

THE NEON FINGERPRINT

A Guide to Being ***Unignorable***
for Professional Services Firms



Every professional services firm gets stuck sooner or later—you grow initially by plugging into your network and winning business from companies that you have an existing relationship with.

And then you reach the end of that network. Sometimes it takes a couple of years to land at this point; sometimes it takes a decade. Whenever it happens, you feel the symptoms: growth slows, opportunities take longer to close and you find yourself competing on price.

This is a dangerous spot to be. Consider that most consulting firms need to have approximately [25-30% of annual revenue from net new clients](#). When that stops happening, your firm begins to stagnate and you begin to lose altitude.

This guide is meant to help you get unstuck. To help you move boldly beyond one degree of separation into the next phase of your company's history. It demands some decision-making—you need to identify what your firm excels at, where you want to go and who you want to do it for.

| You need to actively decide *how you're different*.

We call this point of differentiation your “neon fingerprint.” It is a bold, unignorable identifier that immediately and unmistakably identifies your firm.

Differentiation makes it clear to prospective clients that your firm is not like the others. Differentiation is how you position your firm for its next phase of growth. It requires time, effort and taking the long view.

Unfortunately, many firms fail at this because they rely on their internal perceptions of themselves—it's hard to read the label from inside the jar. They end up with a “differentiation” that isn't different at all.

Most consulting firms need to have approximately 25-30% of annual revenue from net new clients.

[-STATISTA](#)

This guide helps you think about differentiation in a different way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Why differentiation matters

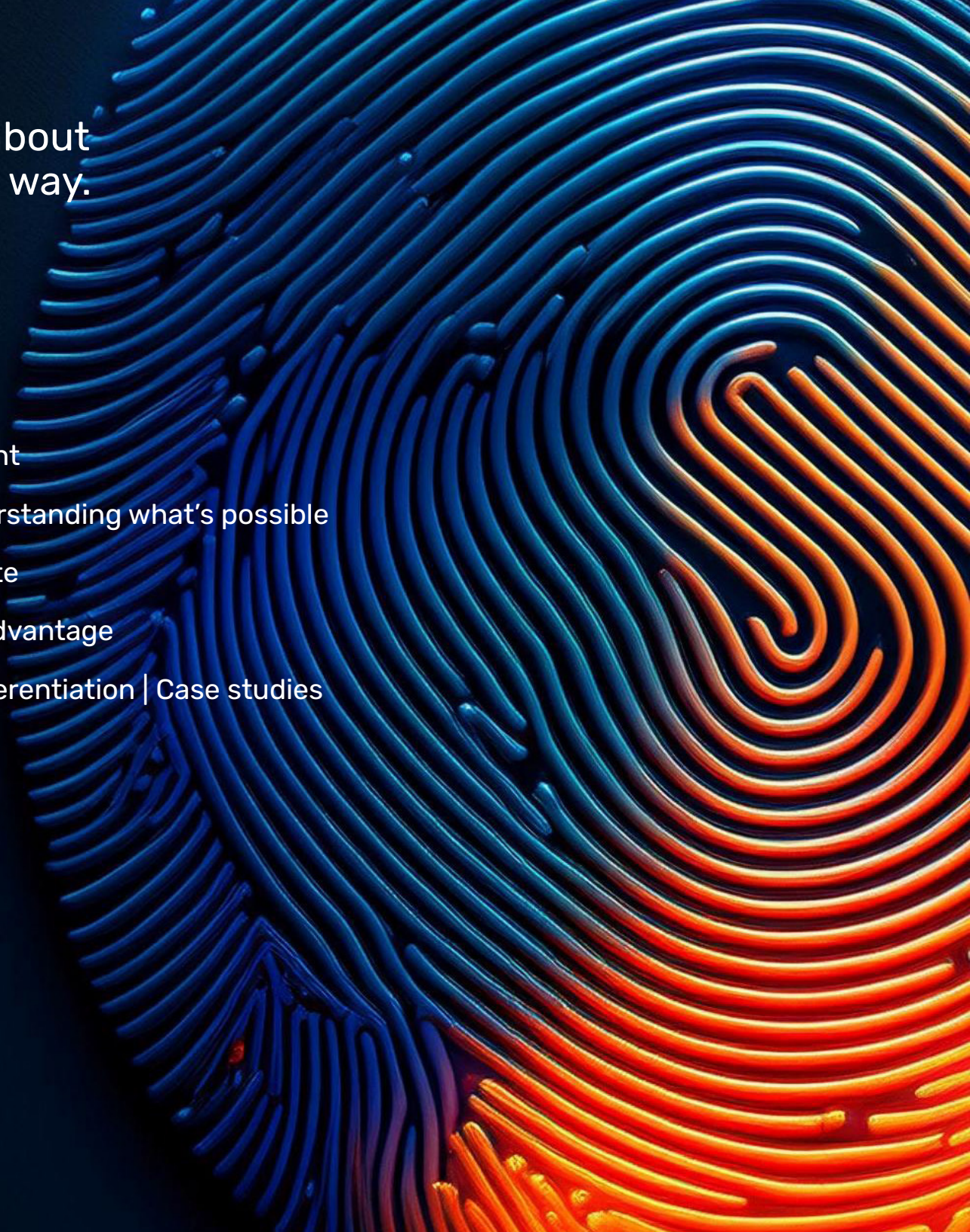
Chapter 2: Finding your neon fingerprint

Chapter 3: Self-examination and understanding what's possible

Chapter 4: The right way to differentiate

Chapter 5: Proving your competitive advantage

Chapter 6: The business impact of differentiation | Case studies



Chapter 1: Why differentiation matters

If you're a professional services firm looking to grow, blending in with the crowd is the last thing you want to do.

And yet, if you review services firms' websites, you'll see a vast sea of sameness. Your eyes will gloss over. You'll be bored out of your mind. And you definitely will not be able to determine which firm is better than any other. Prospective clients cannot discern a difference between you and all your competitors because most of you are saying the same things and most of you are doing the same things.

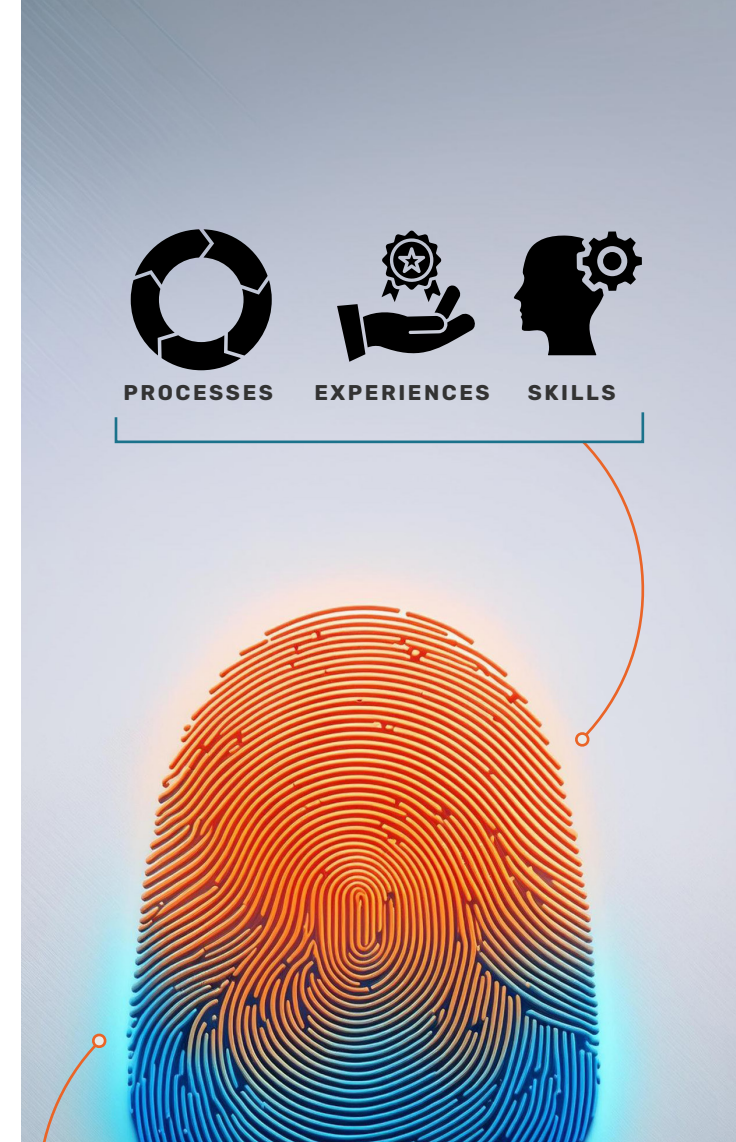
Remember, most services firms sell pretty much the same thing—custom solutions ... sterling service ... a consultative, strategic approach ... X years of experience.

We'll concede that your firm has smart people who do great work and that your clients love your team. It's natural that we default to talking about the things we witness day in, day out—we tend to focus on the attributes we see from inside the house. But to the outside world (where your future clients live), those things are meaningless.

Differentiation, defined

Your differentiation is your *provable competitive advantage*—the way in which you stand out from the competition.

It is more than messaging; it is often a business decision about where you want to focus your firm. What do you want to specialize in? Is there a specific niche service you offer that you can focus the firm on? Is there a specific type of client you work especially well with?

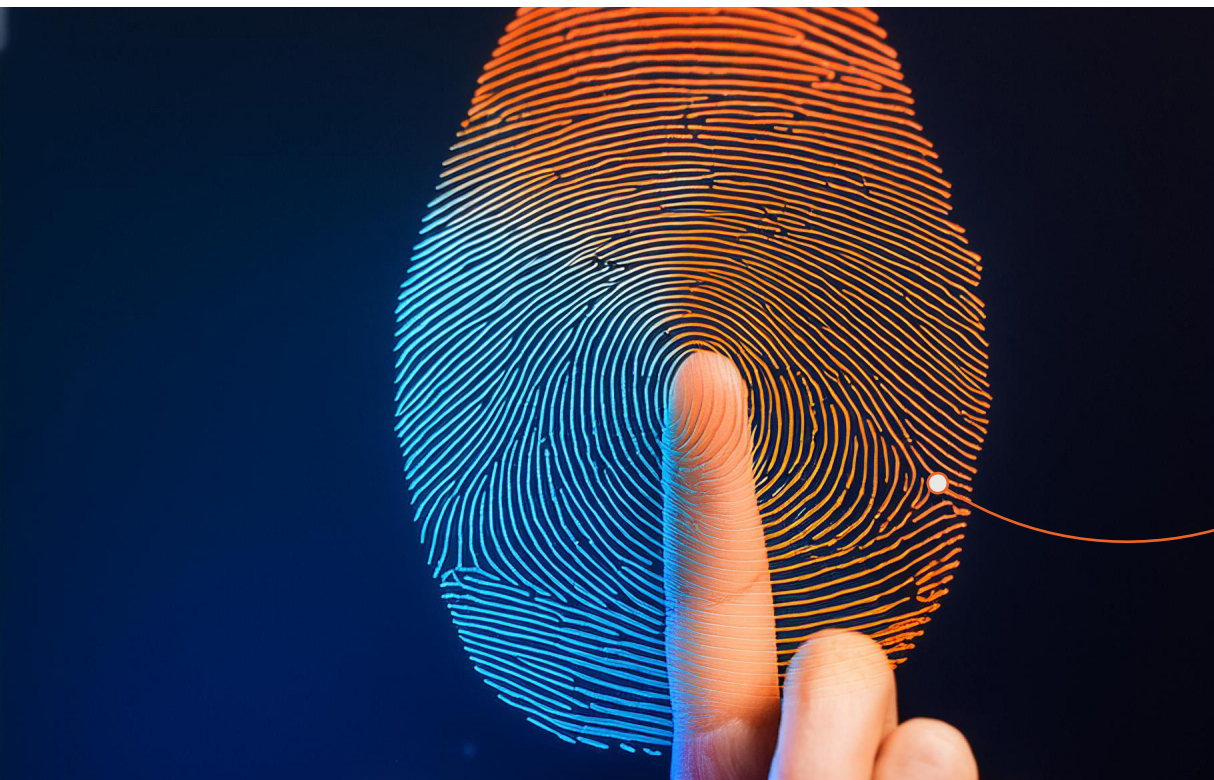


Differentiation is a stackable series of unique attributes—processes, experiences, skills—that are the building blocks of your overall value proposition. It's deciding what to do more of, and what to stop doing.

| Differentiation becomes your *neon fingerprint*.

Figuring out what makes you truly different can be difficult (we'll get into this in the next chapter); it requires a willingness to stop saying all those things the other firms are saying and focus on what you truly can do better than them.

When you differentiate your firm, people—both internally and externally—come to understand what you stand for. They know what you are, and what you aren't. You might think that you're diminishing your revenue potential, but the opposite is actually true—by planting your flag and presenting yourself to the world in a distinctive way, you are raising your firm's profile.



Benefits of true differentiation

Better team effectiveness:

Your team's effectiveness rapidly increases as they acquire a deeper understanding of the work your clients do. And this accumulated and demonstrable expertise will soon become apparent to prospects as you market your firm in a smarter, more confident way that truly matters to future clients.

Decreased competition: You've gone from being a small- or medium-sized fish in the ocean to the biggest fish in the lake.

Increased client loyalty: Your level of expertise makes it harder for clients to substitute another firm for you, creating a bulwark against client churn.

Increased acceptance of higher fees: We saved the best for last! Clients will more readily accept that you're charging higher fees. You can command higher fees if your differentiation adds true value and is not available elsewhere. This is especially true if your differentiator is based in expertise.

Chapter 2: Finding your neon fingerprint

Defining a differentiator requires some rigor and often a third-party perspective to free your team from its echo chamber. You can't just say the first thing that pops into your head and consider yourselves done.

Pinpointing and defining your differentiation demands that you do some competitive research to understand what others are saying. It requires significant, honest discussion about where you are, what you're best at and where you want to take the business.

A differentiator sits at the middle of a Venn diagram—at the intersection of truth, relevance and provability.

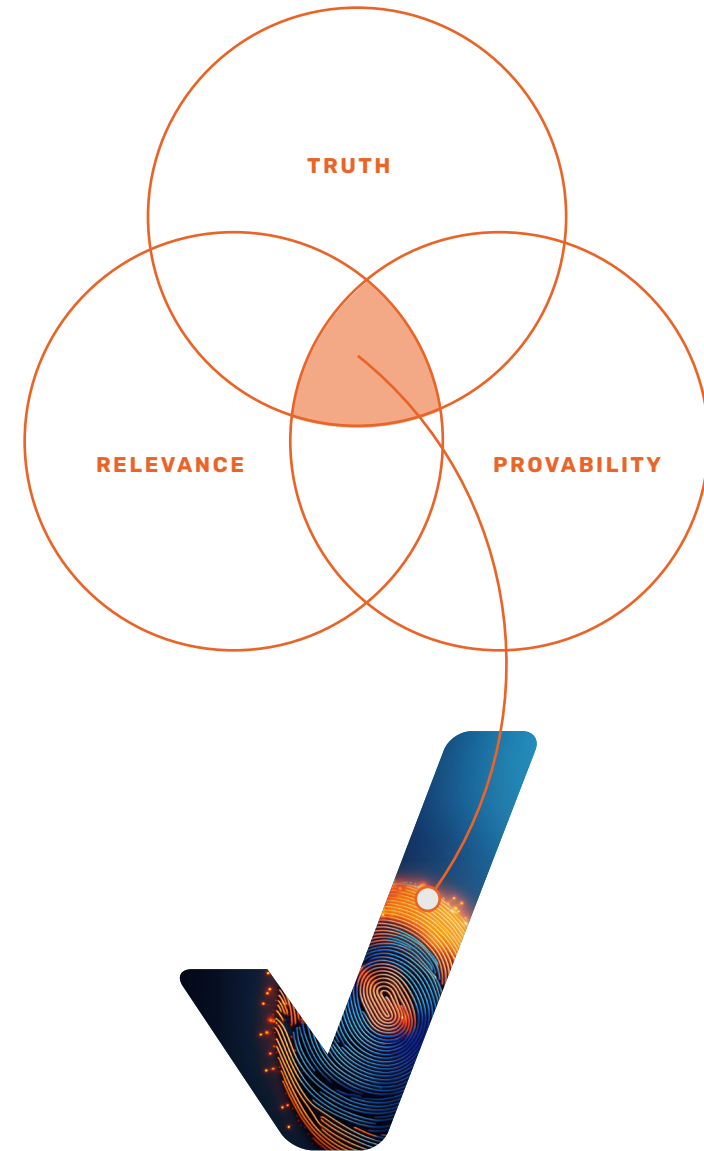
Your differentiators must be **true**

It needs to be real.

It needs to reflect who you are.

Sure you could come up with something that sounds grandiose and garners attention, but it won't last—if you can't execute against this value proposition, your clients won't hang around for long.

Just as importantly, your team members won't stay if they know you're BSing your way through creating an important distinction—they'll question your ethics and they won't enjoy being put in a position where they have to support your falsehoods.



Your differentiators must be **relevant**

Professional services firms frequently get hung up on what's important to them, rather than what's important to clients. If your so-called differentiation is not something your clients care about, it won't work—you'll be stuck in the same spot you're in now, losing momentum.

This requires that you understand what is important to your clients and prospects. Shockingly, it might not be what is important to you. It's not uncommon to think that your clients love you because of your brilliant work, but what they really value is your speedy turnaround time. Or vice versa.

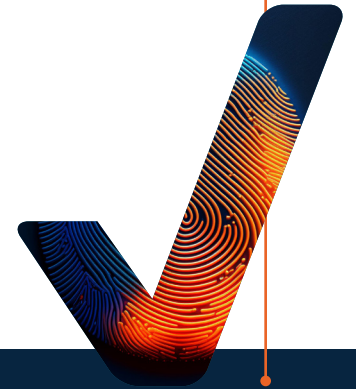
To be a differentiator that helps you attract new clients, your differentiators must be something those clients care about.

Your differentiators must be **provable**

Inside the walls of your company, there are certain things that you know to be true. In your mind, these are stone, cold facts.

But, as confident as you are in Lisa's client management skills, or Hank's industry know-how, or Charlie's relentless focus on perfection, the outside world has a very hard time seeing those things. They certainly can't measure these attributes.

What are facts in your mind are opinions in theirs. And guess what? When that's the case, you lose. Buyers today are cynical and have learned to ignore empty, unprovable claims.



**Your differentiators
must be something
your clients care
about.**

Where to look for points of differentiation

What makes you stand out from your competition?

Here's where to look.

WHO YOU WORK WITH

If your company works with a preponderance of clients in a specific industry, that could be your differentiation—when you focus on one specific vertical, you develop expertise in that vertical. It's natural that your team begins to notice patterns with your clients, enabling them to more authoritatively provide counsel to those clients.

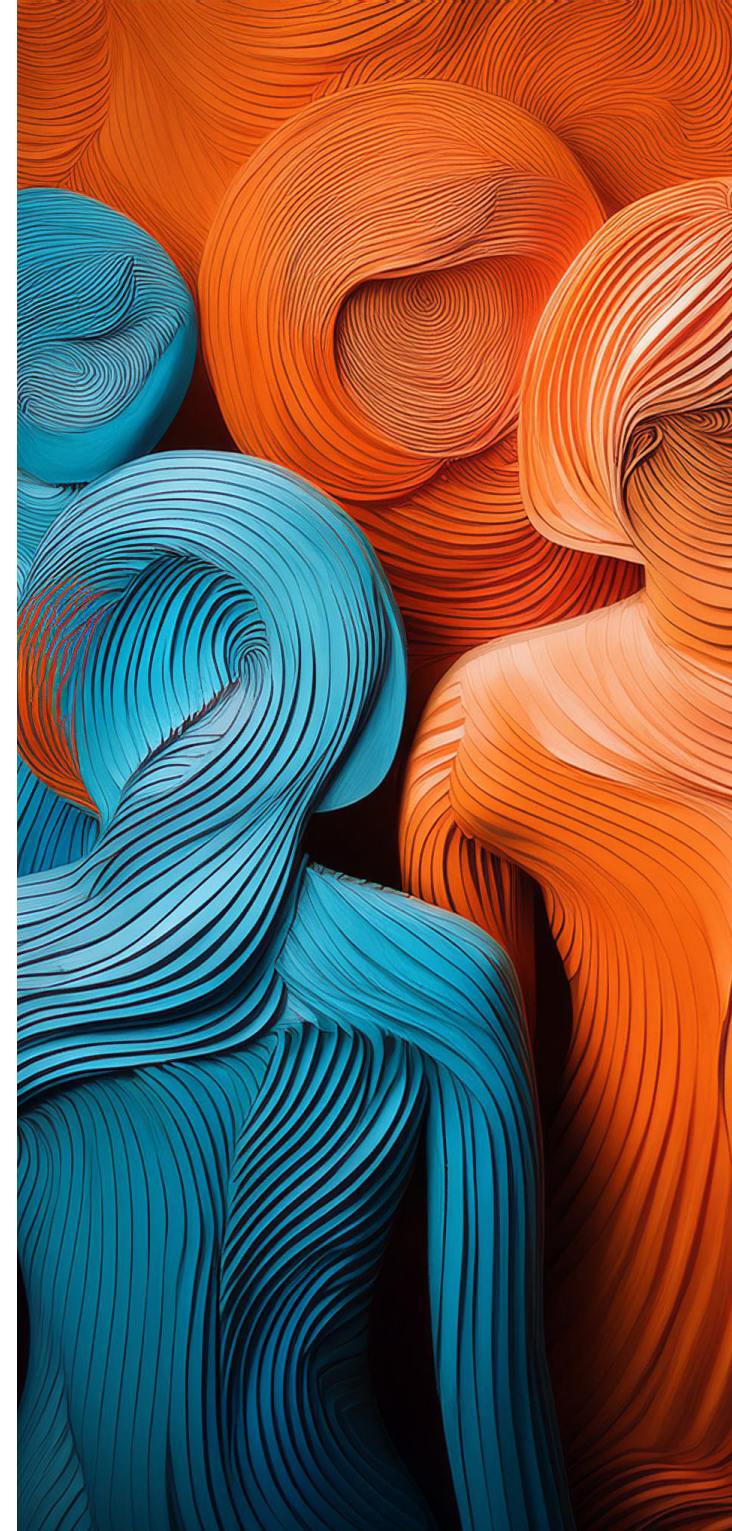
This could also apply to the size of clients you work with—if you work with startups, you understand their unique needs and pressures. If you work with companies with 5,000 or more employees, you understand *their* unique needs and pressures.

Working in a specific horizontal or vertical niche will, over time, give you opportunities to collect unique information applicable to companies in that niche that aren't clients (yet).

WHERE YOU WORK

While your firm might not be able to prove that it's the greatest IT consulting firm in the world, you might be able to carve out a reputation as the best IT consulting firm in Richmond, Virginia (or wherever).

A vertical niche within a geographic niche might be plenty to differentiate you from your competition, provided there are not potential clients at that cross-section.



WHAT ROLE YOU WORK WITH

A consulting firm that specializes in working with the finance organization, or human resources, can begin to carve out messaging to separate itself from the pack. However, you might need something deeper—there are plenty of consultants trying to get in front of the CFO, but perhaps you can work with CFOs at non-profits or at law firms (goodness knows they both need the help there!).

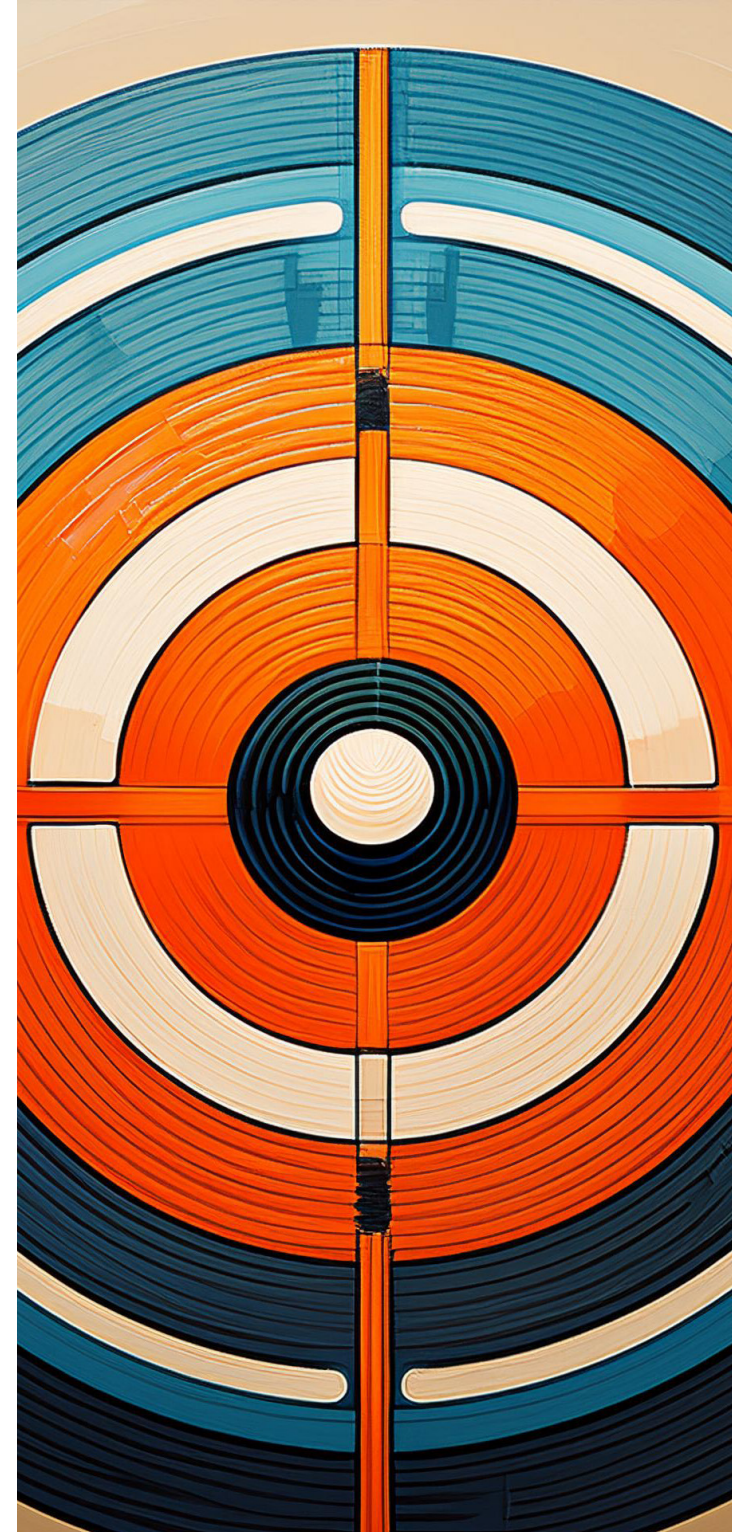
WHAT PROBLEM YOUR CLIENTS ARE TRYING TO SOLVE

Another potential area of specialization is the challenge you help your clients overcome. Do you always get hired when a client faces a specific challenge? For IT consultants, this could be cyber security. For benefits consulting firms, maybe you always get brought in when an employer's RX spend suddenly jumps. If you're known for a specific area of expertise, consider leaning into it.

WHO YOUR CLIENTS' TARGET AUDIENCE IS

Developing a deep understanding of your clients' clients puts you in prime position to lead them. When you can plausibly claim to know their clients better than they do, you're sitting pretty.

An easy example of this is multicultural consulting—"we help you gain access to this unique community." Not everyone will want to access that community ... but plenty will.



WHAT YOUR BRAND PERSONALITY IS

A lot of professional services firms actively try to be boring.

There, we said it.

This very common attitude is rooted in the idea of not being offensive—“if we color inside the same lines as our competition, we won’t be excluded from any work.”

We need to move past this kind of thinking. A, it’s wrong—you will be excluded from possible projects because you are invisible. B, business has changed. Because clients can buy from anywhere in the world, they are looking for someone who thinks and works like them—making it very clear that you are fun, or authoritative, or down-to-earth can be a significant differentiator when everyone else in your universe is no fun, wishy-washy or uptight.

Important caveat—the brand personality you lead with must match your team’s personality. The brand experience must align with the customer experience and the employee experience. If you fail at creating this alignment, people—whether clients or employees—will see right through it.



Chapter 3: Self-examination and understanding what's possible

Before you try to figure out what makes your firm unique among all your competitors, we recommend taking a step back and thinking about the type of firm you are. It's helpful to map out where you are on Harvard Business School Professor Jack Gabarro's Professional Service Spectrum. Gabarro categorizes firms as either commodity firms, procedure firms, gray hair firms or rocket science firms.



Commodity firms typically do large-scale implementations at a relatively low cost. If that's you and you intend to stay in that space, you have fewer differentiation opportunities; price will always be the primary driver for business development.



Procedure firms have a systematic approach to their work, and rely on their specific methodologies every time.



Gray hair firms have plenty of experience and can guide their clients through major, hard-to-define challenges. There are very few things they haven't seen, and they will often win clients by pointing to past successes on similar changes faced by similar firms.



Rocket science firms get the call when a client needs assistance diving into the unknown. They are often more theory-driven big thinkers who can wrap their brains around complex challenges.

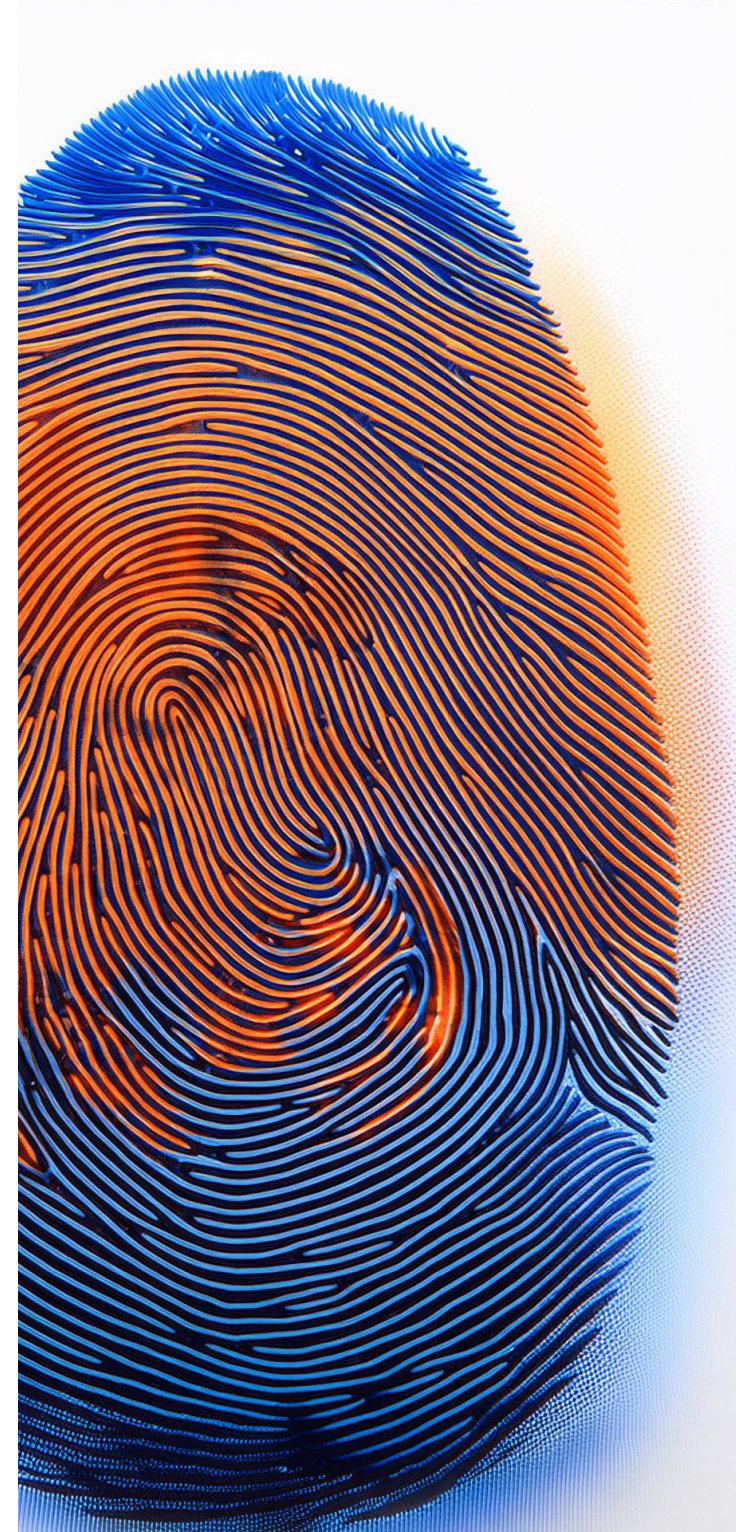
The Professional Service Spectrum

	COMMODITY	PROCEDURE	GRAY HAIR	ROCKET SCIENCE
Client Need	Solving routine, often simple problems	Implementing a complex project with several interrelated parts	Deciding on a major, ill-defined issue which the client has little experience	Addressing a unique and difficult problem with major consequences for the client
Selling Proposition	Low cost	Systematic and comprehensive approach	Track record of dealing with similar problems	Ability to solve complex challenges
Organizational Capabilities	Efficient delivery processes	Methodologies	← Rigorous empirical analysis → Learning from experience ← Knowledge management → State-of-the-art theory	
Professional Skills	Focused execution against specific requirements	Following procedures rigorously and comprehensively	Converting specific knowledge to judgement that's applicable in other settings	Applying theoretical and empirical tools to devise innovative solutions
Profit Drivers	Low Margin High Low Rate High High Utilization Low High Leverage Low			

Credit: Harvard Business Review

You don't have to stay where you are today on this spectrum, but you need to be truthful about where you are before you can consider moving upstream. Once you understand where you are on this spectrum, you'll have a greater understanding of how to move forward.

Wherever you want to be on this spectrum (by the way, dear marketer, this is a C-level business decision, not yours to make solo), that will dictate how you start to talk about yourself in the marketplace. For instance, rocket science firms must demonstrate the depth of their original thinking in the marketplace—it is not enough to say that you have a bunch of really smart people, you have to demonstrate their intelligence in your marketing.



Chapter 4: The right way to differentiate

In our research for this eBook, we stumbled upon this blurb from an insurance broker's website on what "their difference" is:

*We work closely with our clients to understand their risk protection needs, enabling us to secure the right coverage to protect their business and personal assets.
We constantly monitor market conditions to identify opportunities for increased coverage or reduced costs for our clients.*

Really? You help me buy the right insurance? That doesn't sound very different; it sounds like table stakes for any insurance broker.

No doubt, this broker's clients probably feel that they're getting good counsel and superior service. But, based upon what this firm says it does better than all their competition ... I don't think they're any better than their competition.

They have failed.

There are three aspects to determine your firm's differentiation the right way:

1.

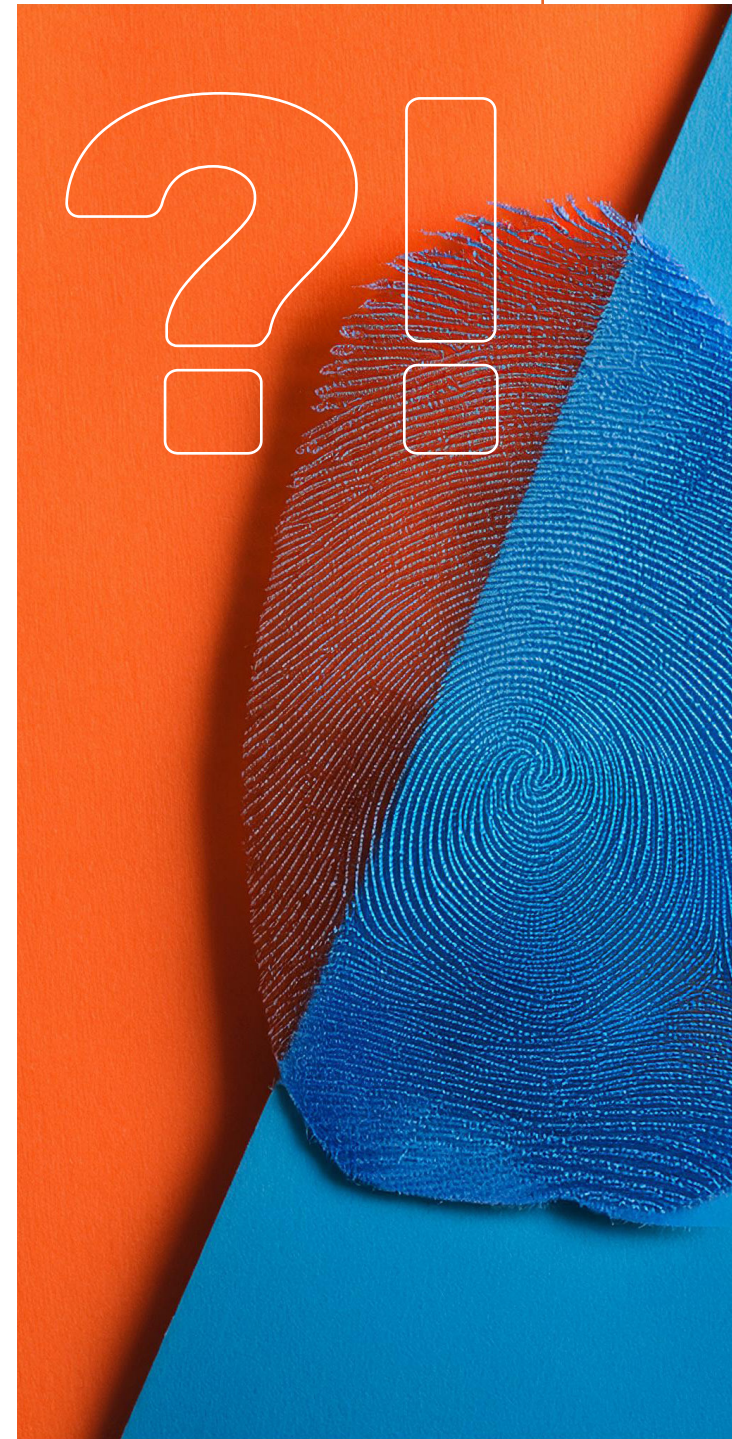
Leadership's view of where you are now and where you'd like to get to

2.

Competitive research to gain a greater understanding of the universe in which you're operating

3.

Insights into what clients care about most



Leadership's view

This first aspect requires both introspection and vision-casting from your leadership team. First, assess where you're at. The questions you're seeking to answer are:

- What skills does our team bring to the table?
- What are we great at? What are we not so good at?
- What do we like doing the best? What do we not like doing?
- What are our team's best attributes?
- Is there anything we do in a way that none of our competitors do?
- What clients do we historically work best with, and what are their similarities?
- What is the revenue breakdown across clients and industries?
- How would we categorize the work we do according to the professional service spectrum? What percentage of our work is commodity work? Procedure work? Gray hair work? Rocket science work?
- What do we want to be in five years?
- Where do we think our clients are headed?



Competitive research

The second aspect of the differentiation process is to look at your competitors. What can you find out about them?

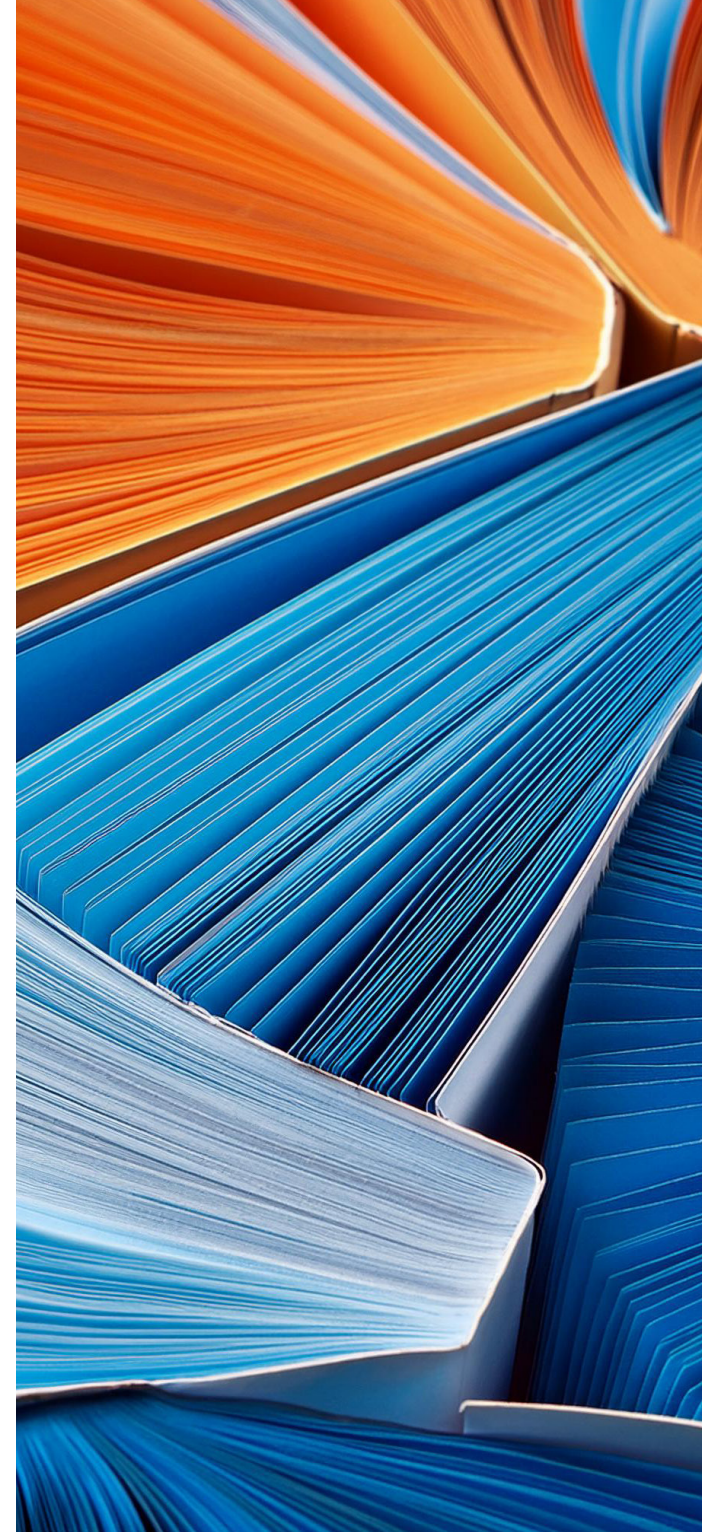
Identify five to 10 competitors—the firms you bump into when you're selling, firms you admire, firms that already have a toehold in an industry or service offering that you want to move toward, or maybe even that big firm that you hate but that seems to win a lot of business you'd like.

Search for information on these competitors' websites and social media channels. Check to see if they are running ads with industry media outlets, including podcasts. Subscribe to their emails. Investigate whether they're investing heavily in trade shows, or producing webinars. See what clients and employees are saying on review sites like Glassdoor. And, sometimes, you might know someone who will share a competitor's proposal—always a fascinating read!

Dig into these materials and catalog things like:

- Their messaging
- Their mission and vision
- Your thoughts on their brand identity and voice
- Any specialization they have
- Case studies and testimonials

Drop this information in a spreadsheet. Plot their attributes graphically if you can.



Insights

Now, let's tackle the third piece—trying to put aside all of your insider knowledge and get an idea of what clients think and what's important to them. You want to identify what your ideal future client cares most about.

This isn't easy—looking at your business from the outside in demands empathy and understanding of your potential clients' situation and what's important to them.

Somehow, you need to get an outside perspective. There are a number of ways to do this.

Perhaps the most obvious is to hire an outside consultant or agency. A good outside voice will assess what your positioning is currently and recommend ways to better define it. Double down on these things; stop doing those things. Their job will be to apply rigor to your messaging, but also to be clear about any business transformations that need to take place—when you narrow your focus you might need different skills on your team, and you will absolutely need to begin communicating differently to the marketplace.

Another approach is to conduct a survey of potential clients who are not your clients today. You can do this yourself or hire a survey company to handle it.

You could also decide that you don't want to pay for original research and do a bunch of secondary research to understand what potential buyers care about. Depending on your business, there is likely plenty to find.

Determining what truly makes your firm different requires that you be both introspective about your strengths and be able to look out into the world and see what it's saying and where things are going.

Chapter 5: Proving your competitive advantage

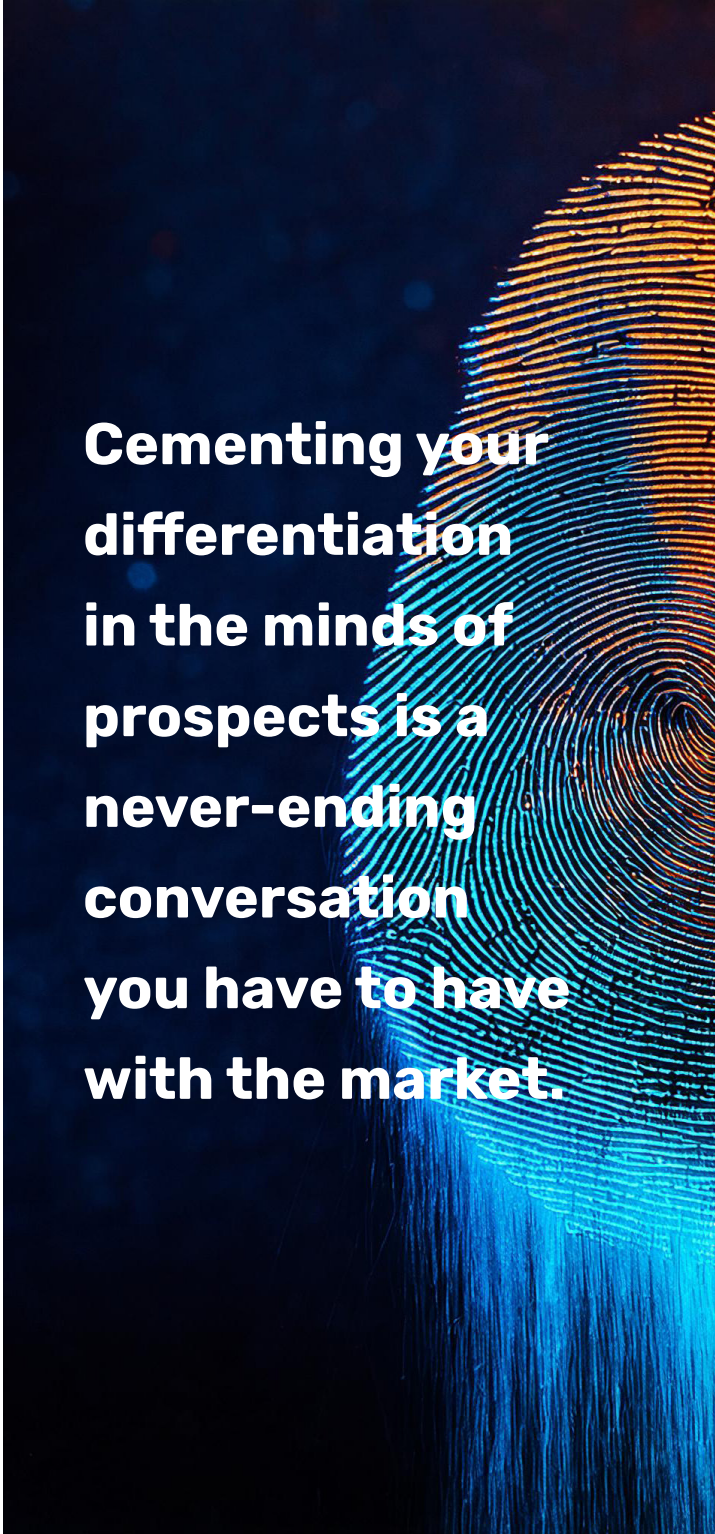
You are paying attention to your firm every day. Your clients and prospects are not.

Your clients' universe does not revolve around your company. Clients are focused on their own lives and jobs.

Your marketing must focus on building and sustaining a relationship with prospective clients. As every adult knows, relationships require work, and the work never ends. Cementing your differentiation in the minds of prospects is a never-ending conversation you have to have with the market.

This does not mean saying the exact same thing all the time. It means supporting your differentiated message in new and interesting ways. If your focus is on being the benefits consulting firm for life sciences startups, do an annual survey of those companies and create a report on the benefits they offer. If you're an IT consulting firm serving nonprofits in Chicago, create an event for them to provide education around emerging cyber issues and AI.

Creating these types of thought leadership focused on your target market will lead to increased knowledge for your team, create goodwill with the community you serve and lead to smarter, deeper conversations with prospects.



Cementing your differentiation in the minds of prospects is a never-ending conversation you have to have with the market.

Chapter 6: The business impact of differentiation

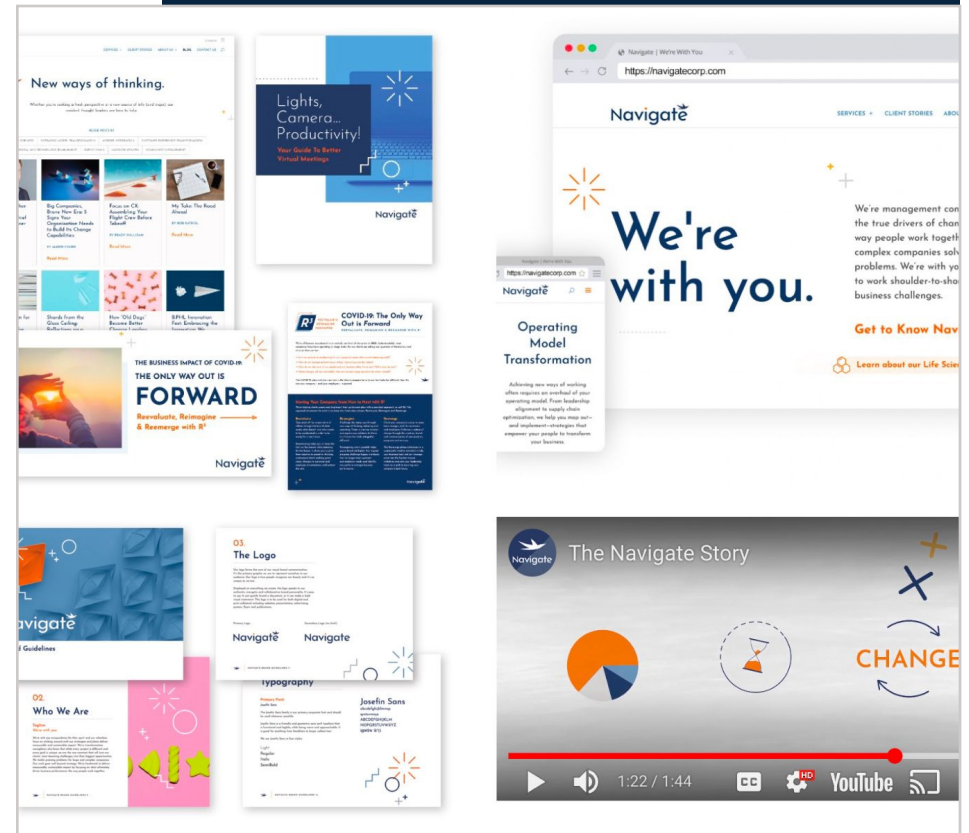
Case Study: Navigate

After a decade of success, growth had stagnated for management consulting firm **Navigate**. They were indistinguishable from every other boutique management consulting firm.

Scribewise helped them to bring this revamped approach to life with a refreshed brand—a new visual identity and a new thought leadership-oriented website. All of this work was driven by a new brand voice that reflected the collective personality of the people who work at Navigate—fun, smart, authoritative but not uptight.

We helped them implement an account-based marketing strategy, focused on authoritative thought leadership content tailored for specific prospects.

Peer-to-peer content distribution on LinkedIn deepened existing client relationships and created new opportunities. Over 18 months, Navigate changed internal business development behaviors and exceeded their new business goals, reigniting substantial growth.



Case Study: Corporate Synergies

Benefits consulting firms are all selling the same product from the same set of companies—health insurance. Most market themselves as providing superior service and saving you money. Neither of these attributes are provable differentiators. Corporate Synergies is different—their consultants are true consultants, not mere brokers. They understand the world of health insurance well enough to guide their clients to smarter benefits plans.

No company can just say “we’re smart,” and be believed; you have to demonstrate it over time. And it helps if a disinterested third party verifies your smarts.

Scribewise implemented a thought leadership-driven media relations strategy to elevate the Corporate Synergies brand by ghostwriting smart, compelling thought leadership and placing articles in vertical industry media. Over a decade, this strategy led to hundreds of published articles, boosting Corporate Synergies’ credibility and generating substantial new business.



ABOUT SCRIBEWISE

For more than a decade, Scribewise has worked shoulder to shoulder with professional services firms like yours to make them unignorable. Through thought leadership and demand generation programs, we elevate your profile to position you for growth. Our team excels at humanizing complex business conversations to build sustainable, trust-based relationships with your ideal clients to change the trajectory of your company.

Learn more at www.scribewise.com

