewer**
- **Tier 3: medium-sized firms with between 50 and 200 consultants**
- **Tier 2: big firms with between 200 and 1000 consultants**
- **Tier 1: very large firms with more than 1000 consultants**

Please note that these tiers are simply used for the purposes of effective segmentation within this report; they are in no way a comment on quality.

But we're also interested in the combined view, both of different firm sizes and of the different types of people within a consulting firm, because what this gives us is perhaps the broadest and most balanced view of marketing in consulting firms that exists today.

*Firms are happier spending money on sales than they are on marketing*

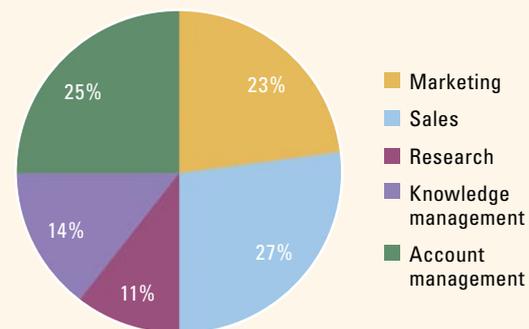
## Priorities

### The business development budget

We divided the business development function into five distinct areas in order to get an understanding of how budget is currently assigned:

**Figure 4:**

Allocating the business development budget.



What this suggests is that marketing, sales and account management are all fairly equal in the eyes of the budget holder, with the latter two actually accounting for a slightly higher proportion of the budget than marketing.

The figures change depending on the role of the respondent and counter the idea that most people assume their area of the business to be underfunded:

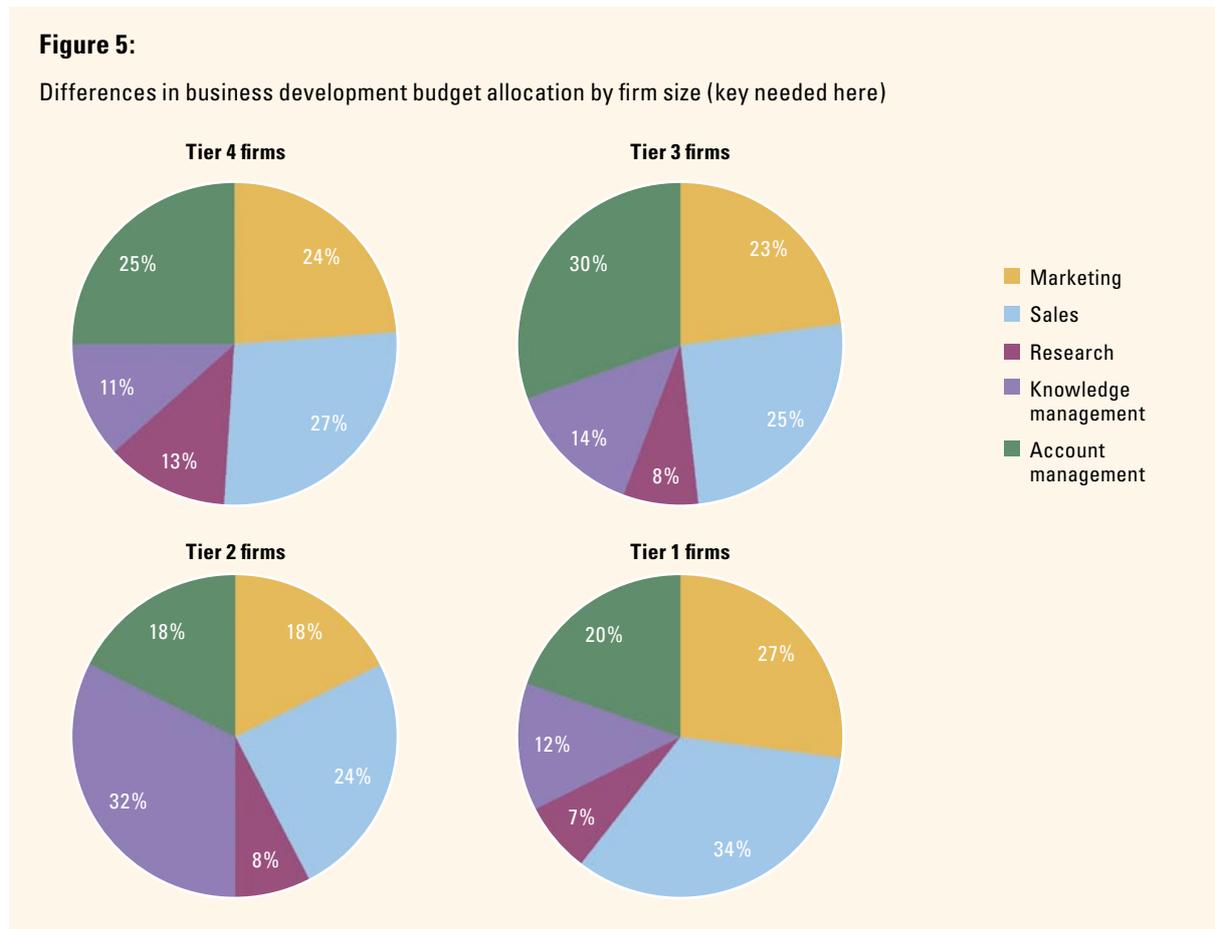
- Consultants think the lion's share of the business development budget goes on sales (36%) and account management (also 36%) with marketing only accounting for just 14%.
- Marketing, for their part, assume they're getting more than anyone else (27%), though only slightly ahead of sales (26%) and account management (22%).
- The management team, mindful no doubt of the need to swell the coffers (and presumably more aware of the actual figures than anyone else) think sales accounts for about 28%, account management for about 24% and marketing for just 20%.

Overall it seems safe to assume that firms are happier spending money on sales than they are on marketing, or any other area of business development.

These are trends that are broadly followed by different sizes of firms, but with a few notable differences:

**Figure 5:**

Differences in business development budget allocation by firm size (key needed here)



In Tier 4 firms there's a fairly even split between marketing, sales and account management, with a slight bias towards sales. For Tier 3 firms, who may find themselves having to manage a relatively large client base for the first time, account management (30% of business development budget) assumes the highest priority. Having dealt with that, Tier 2 firms shift their attention to knowledge management, assigning more than double the proportion of their budget (32%) to this area than any other size of firm. Marketing and account management fall most here, both shrinking to just 18% of the total business development budget. For Tier 1 firms it's all about sales (34%) though marketeers in these firms look likely to have a bigger share of the budget than their peers in other sizes of firms. Finding something distinctive to say (their biggest marketing challenge), or at least finding the media through which to say it, is obviously an expensive business.

*Finding something distinctive to say is obviously an expensive business*

What Figure 5 also suggests is that the amount of money spent on research, as a proportion of total budget, falls as firms get bigger. This is presumably because the price of paid-for research remains relatively constant whatever the firm size, making it feel expensive to Tier 4 firms and cheap for larger firms.

### Where marketing resources currently go

Assuming somewhere in the region of a quarter of business development budget goes on marketing, the next question is where priorities lie within the marketing function itself.

Here we asked respondents simply to indicate whether a lot, some, not very much or none of their resources (time and money) are expended on various types of marketing activity. The results suggest that the highest priorities are case studies, thought leadership and press relations, while advertising, sponsorship, industry-specific marketing through events/trade press and market/client research are the lowest priorities.

**Figure 6:**

Where marketing resources go (all respondents)

Most (in order of priority)	Least (in order of priority)
Case studies	Advertising
Thought leadership	Sponsorship
Press relations	Industry-specific marketing through events/trade press
Developing brochures and other marketing collateral	Market/client research
Online content	Direct mailings

Of course contained within Figure 6 are the opinions of people who aren't actually involved in marketing on a day-to-day basis. A more accurate indication of where marketing resources go should come from the marketing team themselves. Here's what they think, set alongside the opinion of their colleagues:

So although the overall impression is that more marketing resources go on case studies and thought leadership than anything else, the reality, according to the marketeers themselves, is that most of their time is spent developing glossy brochures and managing press relations.

Much of the discrepancy between what marketing say they do and what other people think they do can probably be put down to the interface between the different parties. Consultants think marketing spend most of their time organising events because they're something into which marketing tend to need consultants' input. They may even be one of the only times consultants get to meet their marketing colleagues! Planning also features more prominently in the views of both consultants and management because, again, this is an activity which requires marketing to engage with other parts of the business. In fact, marketing teams put planning eighth on their list of where resources go, which is something, as we'll see later, that they'd quite like to address.

Most striking is how much effort management think that marketing put into market and client research when there's little to suggest this is an activity that takes up very much of their time at all. Experience of the interface between marketing and management probably accounts for some of this (research is something that marketing will talk to management about) – as does the fact that marketing may be asking management for money to spend on research – but it's possible that the rest can be attributed to what management want marketing to be doing. Or perhaps even what marketing tell management they're doing.

What's immediately clear from Figure 8 is that when it comes to allocating resources, what's good for one size of firm isn't necessarily good for another. Indeed there are very few similarities – thought leadership being the notable exception – across the responses from different sizes of firms.

*The impression is that marketing resources go on case studies and thought leadership... the reality is that more time is spent on developing glossy brochures and managing press relations*

**Figure 7:**

Where marketing resources go: opinion of marketing people v management and consultants (top five activities in order of priority)

According to marketing	According to management	According to consultants
Developing brochures and other marketing collateral	Market/client research	Organising events
Press relations	Thought leadership	Planning
Online content	Online content	Case studies
Case studies	Case studies	Thought leadership
Thought leadership	Planning	Developing brochures and other marketing collateral

**Figure 8:**

Where marketing resources go: by firm size (in order of priority)

Tier 4 firms	Tier 3 firms	Tier 2 firms	Tier 1 firms
Thought leadership	Online content	Case studies	Developing brochures Industry-specific marketing
Planning	Thought leadership Press relations	Planning	Case studies Thought leadership Press relations
Case studies Online content Market/client research	Organising events	Organising events Direct mailings	Organising events
Press relations Organising events	Developing brochures	Developing brochures Press relations Thought leadership	Online content Direct mailings Client/market research
Sponsorship Developing brochures	Direct mailings	Online content Market/client research Industry-specific marketing Sponsorship	

*When it comes to allocating resources, what's good for one size of firm isn't necessarily good for another*

For Tier 4 firms, thought leadership offers an especially effective way to spend marketing effort. In theory at least, and certainly in terms of quality, the thought leadership 'market' is a great leveller. While bigger firms can pack a bigger punch in terms of volume, Tier 4 firms are usually specialists, with plenty to say about their subject.

Tier 3 firms appear to like thought leadership, too, but for them online content is, by some distance, the most popular use of marketing resources. Again, this is probably about levelling the playing field. Tier 3 firms may well have the capacity to start producing a reasonable volume of content and can benefit from the internet in a way they can't from print. After all, Google doesn't care how big they really are.

*Google doesn't care how big firms really are*

Tier 2 firms start to want to shout about the depth of their experience so this is where most time and money is most likely to be spent on producing case studies, whereas the biggest firms seem to resort to good old-fashioned glossy brochures and other marketing collateral. For them the old media still work well – people make more abstract, illogical decisions than search engines: brand and size matter and a glossy brochure from McKinsey is going to be received in a way that a glossy brochure from a firm they've never heard of won't. Printed material is just more cost-effective for the biggest firms than it is for anyone else.

Industry-specific marketing through event and trade press also becomes more important the bigger a firm gets, so that for the biggest firms it's equal to brochures and other marketing collateral in terms of the marketing resource allocated to it. This is about taking advantage of depth of experience as anything else, but it's also likely to be guided by a desire to shake off the generalist tag. If you can't persuade clients that you're actually a specialist then speaking to them through specialist media is likely to help.

*If you can't persuade clients that you're actually a specialist then speaking to them through specialist media is likely to help*

## The external challenges

### What the challenges are

Consultants may beg to differ but everyone else agrees that finding something distinctive to say amid all the marketing produced by other firms is the biggest challenge consulting firms face in their marketing. 58% of respondents cited it as the single biggest challenge, with the role of procurement as gatekeeper (15%), the increasing prevalence of preferred supplier lists (12%), cynical clients (10%) and the poor reputation of consultants (5%) nowhere near as big an issue.

Consultants have a slightly different view of the world; for them procurement is the biggest issue because it's what comes between them and their clients. The fact that they see this as a marketing challenge suggests that consulting firms still haven't found a way to market themselves effectively to procurement departments. Cynicism amongst clients is also considered by consultants to be a far bigger marketing challenge than it is by anyone else. In fact as many as a quarter of consultants think it's the biggest challenge. They don't write off the issue of finding something different to say (the biggest concern amongst marketeers) but it's a long way from being their biggest concern. Of course consultants spend a lot more time in front of clients so they're better placed to make judgements about how cynical clients are.

What this hints at is the issue of effective communication between marketing and consultants (something we'll pick up in more detail later). Either consultants do have plenty to say that's different (in which case marketing would do well to talk to them) or they don't realise that what they're saying is the same as what other consultants, from other firms, are saying (in which case they'd do well to talk to marketing).

But perhaps the most interesting thing is how the challenge of finding something different to say grows as firms get bigger. Tier 4 firms see it as an issue (40% agree that it's the biggest issue) but they're understandably concerned about preferred supplier lists (28% think that's the biggest issue) and the role of procurement (22%) which presumably look like more of a barrier to entry for Tier 4 firms than they do for any other size of firm. It's not just that they have to work much harder to justify their inclusion on preferred supplier lists (PSLs) in the first place, but that the effort required of all firms to get on a PSL is something they have far less capacity to cope with.

Within Tier 3 firms, the number of respondents for whom finding something different to say is the biggest challenge rises to 50%. It's notable that concerns about PSLs disappear completely for these firms (at least according to our survey), to be replaced by concerns about cynical

clients (a third of respondents thought this was the biggest issue). The reason for this is probably that most clients' PSLs are still reasonably long and will often include Tier 3 firms. That's likely to change in future because it's not uncommon to hear large consultancy-buying organisations talking about wanting PSLs with fewer than ten firms on them. Given that four or five of those tend to be the same Tier 1 firms that appear on everyone's lists, it would be interesting to ask the same question of Tier 3 firms in another couple of years.

Why these firms are struggling with cynical clients so much more than any other size of firm is also interesting. What we do know is that Tier 3 firms believe in the potential of marketing more than any others; so it's likely that the targeted, specialist messages that formed such a cornerstone of their marketing as a Tier 4 firm, are being replaced by more generic marketing activity, and that clients aren't responding well to this.

The growing role of procurement is a concern for Tier 3 firms (17% of respondents said this was the biggest marketing challenge) but not to the extent it is for smaller firms.

For Tier 2 firms, it's nearly all about finding something different to say. 83% of respondents cited this as the biggest challenge with everything other than the growing role of procurement (17%) no longer presenting a marketing challenge at all. It's quite possible that by the time firms get to this size (between 200 and 1000 full-time consultants) they're able to assign dedicated resource to the issue of PSLs and procurement generally, meaning that it stops being a marketing challenge, but equally likely is the idea that PSLs and procurement just aren't the barriers to firms of this size that they are to smaller firms. Or even that they might be starting to see life from the other side of the barrier, and be grateful for the protection it's offering them from smaller competitors.

*Tier 2 firms might start to see procurement and preferred supplier lists as a barrier they're glad to have*

By the time a firm has more than about 1000 full-time consultants, finding something different to say becomes an all-consuming issue. Not a single respondent to our survey ticked any other option when asked the question about external marketing challenges. It's safe to assume that many firms of this size will find themselves on preferred supplier lists without having to justify their inclusion. Procurement departments may present more of a challenge in future – assuming they start playing a more active role in the selection of consulting suppliers – but for now the biggest firms are presumably glad to be one of five or ten consulting suppliers rather than one of 100.

We've already discussed in our introduction why finding something distinctive to say is an issue in the first place; the fact that it grows as firms grow is probably down to the fact that bigger firms tend to be more generalist in nature. For these firms there's a big challenge in getting the balance right between centralised marketing – which will help with things like brand building, but through which communications may become the relatively bland amalgam of their more interesting constituent parts – and localised, issue or sector-specific marketing which may be a better way to uncover differentiation but which can lead to damaging fragmentation and loss of control.

*Ask a consulting firm how it's different from its competitors and it'll usually talk about all the things it's not*

One thing that is likely to raise eyebrows outside of consulting firms is the fact that just 5% of respondents (mostly managers or partners in Tier 4 firms) thought that the poor reputation of consultants in general at the moment was the biggest external marketing challenge their firm faced. Ask clients how much the reputation of consultants affects their use of management consulting and we suspect you'd see a very different result. In fact, if you ask a consulting firm to explain how it's different from its competitors, it'll usually talk about all the things it's not, suggesting it's only too aware of the poor reputation of consultants generally.

### The effectiveness of marketing

Our survey asked firms how effective they thought various marketing activities were in meeting the following objectives:

- **Building brand awareness and name recognition**
- **Promoting specific services and skills**
- **Generating leads**

What this creates is not only a picture of the marketing activities that best serve each of those objectives, but an overall impression of where marketing resource should be directed. It also shows the extent to which different people within a consulting firm 'believe' in marketing and how the picture shifts from one size of consulting firm to another.

### Overall effectiveness of marketing activities

**Figure 9:**

The effectiveness of marketing activities (all respondents)

Most effective (in order)	Least effective (in order)
Case studies, thought leadership	Advertising
Organising events, industry-specific marketing	Client/market research
Planning, online content	Press relations
Direct mailings	Sponsorship
	Developing brochures and other collateral

Using the list in Figure 9, we can then compare what marketing departments *are* doing, and what they *should* be doing.

**Figure 10:**

Comparing what marketing departments are doing with what they should be doing

What marketing departments <i>are</i> doing	What they <i>should</i> be doing
Developing brochures and other collateral	Case studies, thought leadership
Press relations	Organising events, industry-specific marketing
Online content	Planning, online content
Case studies	Direct mailings
Thought leadership	

This suggests that far too much time is being given over to developing brochures and other marketing collateral, and to press relations. On the other hand it suggests that more time should be spent organising events, carrying out industry-specific marketing, running direct mail campaigns and planning.

**Figure 11:**

How marketing should be spending their time



It's important, of course, not to forget those activities that both *should* be and *are* being prioritised because this is where there should be little argument with what marketing departments spend their time doing. For now those are case studies, thought leadership and online content.

Overall the impression is of a need for marketing departments to move away from the old media and old messaging and towards more targeted, more content- and evidence-driven marketing.

As ever, there are differences of opinion within consulting firms. What one group of people think marketing should be doing isn't necessarily what another group thinks. Marketing actually believe that where external marketing challenges are concerned, planning – possibly the most internal-facing of all the activities they undertake – would be the most effective use of their time. Not unreasonably, their view is that the success of most other marketing activity depends on it being co-ordinated through effective planning. It's safe to assume that the difficulty in planning is one of a dependence on, and a need to co-ordinate with, colleagues in other areas, just as it's possible that management and consultants simply haven't grasped the importance of co-operating with marketing planning in order to address the challenges they face in the market.

*Marketing believe that where external challenges are concerned, internal planning would be the most effective use of their time*

In the eyes of management it's all about case studies. 71% think work on case studies represents an effective use of marketing time; and judging by their interest in industry-specific marketing (63% by the same measure) they're keen to use sector specific press and events to demonstrate their capability. For them, planning only comes 7th in a list of most effective uses of marketing time.

Consultants, for their part (and for reasons we'll explain later) would like to see marketing spending most of their time organising events, though they're also staunch believers in the power of thought leadership, case studies and online content. In fact here's one of the most surprising statistics that our survey threw up: based on an average of their responses to the efficacy of all types of marketing activity, consultants are the biggest believers in marketing that a consulting firm has. More so, even, than marketing themselves.

*Consultants are the biggest believers in marketing that a consulting firm has*

**Effectiveness of marketing activities for meeting specific marketing objectives**

Understanding which marketing activities serve which marketing objectives is important. Advertising may appear at the bottom of most lists but if you're looking to build name recognition it's likely to be fairly effective. Here's what respondents to our survey thought were the best marketing activities to meet certain key objectives:

**Figure 12:**

The effectiveness of marketing activity for three key marketing objectives (in order of effectiveness)

Best for...

Building brand	Promoting specific skills	Generating sales leads
Advertising	Online content	Organising events
Press relations	Case studies	Planning
Sponsorship	Direct mailings	Direct mailings
Thought leadership	Planning	Case studies
Industry-specific marketing	Developing brochures	Market/client research

### Effectiveness of marketing activities for different sizes of consulting firm

Just as certain activities suit certain objectives, so certain activities – for certain objectives – suit certain sizes of firm. Case studies may be seen as the most effective way to generate sales leads for a small firm, but Tier 1 firms generally wouldn't expect them to do anything of the sort, preferring direct mail as a way of generating leads. Let's look at the overall picture by firm size first.

**Figure 13:**

The overall effectiveness of marketing activities for different sizes of firm (in order of effectiveness)

Best for...

Tier 4 firms	Tier 3 firms	Tier 2 firms	Tier 1 firms
Case studies	Online content Organising events	Direct mailings	Planning
Industry-specific marketing	Direct mailings	Case studies Thought leadership	Case studies
Online content Thought leadership	Planning	Organising events	Organising events
Planning	Industry-specific marketing	Industry-specific marketing	Thought leadership Direct mailings
Organising events	Thought leadership	Planning	Industry-specific marketing

Tier 4 firms, more than anything else, want to talk about their experience; for them, time spent writing and promoting case studies is time well spent. As is industry-specific marketing, primarily because the specialisation of their messages is well suited to being promoted through these sorts of channels.

The biggest shift seems to happen within Tier 3 firms, for whom online content (as has already been discussed) and organising events are the most effective uses of marketing resource. Especially notable in the list for Tier 3 firms is the absence of case studies (which feature prominently for everyone else) and the fact that thought leadership is relegated to fifth-place. What this suggests is that, in marketing terms at least, the leap from small firm to Tier 3 firm, is one of the most significant a firm undertakes. Suddenly the game is less about proving capability in specific areas and more about telling everyone about yourself. Perhaps for that reason, Tier 3 firms are the biggest believers in the power of marketing; they appear to have a sense that the marketing activities they undertake really do work.

Once a firm gets bigger than about 200 full-time consultants in size they appear to want to take advantage of a growing client base by marketing into them. Sleepy, quiet corners of the client base may have started to appear and direct mail is probably seen as a cost-effective way of generating business from clients whose business isn't relied on any more.

For the biggest firms, planning becomes the key. Their challenge is one of size, and the issues it creates, so planning is not only the most difficult, but also the most important, activity they can undertake. Indeed it's probably fair to say that without effective planning, there's a sense that most other marketing activity will fall short of its potential; something reflected in the fact that once firms get this big their belief in the effectiveness of marketing generally has plummeted.

Absent from any of the lists in Figure 13 is market and client research. In fact overall (as shown in Figure 9) this comes second only to advertising in a list of the least effective marketing activities, despite the fact interest grows amongst the bigger firms. And yet, rather like planning, you could be forgiven for thinking that this was an activity that would need to underpin everything else. We look again at this issue later in our report, suggesting that a different view of marketing might lead to a re-prioritising of activity in this area.

Dropping down one more level of detail, we start to see a more complex picture emerge about the ways that different sizes of consulting firm use different types of marketing. Our table illustrates those areas that have an average rating of more than 50% in terms of the number of people thinking they were effective.

**Figure 14:**

Effectiveness of marketing activities by objective and size of firm

	Tier 4 firms			Tier 3 firms			Tier 2 firms			Tier 1 firms		
	Building brand	Promote skills	Generate leads	Building brand	Promote skills	Generate leads	Building brand	Promote skills	Generate leads	Building brand	Promote skills	Generate leads
Case studies	■	■	■		■		■	■	■		■	
Thought leadership	■	■		■	■	■	■		■	■		
Organising events		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■
Industry-specific marketing	■	■	■	■	■		■	■		■		■
Planning	■	■	■	■	■	■		■			■	■
Online content	■	■		■	■			■			■	
Direct mailings	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■
Developing brochures	■	■		■	■		■	■			■	
Sponsorship	■			■	■		■		■	■		
Press relations	■			■	■		■			■		
Market/client research	■		■		■			■	■		■	
Advertising	■			■			■			■		

Figure 14 throws up a number of things:

- Only Tier 3 firms consider press relations to be useful in helping them to promote specific skills or services
- Everyone has a different view about the effectiveness of thought leadership: Tier 4 firms think it's useful for building their brand and promoting specific skills, Tier 3 firms think it's useful for everything, Tier 2 firms don't think it's useful for promoting skills and Tier 1 firms only think it works as a brand-building/name recognition exercise.
- Online content helps everyone promote specific skills but for small and Tier 3 firms it is also seen as a useful way to increase brand awareness
- Beyond brand building, advertising isn't considered effective for anything by anyone
- Tier 1 firms are far more cynical about the efficacy of any marketing activities than their counterparts in smaller firms.

## The internal challenges

Very few of the external challenges consulting firms face can be overcome without them first dealing with their internal challenges. The correlation between the two is absolute. Thought leadership can only be effective if consultants know when a good time to write it is, and then do so. Planning, an important issue for most firms, but especially for bigger firms, requires the input of many different people. Market and client research works best when the benefits of doing it properly are clearly outlined to the budget holders who are asked to invest in it.

Effective marketing relies on input from consultants (into thought leadership, case studies, events, press relations and many other activities) because – as in other professional services firms – its people are so much a part of its product. So the quality of that input is a critical factor in the success – or otherwise – of a consulting firms' marketing. We look in detail at the issue of consultants input into marketing shortly; first, a few general observations from our survey about internal challenges.

### Marketing is becoming more important to everyone, but not everyone's spending more on it

While the consensus isn't completely overwhelming, the balance of opinion suggests that most people, in most firms, believe marketing now plays a more prominent role within their firm than it used to. 58% of respondents to our survey agreed with the statement 'marketing is seen to be more important than it was five years ago' against 23% who disagreed. The proportion of people agreeing is actually larger within Tier 2 and Tier 1 firms (71% and 63% respectively) than it is for Tier 4 and Tier 3 firms (50% in both cases) though views are also more polarised.

But although Tier 4, Tier 3 and Tier 2 firms also agree that they're spending more, for Tier 1 firms an increase in importance doesn't appear to be translating into an increase in expenditure. It's possible that these firms just aren't putting their money where their mouths are, but with some of the higher-cost areas such as advertising coming under increased scrutiny (not so much from a financial perspective as from a changing view of what works and what doesn't) it's equally possible that they're simply becoming smarter about what they spend their money on. And as Figure 15 suggests, they're probably all too aware of the diminishing returns they get from any increase in their investment in marketing. In any event, Tier 2 and Tier 1 firms seem comfortable with the amount they're spending already: 50% of respondents from Tier 2 firms disagreed with the statement 'our marketing budget isn't large enough to have an impact', while in Tier 1 firms that rises to more than 70%.

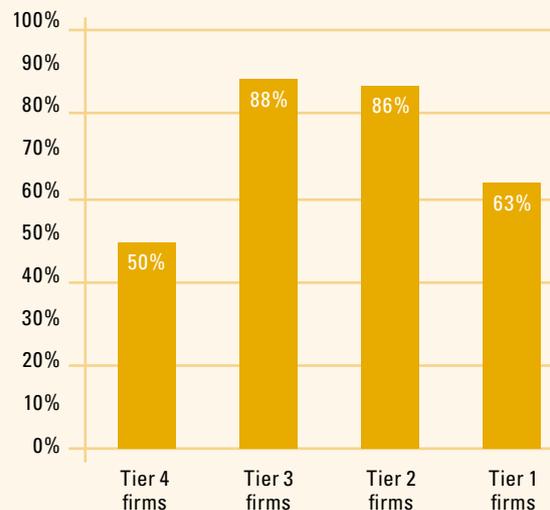
Perhaps more surprising is the fact that marketing people don't generally appear to be complaining about budgets anywhere other than in Tier 3 firms (where marketing departments tend to be trying to do much more).

### Marketing strategy is clearer than it used to be, but not for everyone

Supporting the idea that marketing is generally becoming more important is the view that marketing strategy is clearer than it used to be. Not everyone agrees with that to the same extent though. Tier 4 firms are a bit more circumspect: 50% of respondents here agreed with the statement 'our marketing strategy is far clearer than it was five years ago', against 28% who disagreed. The number agreeing rises to 88% and 86% for Tier 3 and Tier 2 firms respectively, before dropping back to 63% for Tier 1 firms. But if strategy is clearer then someone should probably tell the marketing department about it: 55% of marketing people agreed that their strategy was clearer (against 36% who didn't) which would seem reasonably positive were it not for the fact that the proportion rises to 75% for consultants and 79% for management.

Figure 15:

Proportion of respondents saying that marketing strategy is clearer now than it was five years ago



*If marketing strategy is clearer than it used to be, someone should probably tell the marketing department about it*

### The role of consultants in marketing

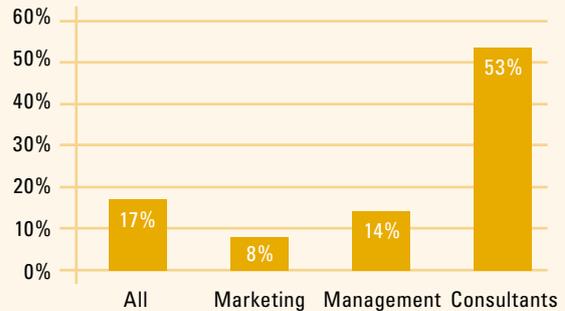
With so much marketing activity relying on the input of consultants, we asked people about the quality of that input and how easy it was to get it.

The general feeling is that getting input from consultants is never very easy, although responses from bigger firms indicate that it might be a bit easier for them than it is for smaller firms. Even then, whether it's driven by reluctance or simple lack of time, consultants seem to choose the areas to which they contribute rather carefully. Ask them to write something, and you're likely to have a long wait (61% of respondents said it was either difficult or very difficult to get any written input from consultants) but ask them to talk about their subject and they tend to prick their ears up a bit more readily (only 35% said it was difficult or very difficult to get consultants to speak to the press or at conferences).

As for the quality of that input when it does come; well, here's where answers become as predictable as they are amusing. Taking an average across a variety of different types of input, Figure 16 shows the proportion of different types of people that thought consultants' input was 'excellent'.

**Figure 16:**

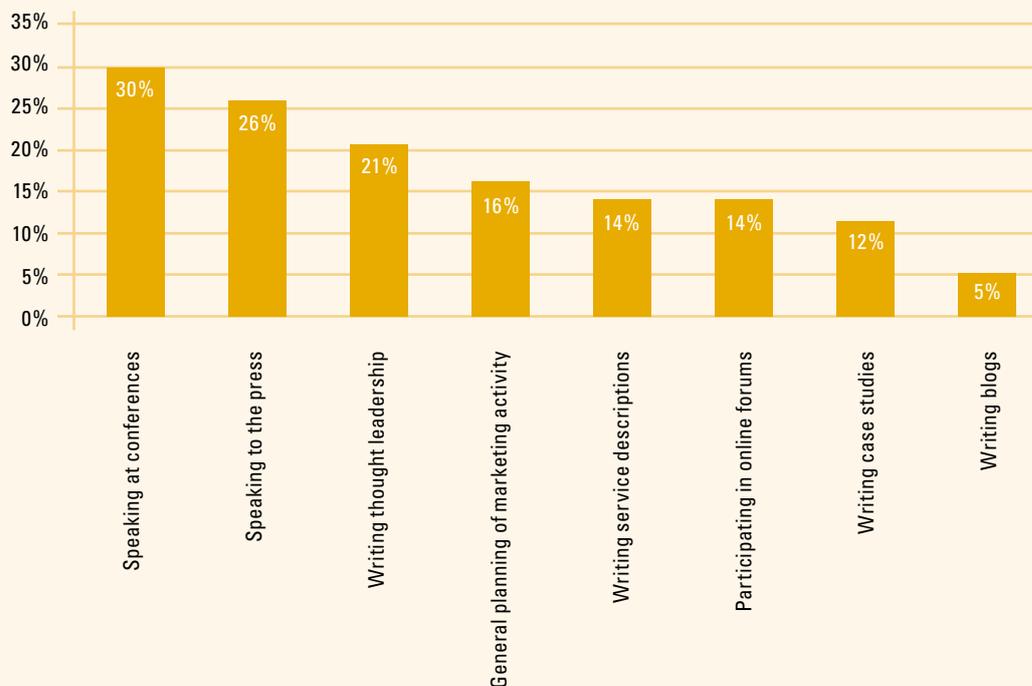
Proportion of different types of respondents saying that the quality of input from consultants (averaged across all types of input) was 'excellent'.



There's little sense dwelling any further on that; more pertinent is a bit more detail about exactly what they are good at.

**Figure 17:**

Proportion of all respondents rating the quality of input from consultants in various areas as 'excellent'.



Amongst different types of written input, thought leadership stands out as being something consultants are best at. And in defence of consultants, writing case studies can be a thankless task, requiring approval from clients who are often unwilling to be identified by name. In fact, 50% of all respondents said they found it very difficult to get sign off from clients for case studies, something firms generally may do well to address up front in negotiations with clients, given the important role they play in marketing.

Unsurprisingly, the areas in which consultants are most willing to provide input are also the areas in which the quality of that input is seen to be highest. Put a consultant on a stage under bright lights – give them a chance to show off – and they'll reward you amply.

### *Give consultants the chance to show off and they'll reward you amply*

Also notable is the degree to which the quality of input varies across different firm sizes; specifically what happens at Tier 2 firms, where there appears to be a sudden surge in the perception of the quality of input.

**Figure 18:**

Proportion of respondents rating the quality of input from consultants as 'excellent' – averaged across all input types – by size of firm

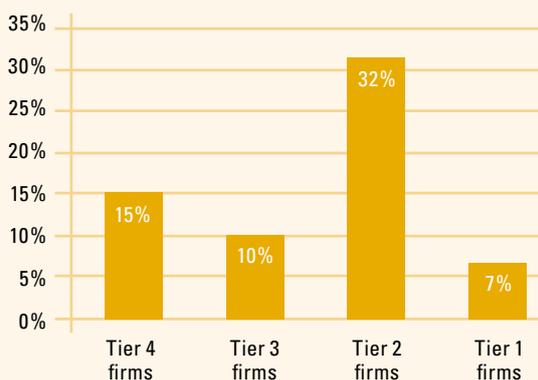


Figure 18 suggests either that Tier 2 firms are prioritising consultant input more than other firms, or that consultants are simply finding more time to create content in Tier 2 firms than they are elsewhere. Whichever of those the perceived in rise in the quality of input from consultants is attributable to, it falls right back for Tier 1 firms whose opinion of the quality of input from consultants appears to be the most jaded. Not a single respondent from Tier 1 firms rated consultants' input into thought leadership, case studies, blogs or general planning as excellent.

### **The disconnect in consulting firms**

Running through much of this report is evidence that different groups of people in consulting firms either don't see eye to eye, or don't talk to each other enough to realise that they do. Nowhere is this latter exemplified better than in views around what consultants think about marketing. Having seen earlier that consultants may actually be the biggest believers in marketing that a firm has, responses to a question about how important marketing is to different types of people suggests that this belief is something that's just not understood. Only 38% of marketing people appear to think that marketing is important to consultants at all. And while they're warmer to the idea that management think marketing is important (76%), management offer an unequivocally supportive view of the importance of marketing, as do consultants themselves.

It's also a glaring issue where firms' biggest challenge – finding something distinctive to say – is concerned. Given that consultants just don't see this as anything like the issue that everyone else does, wouldn't it be a good idea for marketing and consultants to get together to work out who's right? Equally, if consultants are meeting a sizeable challenge in the form of procurement departments, it seems sensible that they work with marketing to find new ways to deal with the issue.

### *Wouldn't it be a good idea for marketing and consultants to get together to work out who's right?*

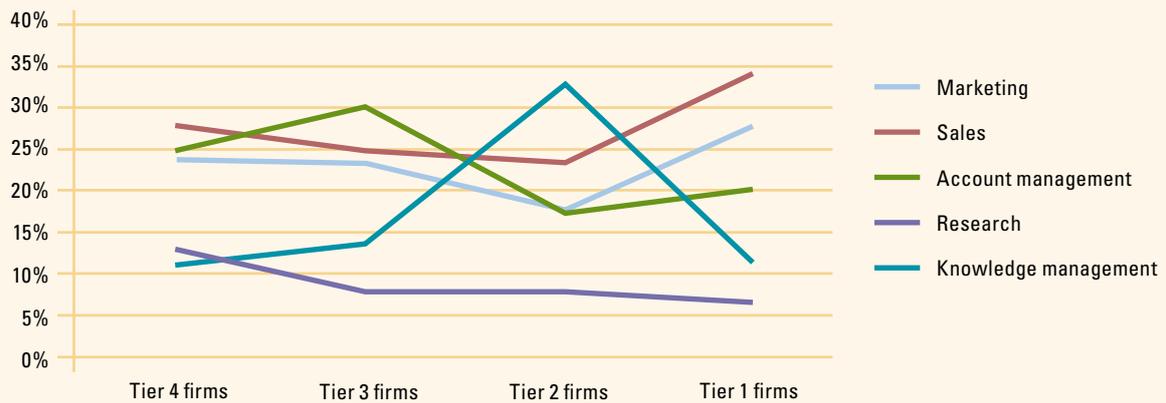
So what's causing the problem? The most plausible explanation is also the oldest chestnut: communication. Consulting firms are not unique in this respect, but challenge may be greater for them than it is for other organisations simply because the key protagonists – the consultants and the marketing team – out of necessity don't see half as much of each other as they need to. But the problem is exacerbated for consulting firms because consultants are such a large part of their firms' products that marketing losing sight of them means marketing losing sight of what their firm does. At which point it's a wonder that any marketing is effective at all.

## How marketing changes as firms grow

The following section pulls together various strands of our report to provide a profile of marketing in each different size of firm. Of course not every firm is actively trying to move up to the next rung in terms of size, but for those that are (and especially for those that are failing to do so) this can be read as a guide to how marketing can contribute to growth.

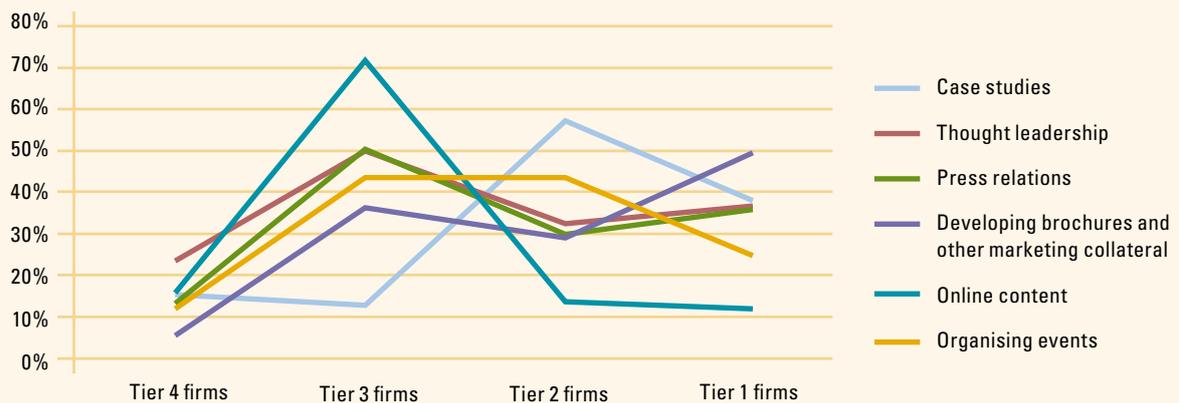
**Figure 19:**

How business development budget is allocated



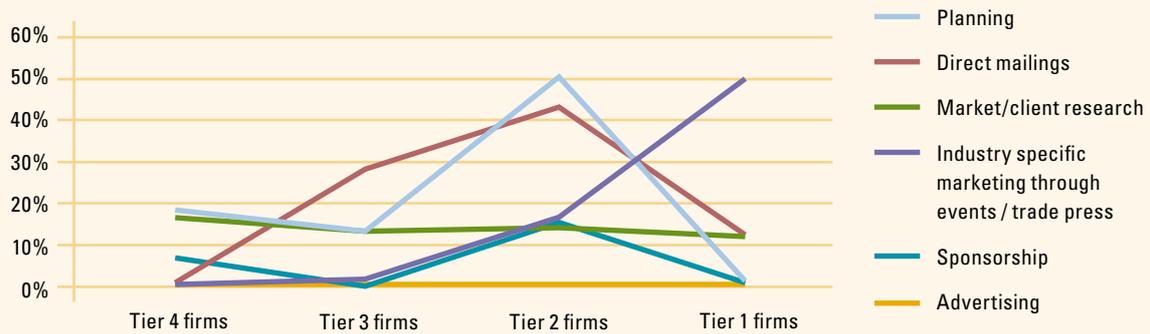
**Figure 20:**

Where marketing resource goes (1): (% of people saying 'a lot')



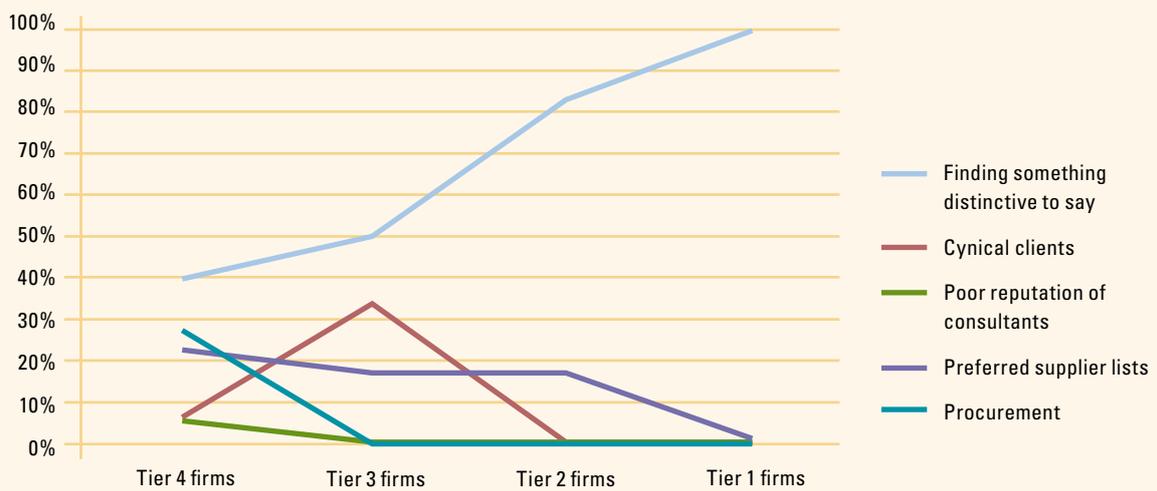
**Figure 21:**

Where marketing resource goes(2):(% of people saying 'a lot')



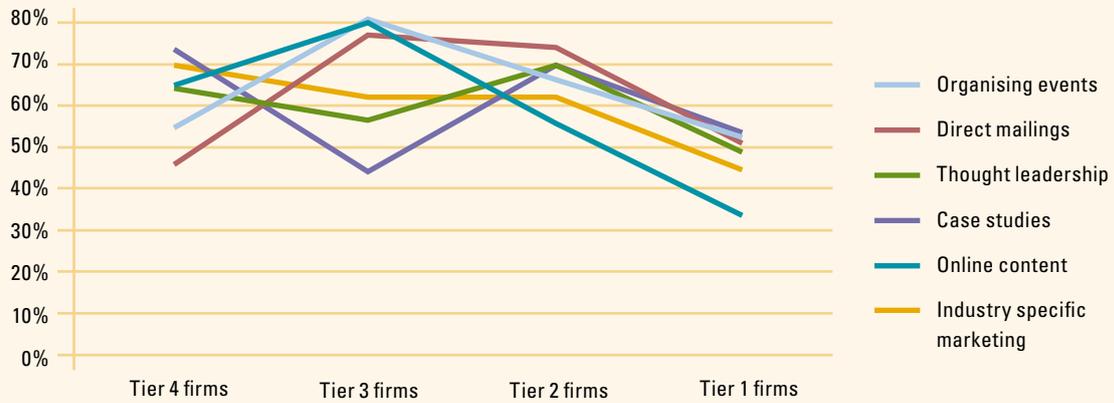
**Figure 22:**

The biggest marketing challenges consulting firms face (% saying each challenge was the biggest)



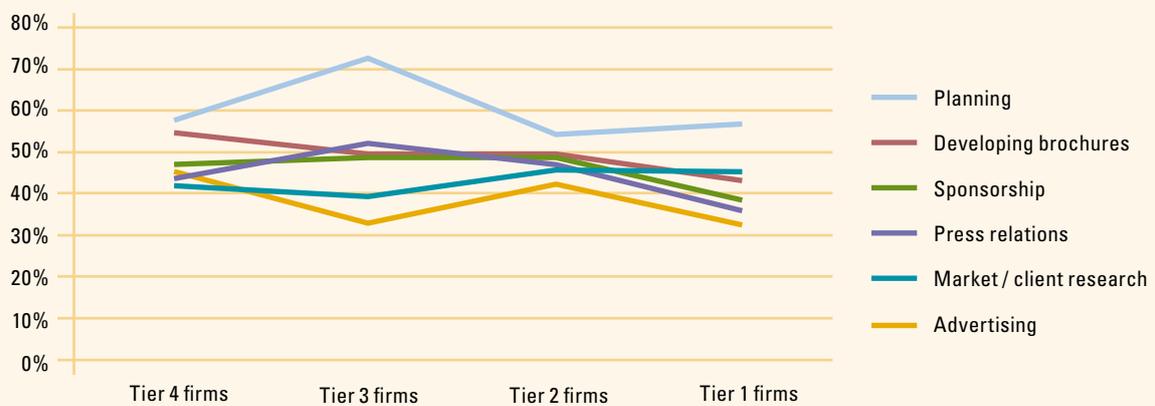
**Figure 23:**

The overall effectiveness of different types of marketing (1) (% saying each type was effective)



**Figure 24:**

The overall effectiveness of different types of marketing: (2) (% saying each type was effective)



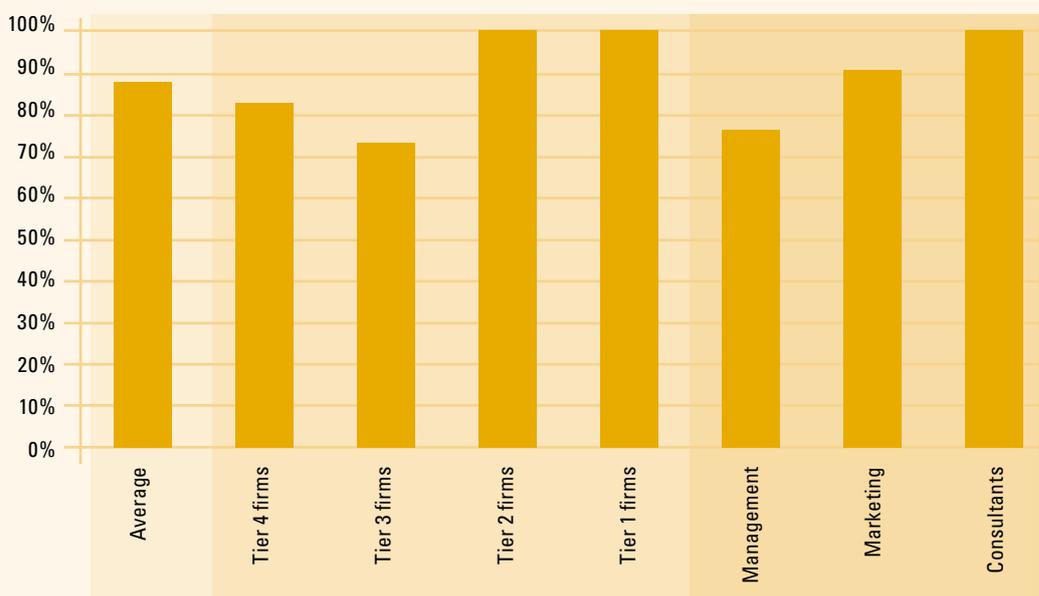
## Information: a key marketing tool

Even if consulting firms are just going to shore up their defences against changing market conditions and the threat of increased competition in shrinking markets, it's hard to see how information isn't going to play a pivotal role. If they're going to go one step further and open up new opportunities it surely becomes critical. Which makes it all the more curious that client and market research are not something that marketing teams spend much time at all doing now.

What is clear is that information is important: 88% of respondents said they believed that information resources were important to their marketing team.

**Figure 25:**

Proportion of respondents saying they believe information resources are important or very important to their marketing team

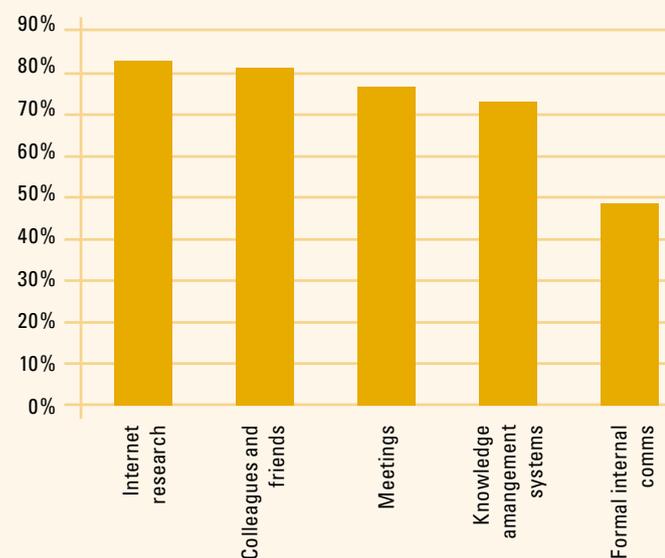


### The changing nature of information gathering

Unsurprisingly, these are changing times in respect of the way consulting firms gather information. There's a sense that old ways of gathering and accessing information – internal knowledge management systems for example – aren't delivering what's required of them (other than for Tier 2 and Tier 1 firms – for whom they are very important – few firms spend much time and resources on knowledge management any more) and that the wider network of the internet offers much more. Indeed the internet has now overtaken internal knowledge management systems as the pre-eminent source of information for all but the biggest consulting firms.

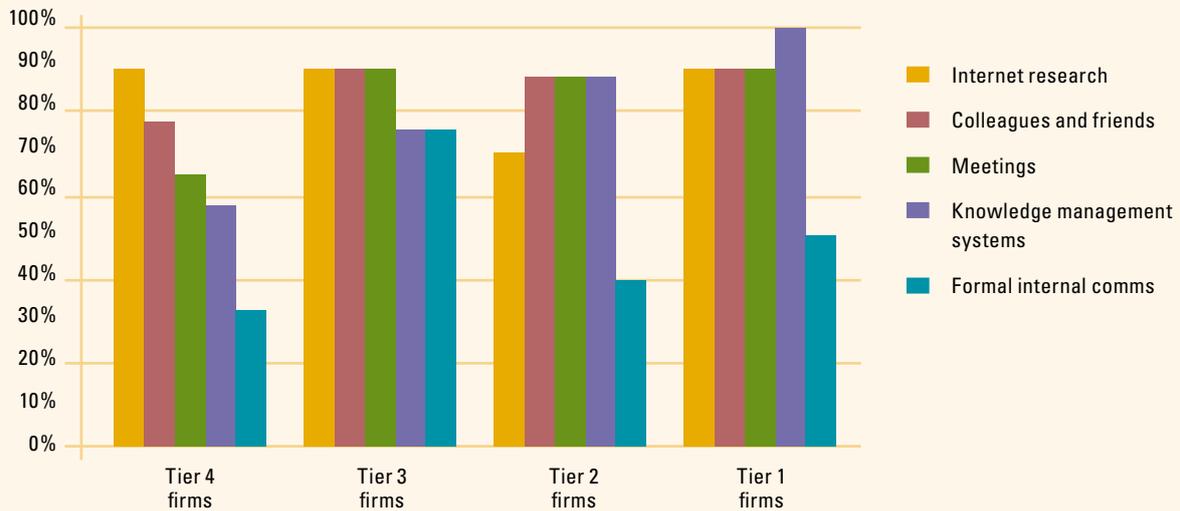
**Figure 26:**

How information is gathered for business development purposes (% of respondents selecting each option)



**Figure 27:**

How information is gathered for business development purposes: by firm size (% of respondents selecting each option)

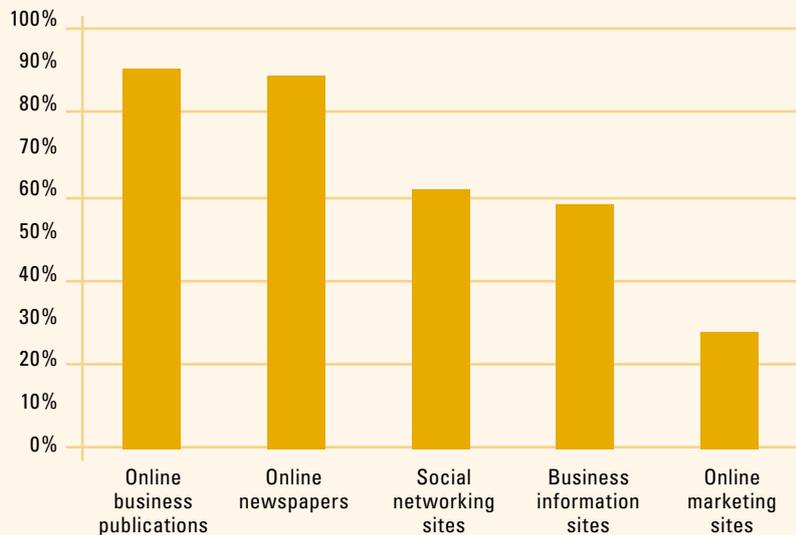


Of those internet based resources, online versions of traditional offline media are most used, while social networking websites appear to be growing in popularity. Online marketing sites such as pearlfinders.com fare less well.

Do these information resources deliver? The answer would appear to be that they do. 42% of respondents to our survey agreed with the statement 'information resources of this type have helped us to win new business' against just 11% who disagreed. But there appears to be a hunger for more: 56% agreed with the more general statement 'we could do a lot more if we had better information tools' while only 10% disagreed.

**Figure 28:**

Most used online information resources (% saying they used each resource)



# The way forward

## How priorities *are* changing

If different sizes of firms are allocating their resources very differently today then there's a surprising degree of consensus amongst them about how priorities will change in future.

The greatest part of the consensus is around online content – which all barring Tier 2 firms saw as being the

area they expect to grow more than any other in future. That's not to say it's there yet: asked if they agreed with a statement that 'online marketing is now more important for consulting firms than conventional marketing', the balance of opinion from respondents to our survey suggests it isn't.

*The list of things people expect to do more of is much bigger than the list people expect to do less of*

**Figure 29:**

How consulting firms expect priorities to change in future



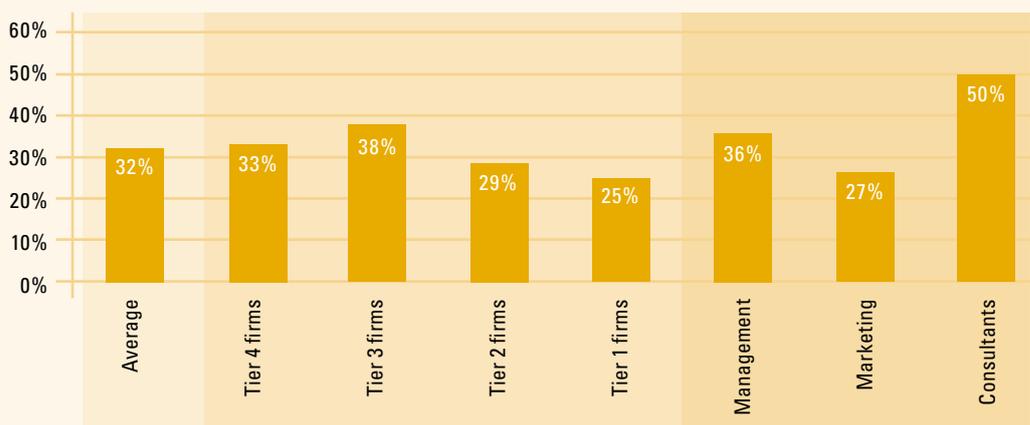
Consultants may beg to differ, and in the smaller pool of overall marketing activity amongst Tier 3 and Tier 4 firms online marketing already makes a bigger splash than it does elsewhere; but on average only about a third of people think online is already the dominant form of marketing.

At the other end of the scale, and presumably as a direct consequence of the growing focus on online content, everyone agreed that developing brochures and other marketing collateral was the activity most likely to suffer in future. Everyone, curiously, except consultants, who not only felt that there would be a greater focus on brochures but also that there would be more advertising.

Other than that anomaly the consensus across different roles and different firm sizes about what will happen in future is very striking. As is one other message that comes across clearly: the list of things that people expect to do more of is much bigger than the list people expect to do less of. Which means more marketing.

**Figure 30:**

Proportion agreeing with the statement 'online marketing is now more important for consulting firms than conventional marketing'



## How priorities *should* be changing

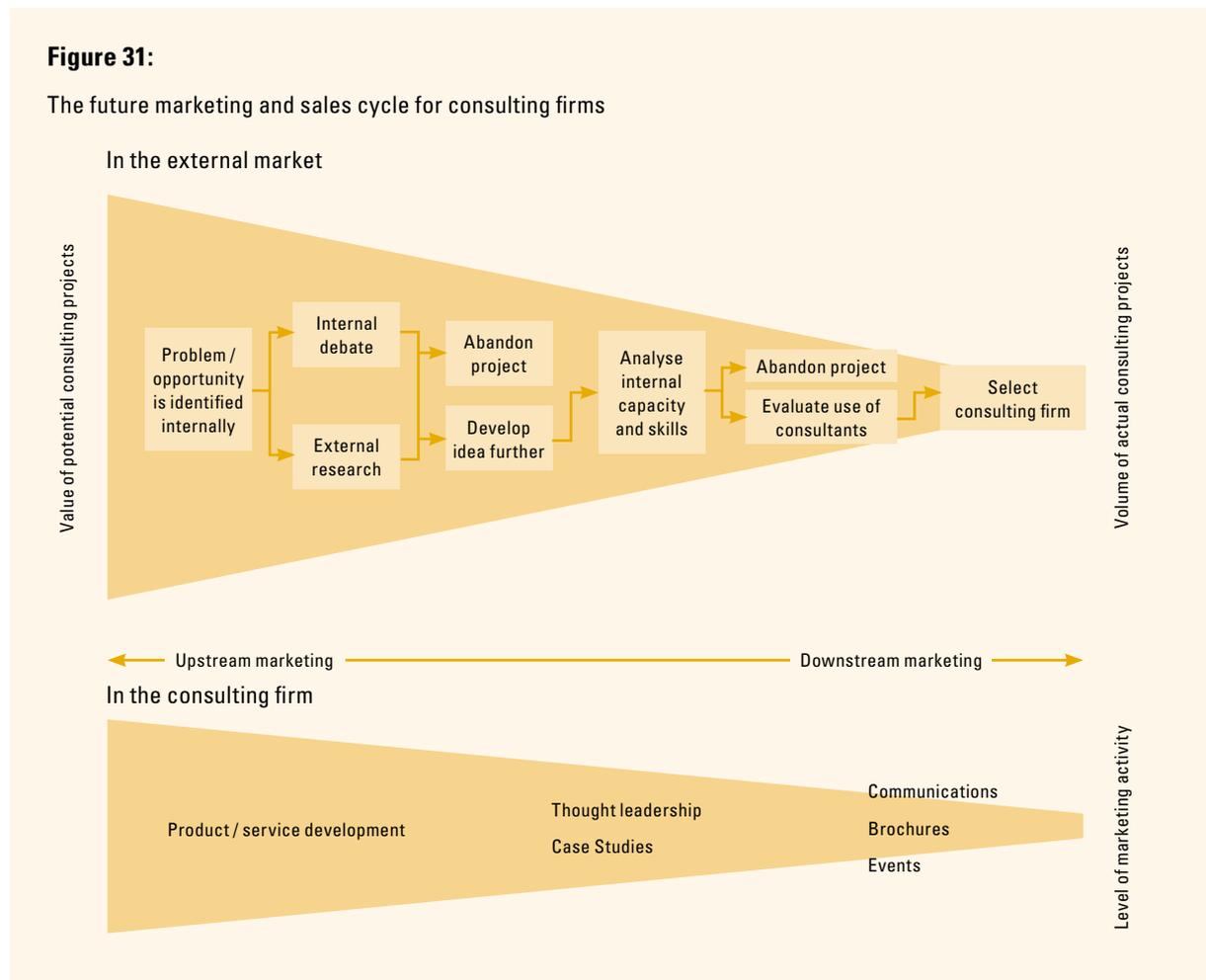
The picture painted above supports a view of the world in which consulting firms move away from traditional marketing activities full of gloss and generic messages, towards more sophisticated marketing. It suggests that evidence, thought leadership and the ability to engage with clients in a more targeted way will become more important. This seems eminently sensible, particularly in light of both the changing market conditions and the evolving opportunity that the internet presents, but does it go far enough to support a shift in the marketing paradigm itself and to grasp the opportunities that doing so presents? Probably not.

For that to happen, as we've suggested before, marketing needs to move upstream in two important respects (Figure 31):

1. In order to stimulate demand, rather than react to it, consulting firms need to engage with their clients at an earlier stage in the decision-making process.
2. More thought needs to go into *actual* differentiation, not into *communicated* differentiation. Marketeers have to work alongside consultants as the latter work alongside clients. The differentiation is here, but needs to be uncovered, developed and – in the last instance – communicated.

**Figure 31:**

The future marketing and sales cycle for consulting firms



The simple truth is that for all but the most specialist consulting firms, differentiation is very hard to achieve. Some firms have spent heavily on advertising in recent years and have doubtless increased awareness of their brand as a result. But has any of that advertising differentiated them from other firms in any meaningful way? Or has it just been able to dominate above-the-line with relatively generic messages in the absence of a comparable push by one of its competitors?

While firms themselves may struggle to differentiate, the problem is reversed when looking at their consultants: too much difference, not only from other firms but from each other, to make co-ordinated messages at a firm level possible. So, what's to be done?

If you start by recognising that a consulting firm's products are made up of two parts: consultant and solution, then isn't it reasonable to suggest that these should be the poles around which a firm's marketing activity gravitates?

That would require one thing above all else: an acceptance that sub-brands within a consulting firm (consultants and solutions) may not only exist, but become bigger than their parent. But that's not such an alien concept elsewhere: people don't buy Procter & Gamble, they buy Max Factor; people don't buy Universal Music, they buy U2. Some sub-brands, like these, exist out of necessity (the parent brand is too generic to cover the many types of products that sit under them) but others exist out of choice. Playstation not only allowed Sony to enter a market with which its existing brand was not associated (despite it being one to which it was arguably very well suited) but also afforded it an effective containment strategy should the new product have failed. Sub-brands, in other words, are already well used by many organisations.

Of course creating a sub-brand out of a solution (a service line) is one thing – and something we'll come on to – but creating a sub-brand out of a consultant is quite another. Let's get the downsides out of the way first:

Firstly there's the smack of a football team about it, where players, whose own brands can become almost as big as that of their employer, hold their clubs to ransom, demanding ever-more extortionate wages in return for

their services. Losing them can become disproportionately damaging. Secondly, consultants are just human beings; and human beings – as Accenture's experiences with Tiger Woods amply testify – are volatile things.

But even if a firm didn't go the whole way and actually create brands out of their consultants, the recognition that they are products and need to be marketed as such might not go amiss. If nothing else it might help marketing teams to see their marketing activity in a new light and to shift the agenda towards an area in which differentiation is no longer the issue.

Where solutions are concerned, the concept is easier and has precedents. If consulting firms are to start taking advantage of the opportunities that exist upstream of where they're currently marketing (and aren't simply going to rely on relationships within existing clients) then they're probably going to need to talk about solutions more than anything else. Solutions are what clients always want, and usually long before they've decided that they need a consulting firm to help them get them. So could there be a better investment of marketing effort for consulting firms than to redirect resources away from talking about the generic skills they offer (which, after all, is an approach more suited to contingent labour than to management consulting) and towards taking ownership – legal and branded where possible – of solutions? They may have to give away more than they do at the moment – if you're taking your place at the top table of a new client they're going to need to be sure why you're there – but the opportunity to talk to new clients about the 95% of projects consulting firms never see ought to offset that discomfort. And as one astute observer recently put it to us: you may be able to find out what kind of operation you need over the internet, but you're still going to want a surgeon to carry out the work.

The fact that the consulting industry has grown to be as big as it is suggests that it's getting something very right; but marketing is a big thing to be getting wrong and this is no time to stare down the sort of opportunity that doing it better presents.

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26 Aldebert Terrace • London • SW8 1BJ

Tel: 0845 293 0993

Email: [info@sourceforconsulting.com](mailto:info@sourceforconsulting.com)  
[www.sourceforconsulting.com](http://www.sourceforconsulting.com)