

# Want To Influence Client Audiences?



## Know What They Want From You

Standing out and building trust with clients is hard. Make it easier by knowing what matters most to client audience members: seeing themselves in your stories.

**By Michael J. Reilly, FSMPS**

Marketing leaders thrive on informing, helping, and influencing clients. As communicators, we spend a lot of time, plus an overabundance of angst, trying to break through the noise with thoughtful content.

This quest isn't an easy thing to pull off. Reaching client audiences and establishing a trusted advisor position that leads to future revenue are universal challenges for every professional service organization.

Why is it so hard? As marketers in a fast-paced digital age, we know that audience attention spans are short and growing shorter. Audiences also have more social channels, media platforms, and favored sources of information and entertainment than ever, including their favorite podcasts, news sites, content streaming, and special interest sites. They face the same daily challenge we do—time. And like us, our client's tolerance for even the slightest whiff of a sales pitch or promotional message is short-lived.



**Clients want to hear from you as a brand if you're there to help them solve a problem.**

—Kelly Frederickson, MullenLowe

Kelly Frederickson, president of the New York and Boston offices of MullenLowe, succinctly explains the challenge. “Clients want to hear from you as a brand if you’re there to help them solve a problem,” she says.

So, what do most companies default to when they try to influence information-overloaded clients? They produce promotional content: project profiles, staff interviews, and company news highlights with the company cast as the protagonist in the story. While some of this content is newsworthy and it’s nice to showcase creative work, a steady stream of all-about-us is likely to prompt the wrong response from clients: tuning out.

## Test for Relevance and Craft Client Personas

To achieve a higher level of connection with a desired audience, ask yourself, “What was the last piece of content that piqued my curiosity and sparked a response?” Maybe you shared an online video, blog post, or survey findings with colleagues. Perhaps you thought about a problem differently and began taking specific steps based on what you saw, read, or learned. Let that experience spark your creative energy and inspire you to aim high.

When you begin the collaboration and topic selection with your team, push for relevance by asking questions. Ask them what they enjoy most about the content they see and value. Take them out of their comfort zone and into the day-to-day world of the people you want to reach.

Another relevance exercise is to craft a client persona for specific audience understanding and relevance. A persona is a composite profile of your buyer/client and their common aspirations, problems, and values. These client persona needs are based on your research and interaction, not on assumptions, and are

developed to help zero in on what that client audience member cares about.

Without this step, it’s hard to reach a shared view of relevance. In professional services firms, we’ve seen how content ideas originate based on what practitioners know best, without considering what the client is thinking or worrying about.

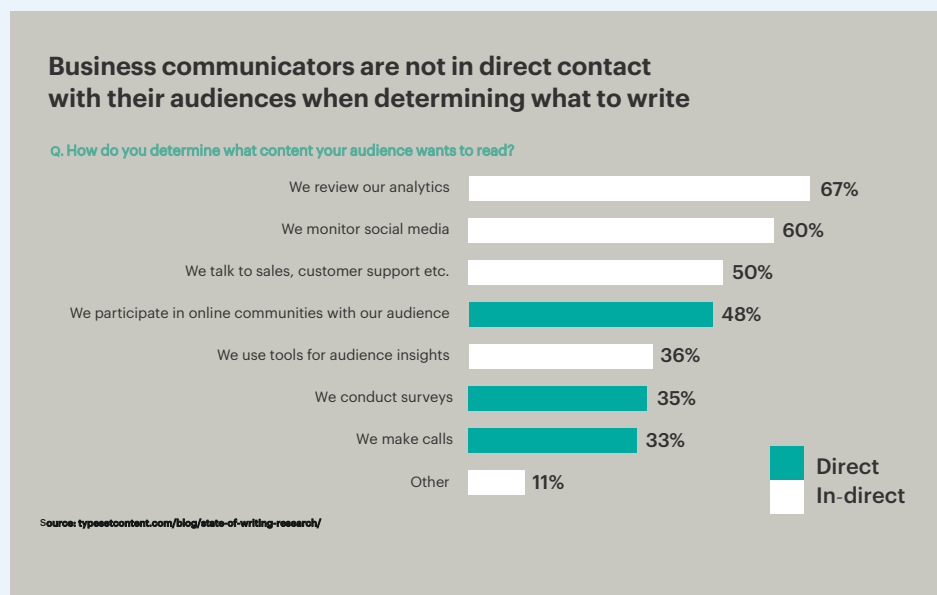
## Start With Them, Not You

If your team is new to client personas, you can reveal a lot about audience needs with a practical approach on client communications. Begin with one powerful question: Based on our knowledge of this audience, what two or three things do they need to know about this topic to solve a problem or change their perception?



**Earn 1 CPSM CEU by answering questions about this article. See Page 1 for details.**

**Figure 1. Courtesy Typeset® and Mantis Research.**





Five Keys School on Wheels, Oakland, CA. Designing Justice + Designing Spaces. ©Emily Hagopian Photography, [emilyhagopian.com](http://emilyhagopian.com).

**From the photographer:** Supporting the advancement of social justice keeps my blood pumping. It helps me balance the commercial work I more regularly shoot. I take great pleasure collaborating with Designing Justice + Designing Spaces to help them spread the message that social justice requires justice within the design community.

Suppose your topic is a call to action on sustainable buildings, and your audience is commercial real estate (CRE) professionals who own, manage, or invest in commercial properties in a coastal region. Using this exercise will clarify how to frame the story. CRE executives need to see themselves, their properties, and their future decisions in your story.

Bring the story to them. Instead of framing your call to action around the global consequences of climate change procrastination or the urgency of a 2030 commitment, show them the cost exposure and business continuity risks that rising seas tangibly present. Locate and include visuals—models and illustrations that show flooding impacts in commercial districts they recognize. If rising seas and storm-related flooding isn't a risk for them, provide objective information and a heads-up on what new energy consumption reporting and other regulatory changes in their state, city, or county will require and how they can prepare for them.



**It's so easy to get wrapped up in the message that you're trying to send, you end up with tunnel-vision and forget that the best marketing isn't about the brand, it's about the customer.**

—Dr. Jillian Ney, digital behavioral scientist,  
The Social Intelligence Lab

## Identify Interests and Problems

The dilemma I hear about most often from marketing professionals is the difficulty in pinpointing their clients' experiences, problems, and interests. Survey results from Mantis Research and Typeset<sup>1</sup> help illustrate why (See Figure 1). Nearly four in 10 content writers reported that "knowing what their audience wants to read" is a considerable challenge. While 67% of the survey participants look at audience analytics and 60% monitor social media, only about one-third had direct contact with their audience via surveys and phone conversations.

This deficit is a hidden opportunity for marketing leadership. By taking the initiative and leading the effort to gather essential client insights, marketing and communications professionals become the stewards of the customer experience. Who is better prepared to take on this role and guide your firm in gathering and using client intelligence than the marketing and communications team?

There are tons of examples of how to do this research and interest identification.\* Marketing teams need to create a tradition in their firm, if it doesn't yet exist, of taking a deeper dive into a market sector or client type through interviews, focus groups, online surveys, and post-occupancy queries. These client initiatives are less about "How are we doing on the project?" and more about "What keeps you up at night?" Note the pronoun transition here: from *we* to *you*.

In addition to primary research sources, pay attention to the client/owner research done by



\*Editor's note: See "Searching for a Deeper Truth: A Contrarian Take on Client Research," Michael J. Reilly, FSMPS, and Ryan Farias, *Marketer*, June 2020, [mysmps.org](https://mysmps.org).

## Resources

<sup>1</sup> "State of Writing in 2021: Writing is hard," Sarah Mitchell, *Typeset*, April 28, 2021. [typesetcontent.com/blog/state-of-writing-research](https://typesetcontent.com/blog/state-of-writing-research)

<sup>2</sup> "2021 Hospital Construction Survey: Hospitals and contractors take on pandemic-related building and design challenges," Jamie Morgan and Beth Burmahl, *Health Facilities Management*, American Society for Health Care Engineering, April 22, 2021. [hfmjournal.com/articles/4148-2021-hospital-construction-survey](https://hfmjournal.com/articles/4148-2021-hospital-construction-survey)

<sup>3</sup> "2021 Owners Survey Report," *Building Design+Construction*, 2021, SGC Horizon. [bdcnetwork.com/form/download-bdcs-2021-owners-survey-report](https://bdcnetwork.com/form/download-bdcs-2021-owners-survey-report)

<sup>4</sup> "Empathy in Content Marketing," The Social Intelligence Lab and Meltwater Solutions, Dr. Jillian Ney. [meltwater.com/en/resources/empathy-in-content-marketing](https://meltwater.com/en/resources/empathy-in-content-marketing)



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dozens of professional associations and publishers. These surveys and research results are typically produced annually and provide a valuable look at the pain points experienced by clients. In the health care sector, for example, the American Society for Health Care Engineering's *Health Facilities Management Survey*<sup>2</sup> each April, providing data sourced from more than 400 healthcare facilities professionals. And the editors of *Building Design+Construction* recently published their "2021 Owner's Survey Report."<sup>3</sup>

## Apply Empathy and Emotion

Once we know more about the interests and challenges of our client audience, we can open the door to communicating the human side of any issue we tackle. Persuasive and effective communications come to life when we tap into issues and emotions we know are in play. Empathy in our content shows the audience that we get it.

In a whitepaper report titled, *Empathy in Content Marketing*,<sup>4</sup> author and digital behavioral scientist Dr. Jillian Ney of The Social Intelligence Lab describes the potential. "Empathy is a key element of emotional intelligence, providing the link between the self and others. Cognitive empathy makes us better communicators, helping us to relate information in a way that best connects with the other person."

As an example of applying empathy, a design firm could advise their nonprofit clients about how to creatively integrate a fundraising and donor campaign within the planning and design schedule. The content team knows from their research and interviews how vital and scary the fundraising challenge is to the success of the client's project. To ease the uncertainty, the team integrates key tactics and lessons learned from multiple nonprofit experiences to provide new ideas, excitement, and community engagement on a fledgling project.

Employing empathy also allows a subtle shift in how the audience receives the information. Consider how most business communications are done in a factual, linear style. The approach, while safe, trades off emotional resonance for rational discourse. This neither offends nor excites anyone. Adopting more of a storytelling style—one that conveys curiosity, human conflict, learning, and adaptation in the face of conflict—shows how we embrace the experience of joining with the reader, viewer, or listener to achieve something great together.

Benjamin Franklin, who wrote *Poor Richard's Almanack* 250 years before the emergence of persuasion theory and content marketing, was ahead of the curve when he said, "If you would persuade, appeal to interest and not to reason." In striving for client influence in the digital arena, this may be the perfect time to act on his advice. ■