

# Marketing in **TOUGH TIMES**

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A roadmap and guide



**The purpose of this roadmap and guide\* is to help you navigate the next few months, keeping an eye on the future.**

Businesses are facing the biggest challenge most of us have had to deal with. There is no doubt that it will be a period of great uncertainty.

Whilst there are some immediate priorities in the short-term, the next step is to pause... before planning for the long-term.

All the research over the last 40 years shows that those companies who do best during tough times and come out strongest are those that combine selective and targeted cost-cutting with investment for the future – through marketing and innovation.

This guide looks at the steps you can take to make sense of this uncertainty and think, shape and plan for the things you can control.

For the short read, the main points are these:

- Deal with immediate priorities around communications and operations, staff, clients and suppliers.
- Spend time on the strategic thinking so that your marketing plan fits into your business context and with what you're selling, to whom and why. Both the context and your clients' world will have changed.
- Then shape and build your marketing plan; this might be a revision of your existing one or you might be starting from scratch. Whichever it is, focus on your existing clients first, before looking at how you motivate warm prospects to become paying clients. The final part of the plan is to look at how you stay visible and attract clients who want and need what you offer.

And, of course, you'll need to be agile and regularly review and tweak this plan.

For those who would like the long read, the rest of the guide is for you.

\* This guide combines 30 years' experience and desk research. Where articles or concepts are used from third party sources, references are given for you to read further or by way of crediting the source.

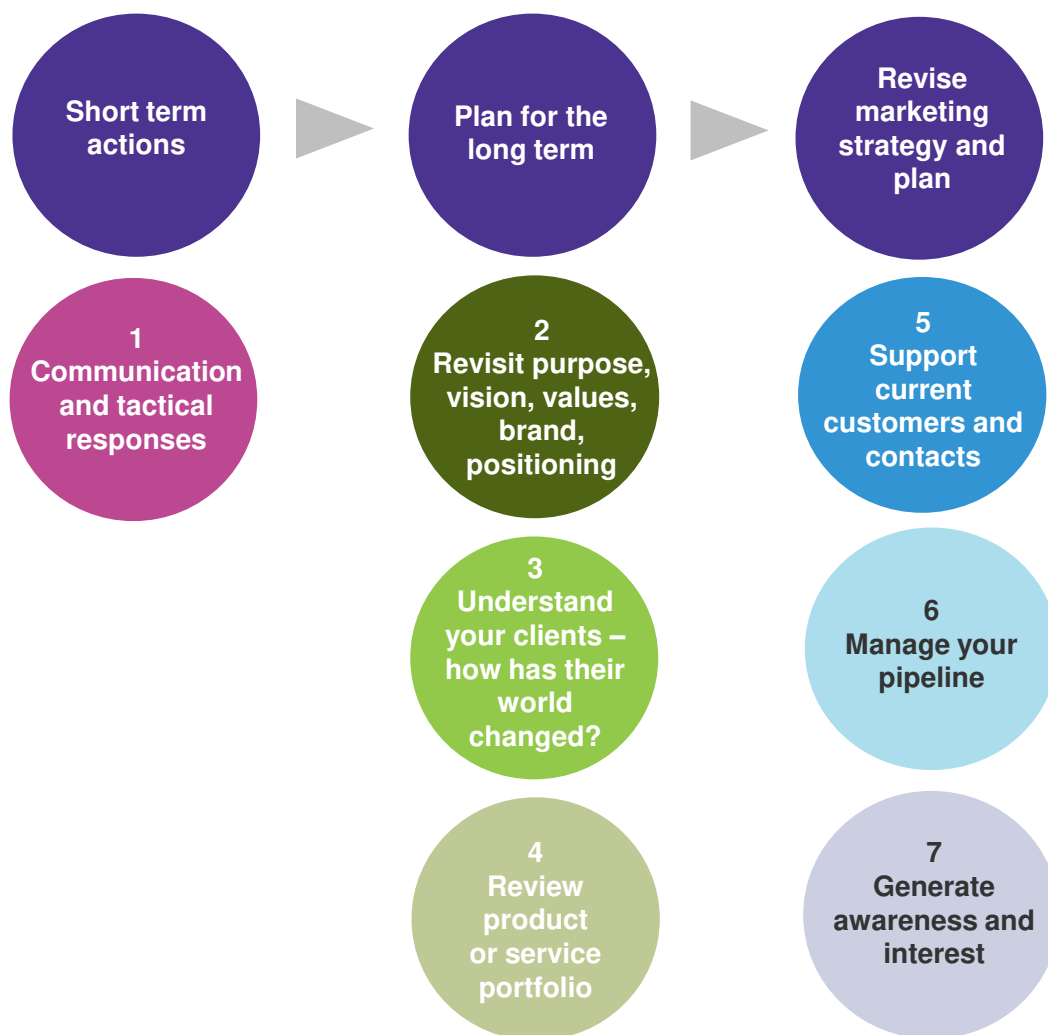
# THE ROADMAP

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## SHORT TERM ACTIONS

### Communications

**The immediate marketing priorities are related to communications.**

**If there's one key point here, it is this: regular, open and on-going communications with staff, clients, suppliers and prospects.**

1. *Have a plan.* You'll need a small taskforce to agree and action this plan. Decide who the main contact is to run it. Put in place processes to communicate breaking news in an ordered, measured way – through agreed media (your website, social media channels, email). Decide who will give the sign-off to any communications. In a crisis situation, the tone and approach you take is critical and any communications bear a second look by someone else to check it's as sensitive as you want it to be.
2. *Message and tone of voice.* Agree your organisation's messages and tone of voice. Empathetic, reassuring, measured, supportive, for instance.
3. *Give people facts as you know them.* Even though there is a lot of uncertainty, be honest about it. People will naturally fill in the gaps if they don't have the information they want, which only increases anxiety. If you don't know what's happening, say that and say you will come back to them as soon as you have the answer. Even whilst you don't yet have further information, update them. People like to know that you haven't forgotten and are working on it. It helps to underpin people's trust in you.
4. *Be crystal clear.* Use words that a 12-year old will understand. In times of anxiety and change people don't hear everything. Don't be afraid of repeating your key messages.
5. *What can you do to help?* You will be immediately considering the impact of the current situation and what you can do to help your clients. They may need your support or at the very least will welcome you asking how you can help. A phone call or personal text or email will be appreciated and shows you care.
6. *Reach out.* To all clients for whom you're delivering current work, services or products. Let them know the current state of play or what effect the situation is having on that work. Reach out too, to warm prospects and suppliers.



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7. *Dealing with increased volume of calls.* Decide how to deal with the increase in call or email volumes to minimise wait times and anxiety. Aim to reply as promptly as you can to them. If necessary, consider short-term help from call answering services.
8. *Information on your website.* This will be a lot of people's first point of call. Put information on your website about how you're dealing with situation, what you've put in place and how to contact you, updating contact details if needs be and business hours. Review every few days at least to update as necessary.
9. *Share information on social media.* On LinkedIn (company and individual pages), Facebook, Twitter so that your clients and others in your business community can see it whichever platform they look at.
10. *Update your email signature.* Make sure it include a quick note about what you're doing, how to contact you or the office and any links to relevant blogs or information on your website.
11. *Keep your regular marketing channels going.* Now is not the time to go to ground. If you possibly can, keep things going even if it's the bare minimum. For instance, if you do a monthly newsletter and use it to write on topical issues, this will be a good way of sending out relevant information speaking to issues that will be on your clients' minds.
12. *Personal one to one messages.* Reach out to ask how your clients, suppliers, warm prospects are doing. That personal contact will be much appreciated.
13. *Consider the commercial implications for you and your clients.* Be prompt and open about staff changes, cancellations, postponements, refunds, payment plans and so on. You might need to take some tough decisions, but be as compassionate and supportive as you can in their implementation.
14. *Be relevant and helpful.* If you can offer clarity on anything topical that is uppermost in people's minds, share your advice, guidance or thoughts. Share that information directly with contacts and clients but also widely on your website, LinkedIn and other social media.
15. *Take time to meet.* Virtually if need be, as a team at least weekly if not more frequently to discuss what's going on, challenges and how to solve them. Let people bring to the table short-term concerns but also medium-term things which will take some thinking and planning to consider and action. For instance, there is not a quick answer to adapting how your business works and implications for the future so it needs to be considered over a period of time.

These short term actions may extend over weeks or even a few months, so review and revisit this list regularly.

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## Nurture your clients

**In the short term – for the next few months – there are two areas of your marketing to focus on; this is one of them.**

You may need to consider segmenting clients. Some will need you more than others. Some will welcome information you send; for others it might be irrelevant.

At a company level, they will be responding in one of three ways<sup>1</sup>:

- Flex - not badly affected; sales may even be bolstered;
- Fix - not knocked out of action, but may have to make significant changes to marketing and operating model;
- Freeze – demand has fallen fast and their priorities are looking after employees and survival.

Which of these groups they (and you) are in will determine what they might need and how you can help. There will be a different marketing approach to each.

Further than that, here are some ideas to remain in contact with, and in service of, your clients:

- Make a list of which clients to call or email and when.
- Note down questions your firm or practice areas are asked regularly and wrap them up into FAQs on your website or an article, checklist or guide.



- What social interaction could you have with them that would keep you connected? This could be on social media – Twitter is particularly good for this. One firm I know holds regular drinks nights after work that they invite some clients to. Regularly ask the question: what do our clients need and how can we help? This will guide what and how you communicate with them.

Don't forget to include communicating with your warm prospects too. It's worth showing them you're still thinking of them. For both clients and prospects, marketing's job is to be helpful, be friendly and be consistent.

Key clients may need extra attention. If you have a plan, revisit this and make any adjustments needed. It may need to pause for a while in its current form and you may need to revise it.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Ritson of Marketing Week framed businesses' responses in this way in a webinar 'Marketing in the Time of Coronavirus', 2 April 2020

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## Keep visible

**This is the second focus for your marketing: ensuring your firm - and expertise - stays visible.**

There are four key ways to do this.

### **1. Through creating the right messages**

Your all-important starting point is to consider your communications and messaging. Most firms have shown empathy and sensitivity and been alive to how their clients are feeling, what personal and business challenges they might be facing. Consider your answer to the following questions:

- How are your clients feeling now?
- What do they need?
- How can you help?

Your response to these will be the foundation of your messaging.

### **2. Through profile-building**

You will need first to consider where you want to build your profile, in which practice area or sector. It won't be appropriate for some (those sectors in 'freeze' for instance). Some areas of work might be quiet at the moment – not much going on in house buying, for example – but clients might still have concerns you can answer.

Then, you'll need to assess what in your expertise is most relevant now, regularly reviewing this as clients and market needs change. Are these specific (What government help is available for me?) or more general (What are the employment law issues I need to be aware of?). Have a point of view.

#### **Innovate how you do BD**

One professional services client I work with has formed a virtual BD group, consisting of people who are naturally good at BD. They are coming together regularly to discuss intel, what they're seeing in the marketplace and with clients, how they can help, how to connect one client with another.

Each person is then responsible for championing the approach back in their teams and feeding ideas to them. It's innovative BD that prevents them from standing still.

Finally, identify where your clients and ideal prospects 'hang out' – where will you see them now? This is where you'll need to show up – and it might be different from two months ago!

There are a variety of ways to build your profile, from regular blogs or articles, running webinars (free or paid for, as appropriate), hosting networking events on a current theme with you as a guest speaker, doing research and writing a white paper. There's no doubt that visibility online has become predominant. If you're not confident in this area, develop your knowledge and skills – there are many good people who can help.

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### **3. Through content**

Obviously, this is linked closely to profile-building. The starting point is to think about the issues or questions people have now - and will have over the coming months - that can help shape your content. Your clients' needs, challenges, even buying behaviour in some instances, will have changed. Some services will be more relevant; some sectors will have been impacted more than others.

Have a regular 'editorial' meeting to plan your content. Since things are changing on a daily and weekly timescale you'll need to be alert to emerging topics and be prepared to do any research and form a point of view quickly.

Any content you create can be used and repurposed in many ways to maintain your profile:

- LinkedIn posts and articles from individuals and the firm (the more human and personal they are, the more engagement and interaction you'll get);
- Blog posts on your website that are then split into LinkedIn updates or articles and multiple Tweets;
- A short slide show;
- A guest blog for a partner organisation;
- Run (regular) webinars or networking events and invite clients and contacts to the conversation.

### **4. Through partnerships and collaboration**

Which other non-competing firms could you team up with where you could support each other? For instance, many accountants have been keeping their clients updated about what support is available, as it evolves.

Law firms could offer to brief that accountancy firm's clients on the furlough schemes and what they need to do to take advantage, providing template letters they can use.

Technology firms could offer help to the business clients of law or accounting firms on how to support remote working.

#### **Marketing winners**

Real examples of marketing that's working for businesses:

- Short videos talking to a particular point or giving advice.
- A financial planner interviewing a mental health expert for their podcast, linking to their core message of financial well-being.
- Researching views on a topic and bringing them together in a paper.
- Educational content on legal topics to technology companies.
- Offering weekly 'surgeries' to clients to resolve current challenges.



Plan for the long term

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Revisit purpose, vision, values, brand, positioning

3  
Understand your clients – how has their world changed?

4  
Review product or service portfolio

## PLAN FOR THE LONG TERM

**Essential for any strategic planning, don't leap to a marketing plan without taking time to think.**

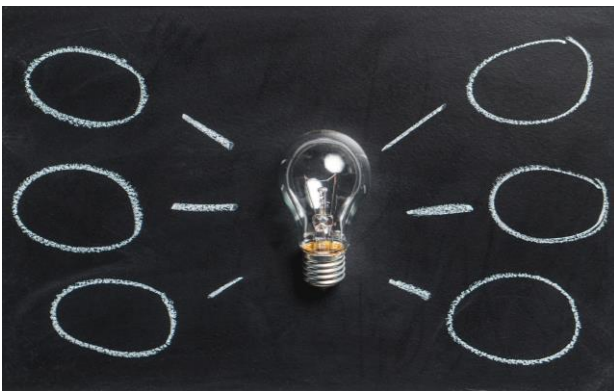
Having a plan in place is one way of building resilience into your business. The timing for looking to the longer-term will vary business to business. For many you'll be wanting to consider this within the next 2-3 months.

### Revisit your vision, values and purpose

The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly they need to be and remain your guiding star. They provide a basis for making decisions. They will inform your marketing, your communications, how you help clients and prospects, the value you provide. Secondly, you may need to adapt your own business so do it with that vision, your values, your purpose in mind.

This then leads on to reviewing your brand. What do you want to be known for? How do you want to show up in the marketplace? What does that say about the messages you want to convey? Use your values to help you make decisions about whether your messages are right, whether your marketing and business development approach remains authentic, with good intent.

Go back to your purpose to help you decide how best you can help and what services you want to particularly focus on over the coming months. This in turn may lead you to consider which of your clients need which services and to what extent you may need to adapt them. Offering virtual versions of what used to be face to face services is a good example of this.



In a recent survey<sup>2</sup> 82% of employees feel that purpose is important and 72% feel it should receive more weight than profit. But only 42% reported that “their company’s stated purpose had much effect.” Putting it at the core of your thinking will help you consider which strategy to take, what products and services to focus on, how to involve your employees in a common goal and what impact you want your business to have for all stakeholders.

Whatever business and marketing decisions you take over the next year, test them against your vision, values and purpose.

<sup>2</sup> McKinsey – Purpose: Shifting from why to how, published April 2020. Also worth reading is another McKinsey article – Demonstrating corporate purpose in the time of coronavirus, published March 2020.

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## Understand your clients

We all feel we know our clients. Make sure, however, that your perception is the same as theirs. The world your clients inhabit is likely to have changed overnight.

Most businesses and individuals respond emotionally to an economic situation. In a 2009 Harvard Business Review article<sup>3</sup>, the authors set out four ways in which clients respond (at an individual, not company, level):

- Slam on the brakes – hardest hit financially, they will reduce all types of spending
- Pained but patient – they economise
- Comfortably well-off – more selective but spending remains the same
- Live for today – unconcerned about their financial situation

This, coupled with the Flex, Fix, Freeze model will help you to filter and triage your clients and determine what communications and marketing is appropriate and what you can realistically resource.

The ripples we are seeing have affected not just you and your clients, but their customers too. The rules of supply and demand have not changed – but which services or products are in demand and the ability of companies to fulfil demand have changed. A client from a month ago is not necessarily the same client (with the same needs) as now.

It is worth revisiting who your ideal client is and what sectors you want to focus on. Walk in their shoes – more important than ever. What's their role, where are they doing this now, are they now on furlough or even unemployed? What are their goals and values, what are their current challenges and blockers? How have these changed in the sectors you serve? How might all of this change in 3, 6 and 12 months?

Depending on where they are on the 'considered purchase continuum'<sup>4</sup> your marketing – and even your proposition – might need to change. How customers make the decision to buy your product or service could now be different. Has it moved from being a very considered purchase to one that is now a crisis buy? Or perhaps they're taking longer to decide than they ordinarily would because they have less money to spend or want to keep a keen eye on costs. Be alive to changes over time – things will evolve over the next few months and in to next year.

3 How to Market in a Downturn, Harvard Business Review, April 2009, John Quelch and Katherine E. Jocz

4 A concept used in the *Watertight Marketing* methodology.

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## Review your products or services

Given that clients and businesses will have differing reactions to an economic crisis, you'll need to give some thought to reviewing your product or services. Some may disappear forever in the future. Equally there will undoubtedly be opportunities for new or adapted products or services.

Clearly, online channels will continue to be a part of the change. Already there is a sharp increase in the use of technology and those companies who have turned to online as a delivery channel. One question is: how might we serve our clients, online?

Some clients will want to decrease their spending, so you might be able to offer a similar service but with some elements taken out. They still get great value, but at a price point they can currently afford. Even if your offer changes in this way, reliability and trust are still critical elements – your stuff still needs to be good!

You may offer products or services which have historically not been easy to deliver or profitable. You might take the decision to continue to offer these: that they position you as an expert or they offer a 'gateway' to other services you offer might both be good reasons for continuing. However, do the research and thinking to decide if certain products or services have had their day and it's time to stop offering them.

And, coming back to a previous point, some services and products will necessarily be on pause. Not much is happening in commercial property development, for instance.

Now is the time for innovation. Product and service development is happening, and fast, often driven by immediate need. Notwithstanding the fact that the property market is slow, one estate agent in London has devised a way of overcoming the impossibility of showing buyers round by setting up a 3D virtual tour. The buyer might have been in the 'live for today' group and not affected financially, but they did buy the house without actually physically seeing it.

### Reinventing a service offering

One business decided that their service (supporting CEOs to grow their companies) was now a discretionary spend that very few would make.

They therefore de-constructed their premium product and offered a free Zoom-based discussion group twice a day on two days a week so CEOs and MDs could participate. It meant people could get a taste for what they did, be supported during a difficult time and get as much value as possible by hearing from experts on various topical issues – finance, HR, marketing, business planning, resilience, etc.

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plan

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Support  
current  
customers and  
contacts

6  
Manage your  
pipeline

7  
Generate  
awareness and  
interest

## MARKETING STRATEGY & PLAN

**Once you've done the thinking, then it's time to start planning your marketing.**

As always in marketing, start with your existing clients.

Many businesses I work with initially think “marketing” is mainly about generating awareness and leads. We'll come on to that, but it's not only that.

It is the process of understanding what your clients need and want and providing a product or service that meets those needs. It is the thinking, researching, planning and then putting in place of tools that motivate your clients to buy. It is the steps you lay down to take them from being aware of what you sell, interested in what you say, reassured about what you do through to being a loyal, happy client.

In many ways, what marketing you do in times of crisis doesn't change. It still needs to have good intent, to be ethical and responsible. It still has to be done with the customer's viewpoint in mind. Examples of good marketing I've seen recently would be appropriate for any time.

What has changed, however, is two things. Firstly, the type of marketing that might be appropriate or relevant. Second, the need to be especially sensitive to what's happening in your clients' world and the wider environment.

### Support current customers and contacts

As you'll know, it's easier (and less risky) to build relationships with existing clients than it is to reach out to potential new clients.

At a time of crisis, it's definitely about being there for them, being consistent, being empathetic. What do you need and how can I help is the question to ask. Create something of real value for them. This has the added benefit of being a piece of content, a service or product that you can use to reach out and support other people who aren't your clients, either directly or through referrers.

Consider how you service existing clients. Is it a self-serve version where you direct them to FAQs or articles on your website. Or perhaps it's a regular phone call to see how they're doing, listening and understanding and finding out what you could do that would be most useful for them now.

Don't forget those clients who might have been quiet for a while. That thing of value you've created could be really timely for this group.

It might be appropriate to socialise with them – inviting them to an online networking event or social you're having, a one to one virtual coffee or engaging with them on LinkedIn or Twitter.

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## Manage your pipeline

Initially, focus on those prospects you were already in conversation with. Their decision may be on pause. That might be for now, or it might be that their business has changed so much that they no longer need what you were discussing.

Of course, they may still need your product or service, so don't assume that they don't. Be sensitive about the timescales though, since over the last few weeks, they will have had some immediate operational issues to deal with.

Again, what content can you create that's in your area of expertise and that would be useful to them. Checklists, templates, guides, educational webinars, case studies, a diagnostic or forecasting tool. Remember to talk to those who refer you too – they may find it useful to send to their clients.

Finally, keep in contact, gently. This could be with further content (yours or someone else's), a call, an email, introducing them to someone who they might find it relevant to talk to. One firm I know is proactively curating relevant resources for their prospects and sending something every three or four weeks.

## Generate awareness and interest

Although this is often what businesses say they need first, this is the final bit of your marketing plan. That's not to say that there aren't sales opportunities if you have something of value to offer. There are. Some businesses are still getting enquiries. But it takes some thought to consider what's right, what feels right, what you can genuinely offer that will be relevant and valuable.

Certainly keep visible. Ensure that people continue to know what you do. Develop content and offer products or services that are related to your business purpose and vision. If you do need to offer something different to keep afloat, you might want to differentiate it from your usual services so it doesn't confuse your clients. Or you could offer a new version of an existing service that is more in tune with what clients need now.

Commit to regular marketing to make sure people know you're still there. That might be at least a couple of LinkedIn posts a day (per individual) and one or two a week on your company profile. It could mean three or four Tweets a day, commenting on others social posts, a video every week, attending online networking events. Follow-up opportunities as they arise – people who show interest in your content or who you engage in conversation. You never know where these might lead.

**The final note on your marketing plan is to review it regularly – perhaps more frequently than you might do normally. Be agile and prepared to change tack if need be.**

# YOUR ROADMAP

## Planning for sustainable sales growth

For a travel guide and companion to explore the journey outlined here in more detail:



### Touchpoint Leak Traffic Light Report

Identify your marketing priorities and plug your profit leaks. From the award-winning Watertight Marketing. Tried and tested, it's a diagnostic that pinpoints what marketing to focus on for the next 3, 6 and 12 months.

Plus a power hour with me to discuss the results

Read more [here](#)



### Watertight Marketing Masterplan

Plan and build your marketing plan in three months. Expert guided online course. Combines a wealth of thinking tools with practical input and coaching from me.

You can find [more details here](#).



### Marketing mentoring

Working with senior executives and marketing teams for regular, practical support to help you think, plan, build and deliver a successful marketing operation.

Sounds like something you need? Let's arrange a coffee to talk more [rachael@bluegreenlearning.com](mailto:rachael@bluegreenlearning.com).

## Questions? Give us a call.

We'd love to talk.



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## ABOUT Bluegreen Learning

### Think differently, realise growth

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- People who want to find out how marketing and innovation can underpin sustainable sales growth.

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