Marketing for growth

My practical guide for founders and leaders of small insight agencies

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Differentiate | Grow | Retain | Scale

How to use this guide

Each chapter in the guide covers a distinct layer of your marketing strategy, from foundational positioning through to sustainable habits. You can read it straight through or jump to the chapter most relevant to where you are right now.

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If you would prefer to let someone else worry about the marketing whilst you take care of business, please feel free to contact me - hello@iamjuliedenny.com.

Transform your agency from invisible to invincible

A funny thing I have noticed about market research agencies - even though they spend their days helping clients understand markets, customers and competitors, sometimes they struggle to apply that same strategic clarity to their own business.

They know how to craft a compelling narrative for a brand, they understand the mechanics of perception and preference. They can articulate what makes one proposition land and another fall flat. And yet, when it comes to marketing themselves, they can flounder.

It’s understandable. Client work always takes priority. Writing a LinkedIn post feels self-indulgent when there is a fieldwork debrief to finalise. Even networking events can get cancelled or sidelined when a proposal deadline looms. Building a newsletter gets pushed back to 'once things settle down' - which, of course, they never do.

As a consequence, an agency may continue to grow through word of mouth, which makes them vulnerable if they lose a major account and are invisible to the wider market. And, when they do go-to-market, they may not be able to clearly articulate what makes them different from the many other agencies a prospective client might also be talking to.

This guide is here to help. It is written for founders of small insight and research agencies who know they need to raise their profile but are not sure where to start, or have started and not been able to sustain it. I will show you how to build a reputation that does work for you between client projects, so that your pipeline is not dependent on who you bump into at a conference.

With the industry already in a state of flux and rapid change, can you afford not to make your services better known?

Chapter 1:
Define your position

Everything else in this guide rests on a clear sense of who you are, who you serve and why that matters. Without that foundation, your marketing will always feel effortful, because you will be making it up as you go rather than drawing from something true.

Most insight agency founders have a positioning problem they have not fully diagnosed. They may describe their business in terms of what they do - “we specialise in customer experience research” - rather than the value they create for a specific kind of client. The result is a proposition that sounds identical to dozens of competitors. As the use of AI in market research and insights becomes ubiquitous, the focus needs to be more on how you help clients make decisions, rather than the methodology used to get there.

Identify your niche

Niche does not mean small, it means specific. An agency that is known for a particular kind of work, in a particular sector, or for a particular type of buyer, will consistently out-compete a generalist for the right opportunities - and will generate more referrals, because people can easily explain what you do. There are 5 axes along which you can define a niche. Most successful positioning combines two or three of them.

1. Sector - for example financial services, food and drink, healthcare, IT/tech
2. Methodology - for example qualitative, quantitative, data analysis, ethnography, syndicated
3. Audience type - i.e. in-house insight teams, brand teams, product managers, strategy directors, C-suite
4. Solution type - ie. innovation, category growth, brand tracking, employee experience, customer satisfaction
5. Geography - i.e. domestic, regional, global

The test of a good niche is whether someone who heard it could immediately picture the kind of client you work with and the kind of brief you get excited about. For example, “We help FMCG brand teams understand why shoppers defect at the fixture” is a niche, whereas “We do consumer research for big companies” is not.

1.2 Articulate your point of view

A point of view is the thing that makes you interesting to talk to and worth following. It is a coherent, opinionated perspective on a topic your clients care about.

For insight agency founders and their internal subject matter experts, your point of view usually sits between how research is currently done and how you think it should be done. Perspectives on a sector shift that clients are grappling with, such as the integration of AI into working practices and solutions, or changes within your industry area of expertise, demonstrate you are a thought leader in your space.

Your point of view does not need to be radical but it does need to be real. The test is whether you would be willing to say it in a room where someone disagreed with you - and whether saying it out loud would make the right kind of person want to hear more.

How to develop your point of view

- Write down three things you find yourself saying to clients that they did not already know.
- Look for the pattern in your best work: what does it always do that other approaches do not?
- Read what others in your field are saying and notice where you want to push back.

1.3 Write your founder or purpose story

Buyers don't just hire agencies, they hire people. The founder or purpose story is your opportunity to make the human behind the business legible - to explain why you do this work, what shaped your thinking and what you care about. Done well, it converts a credentials deck into something a client actually remembers.

What drove you or your team to focus on this particular kind of work? What have you seen or done that makes you credible in this space? And what do you believe that shapes the way you work?

To prepare your founder story, write it in the first person, in plain language, in about 250 to 400 words. If you prefer a purpose story, get buy-in from your core team.

And if you would like me to help you find your story, I would be happy to help.

Where to use your story

This narrative underpins your whole brand proposition. It should appear across your go-to-market channels; your agency website's About page, your LinkedIn profile summary, the opening page of your credentials deck, introductory emails to new prospects, conference speaker bios, etc. All of these benefit from a version of the same story, adapted to the context.

Chapter 2: Build a platform of thought leadership

With this strategy, the aim is to create and share a range of content that demonstrates what you know, how you think and what you believe consistently enough that the right people start to associate your name with your specific areas of expertise. The majority of your overall available market is not currently seeking your services. However, when they start looking, prospects may begin their search without speaking to you. With thought leader content, the goal is be the expert or agency who is top of mind when your prospect recognises they have a specific kind of problem.

2.1 Choose your channels

Don’t try to do too much. One channel done consistently will build more recognition than five channels updated sporadically. The right channel is the one where your buyers already spend time. For most B2B insight agency founders, that means LinkedIn and usually one other channel such as a newsletter, a webinar or a podcast.

Channels	What it is good for
Linked In	Reach, direct buyer access, short-form opinion
Email newsletter	Curating content, understanding client needs
Article	Depth, long-form thinking, positioning
Webinar	Attracting prospects, gauging interest, showcasing experts
Podcast	Depth, relationship-building, niche audiences
Speaking opportunity / Events	Credibility, live networking, referral-generation

If you don’t have a customer database, start with LinkedIn. It is where the most commissioners of research are most active, and it is the one where short, frequent content performs best for people with limited time. Once you have a sustainable rhythm there (2-3 posts per week from your corporate account are ideal), consider adding an email newsletter to your client and prospect database if you want to build a deeper, more direct relationship with your audience. Articles, webinars and speaking opportunities will further broaden your reach and solidify your expertise across a range of services and topics.

2.2 Repurpose your research

One of the biggest untapped assets an insight agency founder has is the work they have already done. Every project contains observations, tensions and surprises that a broader audience would find interesting - but most of it never leaves the client debrief room.

You cannot publish client data without permission, but you can publish the thinking that emerges from it. A pattern you noticed across five separate brand tracking projects, for example, or an observation about how a particular methodology consistently surprises clients, a framework you have developed from repeated work in a sector.

Build a habit of asking yourself, at the end of every project: is there something in this work that I could turn into content? Not the findings themselves, but the thinking they prompted. Most projects contain at least one.

2.3 Repurpose your content

Remember, a single piece of thinking can generate multiple pieces of content. A long observation might become a short LinkedIn post, a section of a newsletter, a talking point in a podcast interview, a slide in a conference presentation and a case study on your website. Different formats reach different audiences at different stages of awareness.

2.4 Don't forget speaking and events

A speaking slot at a conference or industry event is a high-value high-converting marketing activity many insight agencies don't do enough of. The return on time is significantly better than digital content, because it places you in front of a concentrated group of buyers in an environment where credibility is conferred by the act of being on stage.

Getting speaking slots requires proactive pitching. Most events have open submission processes or programme committees that actively look for new voices. The key is to pitch a specific angle on a specific topic. Don't just talk about research trends, say something like, "I want to argue the case that most insight teams are measuring the wrong things and here is the evidence."

How to pitch for a speaking slot

- Identify a handful of events your ideal clients attend (think beyond research industry events)
- Connect with the programme committee or content lead before submitting
- Write a pitch that leads with the audience value, not your credentials and don't overly sell your business
- Include two or three specific talking points and explain why this audience will care.

Chapter 3: Grow your network intentionally

Your agency has a network. What you may lack is an intentional approach to maintaining and expanding it. Rather than just networking reactively - say at events, through clients, via LinkedIn connections accumulated over the years - consider networking as a deliberate activity with a strategy behind it.

3.1 Map your key relationships

Before you can grow your network strategically, you need to understand what you have. A relationship map is a simple exercise that gives you a clear picture of where your connections currently sit and where the gaps are.

Try this exercise. Draw four rings. The innermost ring contains your current clients - people who know you well and have bought from you. The second ring contains warm contacts - former clients, ex-colleagues, people who have referred work, people you have met at events who know what you do. The third ring contains people you know of but have not built a relationship with - potential clients, adjacent specialists, journalists, industry figures. The fourth ring is everyone else. You probably spend most of your energy in the first which is understandable, but the third ring is where most of your future business is sitting.

3.2 Serve, don't sell

The most effective networking behaviour for an insight agency founder is one of active generosity. Before you think about how someone might be useful to you, think about how you might be useful to them.

This sounds simple and most people agree with it in principle. But it can be easy to slip into a transactional mode - connecting with someone because you want something, reaching out when you have a proposal to fill, going to events with a mental list of people to pitch.

Generosity in a professional context means things like: making an introduction that costs you nothing but creates value for two people; sharing a piece of research or an article that is directly relevant to someone's current problem; offering a short, no-strings conversation with someone who is wrestling with a question you know a lot about; publicly crediting someone's work. The cumulative effect of consistent generosity is a reputation for being genuinely useful - the most commercially valuable reputation an agency founder can have.

Examples of practical giving you can adopt:

- Send one “thought of you” type message per week to someone in your second ring - it could be an article, a connection, a note about something relevant to their work.
- Make one introduction per fortnight between two people who would genuinely benefit from knowing each other.
- Respond to people's social media content rather than just liking it. Comments and showing a perspective will help to build relationships, whereas likes are just passive. Congratulate someone who has moved position, or been given a promotion
- Offer a free thirty-minute “challenge call” to a potential client when you sense they are wrestling with something in your area of expertise
- Offer free training to your clients in-house team in an area of your expertise

3.3 Find or build a peer community

One of the underrated growth strategies for insight agency founders is building a genuine community among peers - other founders at a similar stage, in adjacent but non-competing spaces, who share similar challenges.

A well-functioning peer group provides referral opportunities when a client brief falls outside someone's area of expertise, early warning of industry shifts, collaborative content opportunities, emotional support during difficult periods and a testing ground for new ideas.

Where you might find your community

- The Market Research Society and AQR in the UK host regular events and have online communities
- LinkedIn groups for specific research methodologies are active and can surface interesting connections.
- Sector-specific associations (e.g. food and drink, financial services, pharmaceutical) can contain high concentrations of buyers.
- The Insights Consultants Group has over 400 members, shares knowledge for small market research businesses and runs regular events.

Chapter 4:
Turn clients into advocates

Existing clients are your most powerful marketing asset. Turn your favourite clients into advocates with a systematic method of generating referrals, case studies, testimonials and co-authored content or award entries from the clients most enthusiastic about your work.

4.1 Build a light-touch referral system

At the end of a project, or during a review conversation, simply ask for an introduction, either to someone from inside the company - another department or geography - or outside their organisation. Don't forget to follow up at a later date to find out what impact the insights from the project had on decision-making and strategy. There are two benefits to this. Firstly, you can find out what the next phase in the project is going to be - for example, positioning and messaging research is often followed by concept and communications testing. If you have a strong relationship, the client is more likely to include you in that RfP. Secondly, it will help strengthen the impact story for a case study (see below).

4.3 Capture testimonials naturally

The best testimonials are drawn from things clients already say in debrief meetings, in emails after a project, in conversations at events. Ideally you need to capture them when they happen. Build a habit of noting down strong phrases clients use to describe the value of your work. Then, at an appropriate moment, ask if they would be happy for you to quote them on your website or in a proposal.

4.2 Ask for specific feedback

It is good quality assurance practice to request customer feedback at the end of every project. For one thing, if there have been any issues (even if you haven't been aware of them), this gives your client the opportunity to tell you so that you can resolve it. A customer who has been unhappy but had their problem solved is reported to be more loyal than one who is satisfied with your service. Secondly, good client reviews signal high-quality research and insights to other prospects looking for your expertise. If you need to submit a response to a Request for Information, you may be asked to evidence the quality of your services. Having a report of satisfaction scores and a library of testimonials will make a strong case in your favour.

4.3 Sell the sizzle, not the sausage

The most common mistake insight agency founders make when writing case studies is leading with the methodology rather than the outcome. Whilst a demonstration of the method used is relevant, what clients really want to know is what changed for your client as a result of the work. Structure every case study around three things: the challenge (what the client was trying to solve and why it mattered), the approach (briefly, in plain language), and spend more time on the impact (what the client was able to do differently because of the work). The impact section is the most important and this is where to focus your attention.

4.4 Co-create content with clients

The most underused form of client advocacy is co-created content — an industry report, a webinar, a podcast episode, an article or an award entry that you and a client produce together. The client gets thought leadership for their brand. You get third-party credibility and access to their network.

Chapter 5: Convert visibility into revenue

This chapter explains how to bridge the gap between being known and being bought - the journey from knowing who you are to commissioning research.

5.1 Nurture inbound interest

When someone engages with your content - likes a post, comments on an article, downloads something from your website - they are giving you a signal of interest, not a sign they want to buy. Imagine it as a first date. You are looking to find out more about the person, not looking for a marriage proposal! Respond with a low-pressure, high-value next step. Reply to a comment on a post with a personal, thoughtful reply. Respond to a newsletter subscriber who opens consistently with a short note offering an opportunity to discuss.

How to set up a nurturing sequence

1. **On receiving a signal of interest:** engage meaningfully rather than just acknowledging it.
2. **To a consistent engager:** invite them to a conversation about a topic you both care about.
3. **Conversation:** understand their current challenge; share relevant thinking without pitching.
4. **Follow-up:** send something useful based on what they said in the conversation.
5. **Meeting:** they come to you when the right moment arrives.

5.2 Create packaged propositions

One of the most effective ways to make it easy for a potential client to buy from you is to offer clear, named packages for your most common types of work.

How to package a service

1. Start with identifying a client problem you solve repeatedly for and one that clients tend to return to you for
2. Define what will be included in your packaged service and what client value they will get from the output
3. Give it a name (and maybe a logo) that describes the outcome, not the methodology
4. If you are able to define prices (or at least a range) so buyers can qualify themselves before the first call
5. Write a one-slide summary that explains the package, when it is the right fit for a client and the benefits it offers and share that with your team.

5.3 Maintain a discipline of follow-up to build your pipeline

Don't lose clients because you fail to follow up. Build a routine of regular prospecting and relationship-building. I had a colleague who followed up monthly with a prospect - and on 11 occasions they said they didn't need her services. On the 12^{th} month they commissioned a project with her - and they said her tenacity and consistency had won her the work. As you grow you will need a CRM database to maintain your contacts, but as a small agency a simple spreadsheet will do - logging each contact, interaction and next steps.

Chapter 6: Build a sustainable marketing habit

Everything in this guide is only valuable if it happens more than once. The founders who consistently grow their profile and their pipeline are not doing dramatically more marketing than those who do not. They are doing a modest amount of marketing regularly and consistently.

6.1 The time and energy audit

Before you can build new habits, you need to understand where your time and energy currently go. Most founders and other sellers underestimate how much of their week is spent on activities that could be delegated, deferred or eliminated, and overestimate how little time is available for marketing.

A helpful exercise would be to track your time for one working week. At the end of the week, look at where the hours went and ask yourself: which of these activities directly build the business or deliver value to clients? And which, if done by someone else or not done at all, would not materially affect anything?

6.2 Build a 90-day action plan

A 90-day planning horizon is ideal for founder marketing. It is long enough to build momentum and see results from consistent effort, but short enough to be realistic about what is actually achievable alongside running a business.

Here's what a simple plan could look like:

Element	Goal
Positioning	Define your niche, create your narrative
Content	Select your channels, formats and cadence
Networking	Set goals for targeting new or re-activating relationships (and ask your team to do the same)
Business development	Warm conversations and set pipeline targets

As you start to build your brand in the longer term, get some outside help

If you have done as much as you can and you would like to scale up or professionalise your marketing efforts, let me help.

I have over 20 years experience in B2B marketing for professional services agencies. I can help your business with consistent, measurable marketing that will compound over time.

Let me work with you to build strong brand awareness with a clear proposition, design or evolve a killer identity and create a calendar of regular thought leadership and activity across channels such as Linked In, your website, email, in industry publications and at events.

Feel free to reach out to me: hello@iamjuliedenny.com