

Hacking B2B PR to drive sales



**Redefining the role of PR
in powering growth in
business-to-business
companies**

By **Damian Kerr** and **Adrian Ma**



Why read this report?

Not enough B2B marketers are using PR to its full potential.

Marketing has evolved. We are in an era of Big Data, where more information is available than ever before; and Automation, where decisions can be taken quickly and actions happen automatically. As a consequence, the B2B marketer's toolkit has transformed dramatically over the past decade.



Despite this, too often PR is employed in the same way it has been for the past century.

This report aims to inspire B2B marketers to ask more from their PR, and to better integrate it with other marketing tactics.

We have quizzed Fanclub staff, Fanclub's clients, and our contacts from across the B2B space for their opinions on the future of B2B PR. Interviewees included top, current, and former comms and marketing professionals at one of the world's largest FMCG groups, one of the world's largest providers of internet tech to the B2B space, a major worldwide social media platform, and a B2B marketing training firm. What emerged were two key points that marketers should consider: PR's relationship to content marketing, and the way PR is measured.

These two ideas may seem slightly disparate, but they are intrinsic to the aim of ensuring PR is better integrated within marketing – not just in terms of different teams aligning but also in certain specific, and sometimes technical, ways.

Key takeaways

- ▶ PR is effective but it hasn't evolved as fast as other marketing disciplines
- ▶ To get the most out of PR, it should be combined with content
- ▶ Marketers need to ensure PR produces data that integrates with their other tools

The old dog can be taught new tricks

¹ This and other examples from Public Relations by Edmund Bernays (1945). Bernays was a nephew of Sigmund Freud and one of many people credited with creating the discipline

The common PR practice of writing bylined articles and placing them in relevant media dates back at least as far as John Dickinson, the “Penman of the revolution”, whose series of letters appeared in twenty-one of the twenty-five newspapers published in the American colonies at the time. This helped push public opinion in favour of a split with Great Britain¹.

The phenomenon of the PR “stunt” stretches at least as far back as 1809, when Washington Irving promoted his book Knickerbocker’s History of New York by writing a series of articles for the New York Evening Post about the mysterious disappearance of Diedrich Knickerbocker, and ending with the reveal that Mr Knickerbocker had left behind “a very curious kind of written book”.

Clearly, PR is a well-established practice. What is less certain is how fast it has moved with the times.

In the past few years, the B2B marketer’s toolbox has mushroomed. Scott Brinker, a blogger and vice president at customer relationship management platform Hubspot, publishes an annual infographic that attempts to collect and categorise “the marketing technology landscape”. The first iteration, in 2011, contained roughly 150 companies servicing all parts of marketing. The version published in April 2020 contained 8,000.

Many PR tactics go back a very long way.

In that same time, PR's place within the marketing ecosystem – or the evolution of PR itself – has stalled. Search for public relations within the latest infographic, and you will struggle. It occupies just one of the 49 marketing categories listed, and less than 5% of the overall space. If Brinker is correct, there are far more marketing workflow management tools than there are technology products for the entire PR industry. Likewise, "Influencer marketing" – a discipline barely a decade old – already has a larger technology ecosystem than public relations.

Of course, just because something is old, or does not have a flashy "tech stack", does not mean it is not worth investing in. PR remains one of the most impactful and cost-effective methods of generating brand awareness and managing reputation. But recently it hasn't moved as fast as other marketing disciplines, and it doesn't link up with them well enough.

This needs to change.

Today's marketers need PR to speak the same data-driven language as the other tactics they use. They need to be able to measure it in the same way they can measure their other tactics.

Why B2B?

This report has been written with business-to-business marketers and PR professionals in mind. Many of the tactics described are applicable to other areas, but they are aimed primarily at the B2B world.

All integration is equal,
but some is more equal
than others



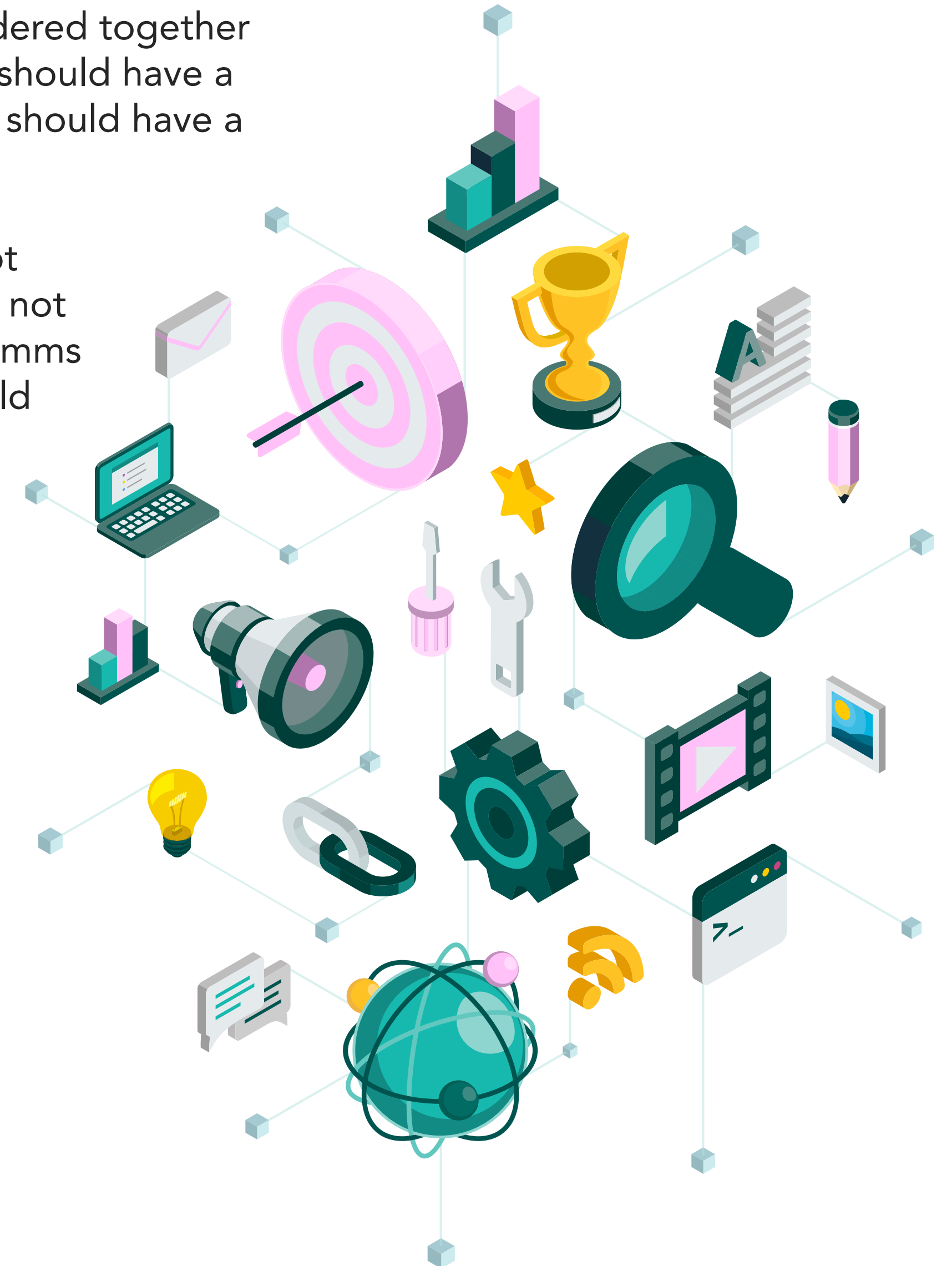
“Integrated marketing” – the need for several marketing tactics to work together for a common goal – is an old concept. But it is not always applied the right way.

PR already regularly integrates with social media. Many PR agencies (Fanclub included) provide a social media aspect to PR campaigns as a default, as well as newer variations on the discipline such as influencer marketing. This is likely the case now across most of the industry – even in organisations with separate PR and social media teams, the two groups will almost always coordinate.

But what of the other marketing tactics? Clearly, a good campaign must link every tactic in some way, but beyond shared media, there is a specific marketing tool we believe PR should combine with – in many cases to the extent of a full merger: content, or “owned” media.

Content and PR should be considered together right from ideation stage. All PR should have a content element, and all content should have a PR element.

While this idea is not new, it is not universally accepted. Companies not currently treating content and comms as part of the same process should start doing so now.

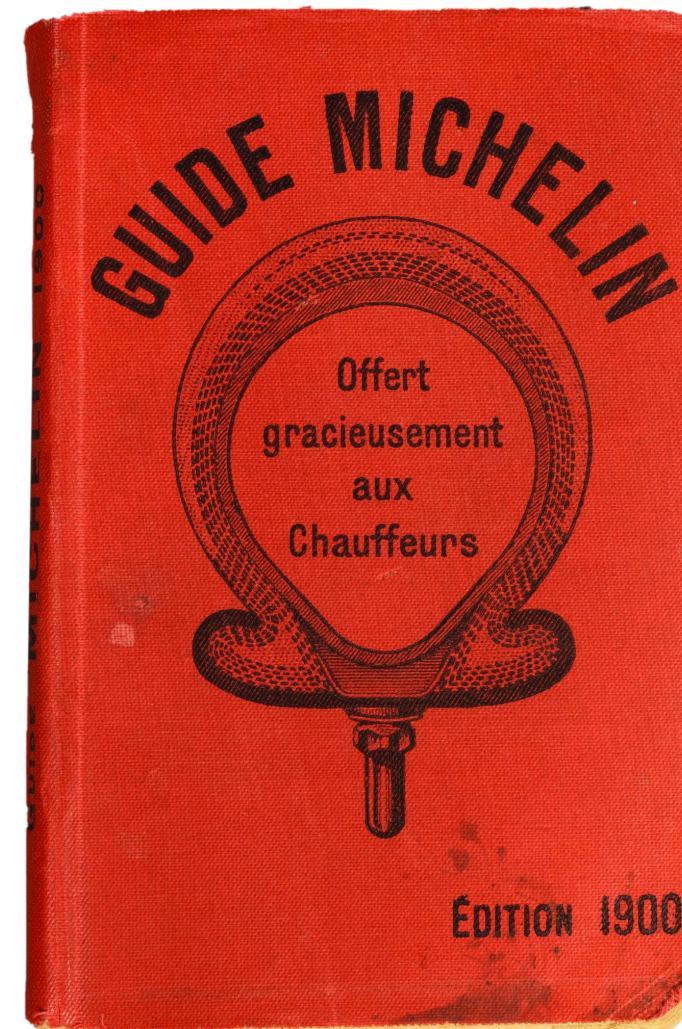


What is content marketing?

According to the Content Marketing Institute, content marketing focusses on **“creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience.”** Content marketing is something interesting and substantial that a company creates and then hosts on a platform that it controls. Examples can be a blog, a downloadable report, a video of a panel discussion, a computer game, an AR application, a voice application for a smart speaker, or anything else besides.

Like public relations, content marketing has a long history. It stretches back at least as far as the creation of the first Michelin Guide in 1900, when the tyre manufacturer realised that if it encouraged people to drive to good restaurants, they would need to buy more tyres.

Recently though, content marketing has jumped forwards. In the process, it has created specific synergies with public relations.



Last year, Hubspot claimed that 70% of marketers are actively investing in content marketing. By some estimates, the industry is growing at 16% annually.² Crucially, content marketing has generated a growing technology ecosystem – marketers can invest in platforms such as Contently, Newscred or Kapost, which take content from “ideation” (new topics and ideas can be created and socialised within the platform) to management of the workflow (content can be written or edited within the systems, then a chain of sign-off takes place within them), and finally to publishing and then analytics.

² https://www.thedrum.com/news/2017/11/06/content-marketing-industry-be-worth-412bn-2021-following-four-year-growth-spurt?zd_source=mta&zd_campaign=11804&zd_term=juliamccoy

70% of marketers are actively investing in content marketing

Earned and owned should merge

What does a merger of content and PR look like? On a simple level, it means taking an idea or theme, then designing the PR and content marketing promotion together. PR/social should transmit the idea via “earned” and “shared” media, while the content team should house the idea via their “owned” platforms; But these marketing tactics are always in service of a shared central concept.

By way of example, look at the venerable Michelin Guide, still going strong after 120 years. It remains a physical book, available to purchase – but it is also a PR campaign, generating 147,000 press articles worldwide in the first half of 2020, according to media monitoring firm Signal. It is both content marketing and PR.

For an example closer to the B2B world, look at the Edelman Trust Barometer. This is a survey registering the public’s trust in various groups, and it has been carried out for more than 20 years; and it exists as a piece of content on Edelman’s website; it is presented by Edelman staff around the world at conferences. But it also works as PR – it has generated more than 4,000 articles in the first half of 2020, according to Signal. Publications covering the Barometer in 2020 include The Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Economist.

The Trust Barometer is a textbook marriage of content marketing and public relations – it contains enough depth to support a dedicated “owned media channel” – a webpage containing the headline information but also articles and blogs digging into trends within the data. But it also produces a quantitative output that is simple and impactful and generates media headlines.



So why, of all the available marketing disciplines, do content and PR work particularly well together? There are a number of reasons:

- ▶ PR provides a “smell test” which can hone content marketing campaigns

Journalists and editors are a proxy for their readers’ tastes. If they publish a story it’s because their readers will find it important or interesting. So, if a company’s content is impactful enough to generate a press article, it’s likely interesting enough to be read, watched and remembered as an article on a corporate website.

The reverse is also true: if content is not impactful enough to appear in the media, hard questions should be asked about how many website viewers will watch, read and remember it.

journalists and editors are a proxy for their readers’ tastes

- ▶ Content provides somewhere for the PR audience to be sent

PR is often thought of in the service of brand awareness or brand alignment – for which it’s very effective – but B2B marketers are generally less interested in such pure brand development than their consumer counterparts. They are often under more pressure for their work to serve a very tangible function. This is where content comes in.

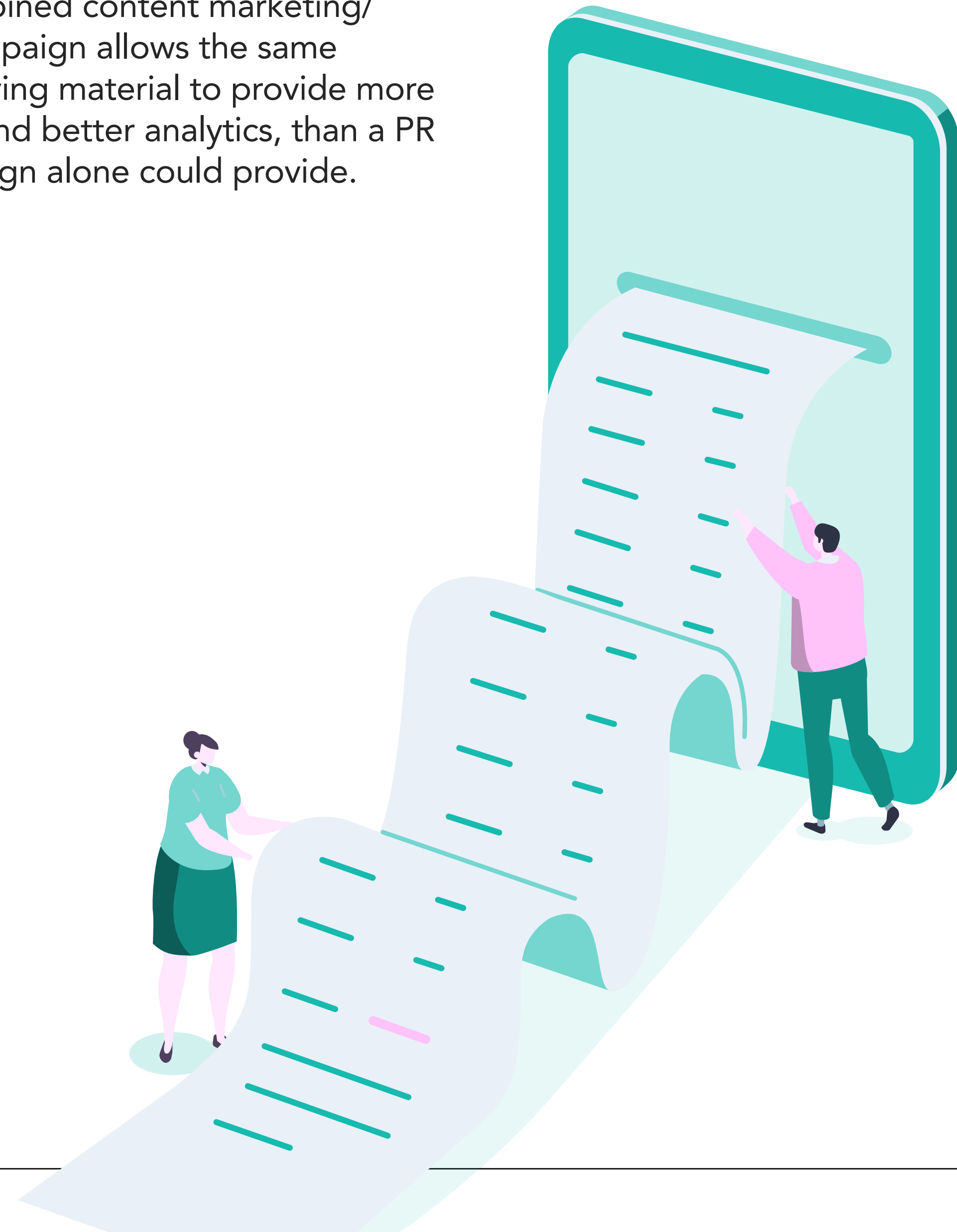
If a PR campaign is designed to drive its audience to a piece of owned content, the link between PR outputs and business outcomes becomes shorter, simpler, and easier to measure. New leads can be found for the marketing funnel, and the PR team gains simple success metrics they might otherwise lack.

► Content marketing fills PR's weaknesses

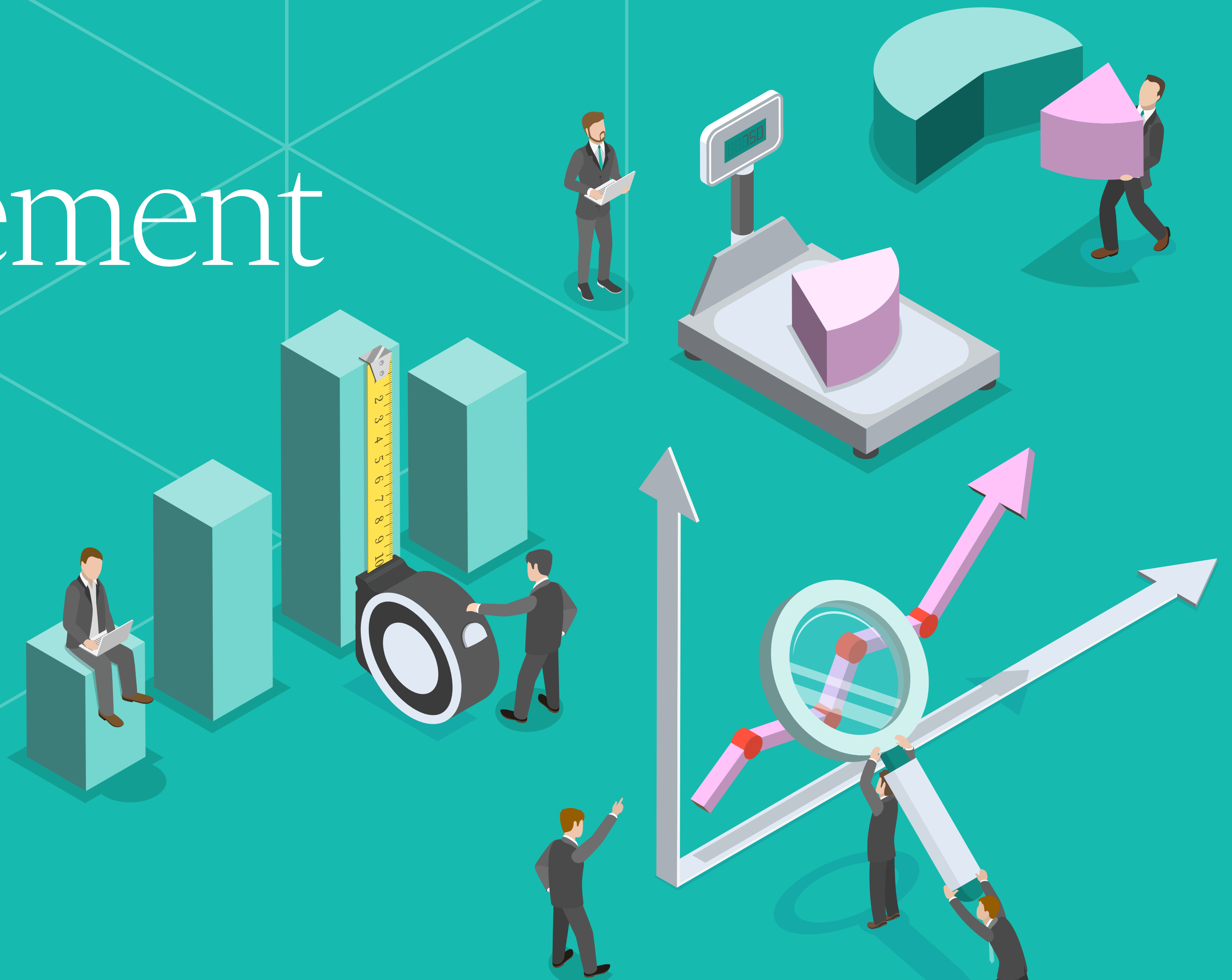
Content marketing is of interest alongside PR because it has everything that PR does not:

- A large "tech stack" of programmes and applications which can integrate with other marketing tools for web analytics, customer relationship management, and automation. This allows content marketing to seamlessly integrate with wider marketing data and technology in a way that PR struggles to.
- The ability to easily generate outcome metrics such as marketing or sales-qualified leads directly attributable to the content marketing campaign. This allows the evaluation of content marketing in a more granular way than is traditionally possible with PR although there are exceptions, as you'll see in the next section).

A combined content marketing/PR campaign allows the same underlying material to provide more data, and better analytics, than a PR campaign alone could provide.



Measurement



The most frequent complaint about PR is that it is difficult to measure. Compared to, say, pay-per-click ad-buying – where marketers can immediately find out their cost per click, their return on investment, and many other granular data – PR is seen as vague. The most famous measurement metric, Advertising Value Equivalent (AVE), has so many flaws³ that one of the industry’s “Barcelona Principles”⁴ of best-practice measurement is “AVEs are not the value of communication”. AVE has largely been abandoned as a metric for PR.

Likewise, attempts have been made at “PR attribution”: a catch-all term for plotting the relationship between PR outputs and business outcomes in a more scientific way. Digital media monitoring giant, Meltwater, made one such attempt when it launched a tool that purchased the cookie data of people who had read certain news articles online and calculated what proportion of those users had visited the brand’s website within the next seven days. This allowed data-savvy marketers to estimate individual articles’ return on investment.

But Meltwater found it difficult to cut deals with enough data suppliers to make their data comprehensive and withdrew the product from sale. Many competitor products have met the same fate.

This lack of a simple, rigorous and universal method of evaluation leaves B2B marketers in a quandary. As Patrick Mork, a former senior marketer at Google and Pepsico (and a former Fanclub client), says: “I have a lot of conversations with CEOs about the value of PR, and a lot of the things I hear is ‘how do I measure it, what are the metrics?’. A lot of companies are run by upper-left-brain types. They’re very focused on numbers, very focussed on results. When you can’t provide any kind of metrics you just can’t get their heads around it and what they can’t measure they can’t value.”

So, how do marketers solve the problem? How do we get right-brain PR to talk the language of left-brain finance? The solution is to stop fixating solely on providing a financial figure for the CFO, and to start worrying about data sharing with the web team.

³ Including: most AVE measures ignore the proportion of an article taken up by a brand; most AVE measures ignore the article’s overall sentiment, which may well be less positive than an equivalent advertisement; many fail to account for the fact that modern digital advertisements are not priced on the basis of physical space.

⁴ <https://amecorg.com/2012/06/barcelona-declaration-of-measurement-principles/>

Bringing PR into the “marketing tech stack”

Most modern marketing tools can talk to each other. A typical content marketing tool will integrate with a marketing automation tool such as Marketo, and most professional social media evaluation tools will integrate with Google Analytics. But few PR platforms – such as journalist databases or media monitoring tools – plug in to this ecosystem, or if they do, they provide one or two integrations as a seldom-used afterthought.

This needs to change. For PR and marketing to work well together – and for PR to be evaluated properly – some aspects of PR should be brought into the marketing tech stack.

The ultimate goal of such integration is “attribution”: discerning which customers or potential customers arrived at the company by way of PR. This is not an easy task, but can be done through:

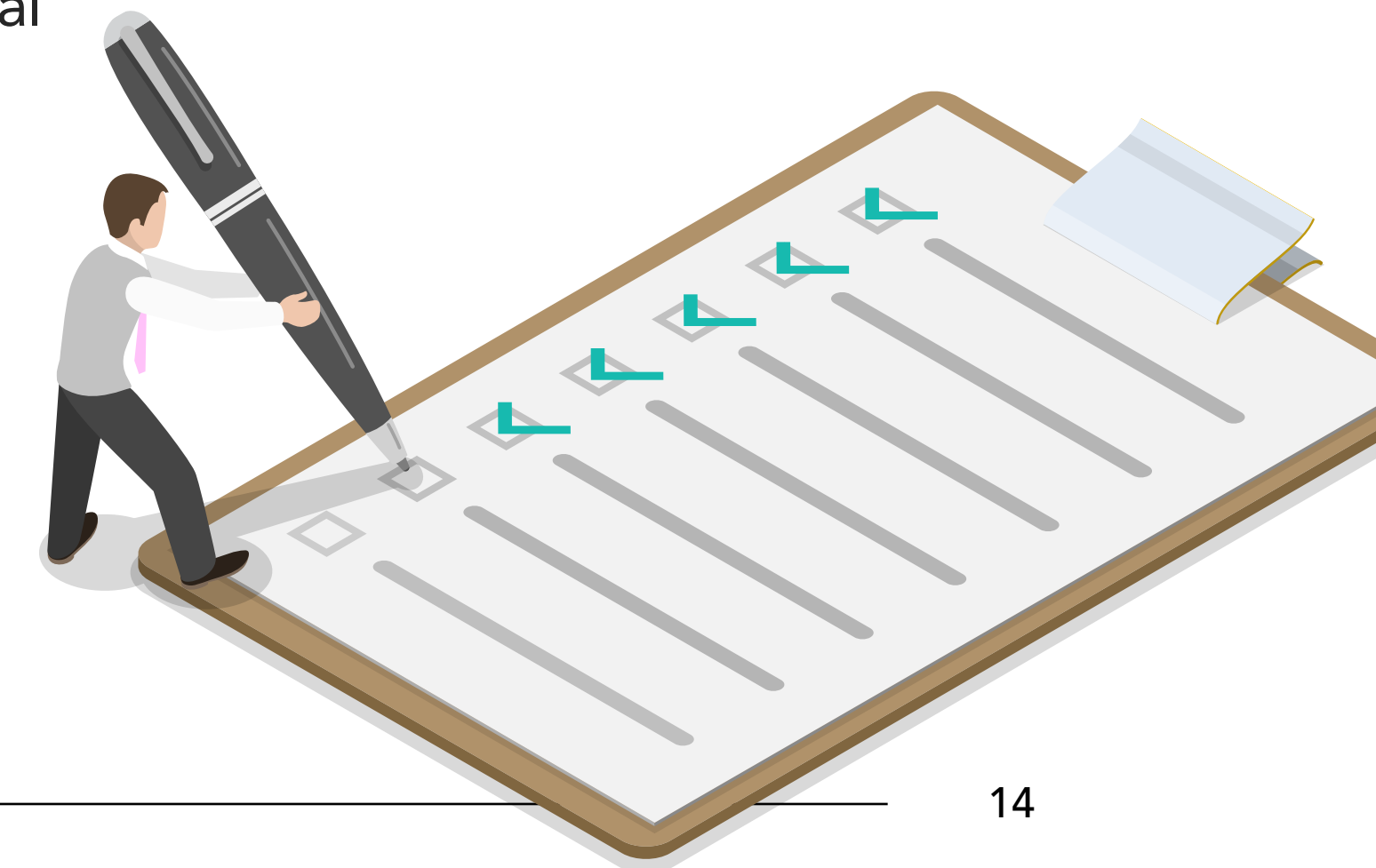
► Modelling

For more than a decade solutions have existed allowing firms to model – usually using algorithms which adapt and evolve over iterations – the precise relationship between their business outcomes (such as sales by product and by location) and their marketing inputs (such as money invested in each specific marketing channel). High-tech products like this are effective, but sadly are often extremely expensive, require a colossal volume of data, and generally are most effective for firms selling fungible products such as FMCG goods.

► Unique websites

A cheaper method is to create microsites only accessible via PR and/or social media. A page can be made unreachable via the website’s internal menus and navigation, as well as being prevented from being indexed by search engines. By removing ways of reaching a page in this way, and by only providing access via PR, companies can be sure any visitors arriving on the page must have done so via their PR campaign.

But there is an easier way.



Link-building: a more cost-effective solution

Link-building – the placement of links within coverage to encourage readers to visit that website – is an old tactic. Many journalists will not agree to comply with a request to include a specific link in their online article; furthermore many early link-building campaigns were designed to improve websites' Google rankings using paid-for "newswire" services which created dozens of identical articles on obscure websites. But Google didn't like this wheeze and updated their algorithm to close the loophole.

Despite this, linkbuilding retains a value. According to recent research by YouGov and analytics firm Talkwalker, 56% of PR firms provide "link building for SEO". SEO, however, is not the whole story. Linkbuilding is one way to get PR to produce the type of data most modern marketers need.

It works like this: a unique link is created for a PR campaign, then embedded within the campaign's coverage and social media posts. A potential customer reads or views the coverage and clicks on the link. Web analytics software recognises the link and attributes that visitor to the PR campaign. If the web analytics platform is connected to the customer relationship management software, this PR-driven visitor can be tracked through the marketing funnel as they become a marketing qualified lead, a sales qualified lead, and finally a repeat customer. They can be assigned a true financial value – and this will give a good indication of the bottom-line effect of the PR campaign that snared them.

One important caveat needs to be made: link building will almost never track every customer that PR campaigns create – not all journalists will consent to include a link, and not all customers will necessarily click on that link – but it can prove evidence of efficacy, and a strong indication of a campaign's likely monetary value.

► **Step one:** create the links

Unless creating a PR-specific webpage (see above), a common way to make your links trackable is by using a UTM code. Standing for “Urchin Traffic Monitor” (Urchin was the name of the software that became Google Analytics), a UTM code is a string of letters and numbers appended to the end of a URL. Web analytics software can recognise the UTM and attribute it to the relevant PR campaign.

► **Step two:** place the links

Link-building itself is more of an art than a science, but there are many tactics that can be used:

- Request that journalists include a link. Many will not agree – but some will. Some of the world’s largest publications, up to and including the Wall Street Journal, can surprise you by agreeing to include precisely your desired link in their copy.
- Include links in accompanying tactics. A good campaign will not be solely PR. Make sure there’s a reason to link to your site, by making on-site content an intrinsic part

of the story. Social media posts can also contain the correct link and be issued at huge volume to accompany a PR campaign. The version of your press release published on your website can include the correct link. If your PR campaign is good enough and there’s a strong enough reason to link back to your site, it will inspire motivated potential clients to do more research, which means finding these accompanying links and clicking on them.

- Consider “paid-for” newswires. Fee-charging newswires such as Businesswire or PR Newswire divide opinion. They are standard practice in many countries – especially so in the USA – but in countries such as the UK they have fallen out of favour, particularly since Google’s algorithm changed. But if the aim is to send people to a website in a traceable way, then paid-for newswires are an option to be considered, because they are a way to disseminate your traceable URLs. Bear in mind that if the articles created by the newswire distribution are not themselves viewed, they will have no effect.

► **Step three:** where relevant, collect data

If PR is combined with content marketing (see above), the content can be “gated” – only viewable or downloadable in return for sharing contact details. (The permission will need to be GDPR compliant – make sure both the legal team and the technical web team help with the project). Once these contact details have been gathered, they can be passed to the sales team; can be used for direct marketing or marketing automation campaigns; and passed through the marketing funnel via whatever route is deemed best. Just ensure they are quantified so the value of the PR campaign can be estimated.





► **Step four:** track visitors through the system

Whether or not gated content is involved, the customer journey of PR-driven leads can and should be mapped. How this happens will vary system to system (it's a wise idea for PRs to become friends with their counterparts in technical web teams) but the goal is to track the onward movement of any visitors attributable to PR campaigns. What further pages did they view? Were they more or less likely to make a purchase or enquiry compared to benchmark? If they became a customer, what was their behaviour after purchase? And what is the ultimate financial value of all visitors directly attributable to PR?

Summary

B2B marketers should demand more of their PR. They should integrate it with other marketing tactics, and they should measure it robustly.

- ▶ Consider integrating PR and content marketing – to the extent of merging the two functions.
- ▶ Cut unhelpful evaluation – especially AVE.
- ▶ Build deeper relationships with the technical web team – the ability of PR to be properly evaluated depends on them.
- ▶ Try to attribute business won by PR. There are many ways of doing this, but one of the simplest and most cost-effective is UTM links.

How to get started

This is just the start of a bigger conversation about how to engineer your PR efforts. There is more to learn and apply based on technology changes. Our first recommendation is to review PR, comms and digital strategies to ensure that they are aligned as possible.

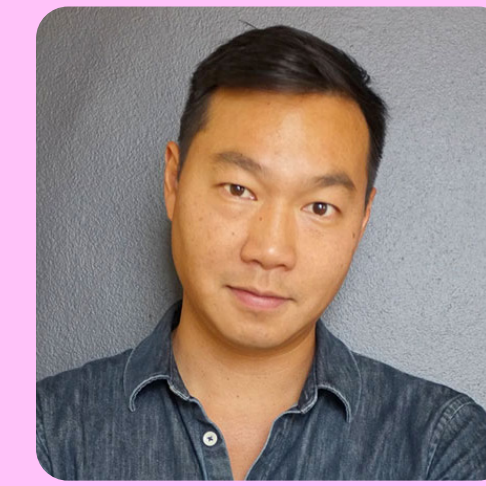
We believe that there's plenty of value to be squeezed out of PR from well- considered efforts and education.

If you'd like to pick up the conversation, just drop me an email at adrian.ma@fanclubpr.com or call us on **020 7096 1375**.

About the authors



Damian Kerr is a senior communications professional. After several years in PR agencies, during which time he represented clients as diverse as Heineken, The British Army, Unilever and Scottish Widows, he became an in-house B2B specialist, and has worked at director level at the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants and TMF Group.



Adrian Ma is the founder of Fanclub PR, an integrated PR agency serving both business-to-business and consumer clients. Before setting up the agency in 2011, he helped found the digital PR practices of three other agencies.