

Buyer Insights Research

How to Understand Your Buyers
So You Can Eliminate the Guesswork

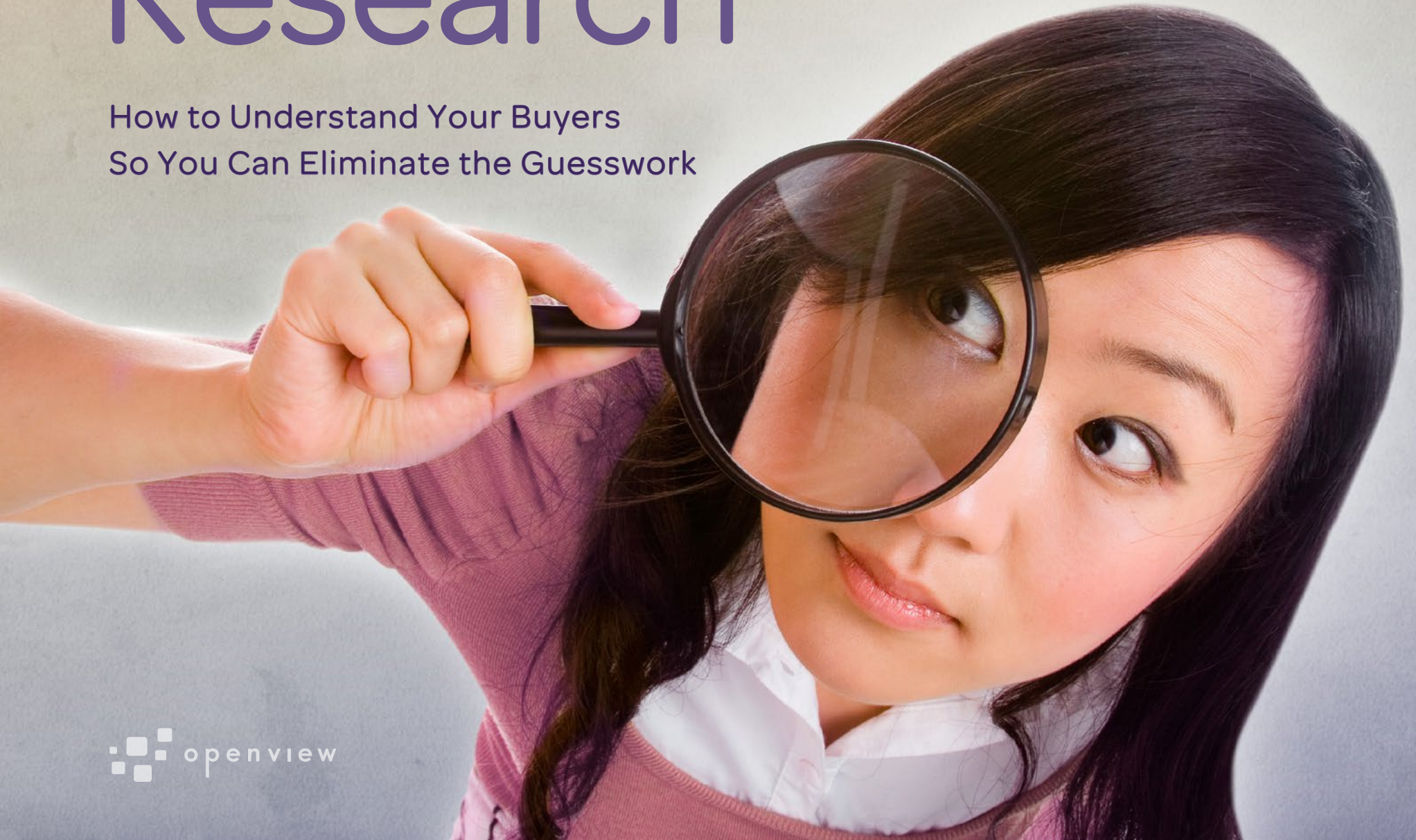


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Foreword

When global market intelligence firm IDC released its Buyer Experience Survey in late 2012,¹ the data it revealed about buying trends among technology purchasers and vendors had to make B2B tech company founders shudder.

Despite technological advancements that should improve the efficiency of the B2B buying process, IDC found that the B2B technology buying cycle is now 20 percent longer than it was just four years ago. Worse yet, that process may grow longer as more complex solutions come on the market and buyers are forced to invest additional time analyzing how those solutions can solve their problems.

The good news is that IDC also discovered that B2B technology buyers — despite misconceptions to the contrary — do aspire to speed up that buying process. To do that, however, B2B technology sellers — not buyers — must first improve their understanding of their target buyers' unique needs and challenges, and deliver relevant information that squarely addresses those issues.

Sounds easy enough, doesn't it?

It can be, but not every B2B technology company is willing to invest the time and resources necessary to discover what individual buyers in their target markets care about most. The problem with that approach, of course, is that it paints your buyers with broad strokes that may or may not accurately reflect who they are, their needs, and buying processes. As a result, companies often miss their targets.

An accurate reflection of what buyers are attempting to accomplish, why solving problems or meeting objectives is important, and how they go about making purchase decisions can be the difference between surviving and closing shop. B2B technology companies are facing the full force of a buyer revolution today. Buying behaviors and buying processes are changing rapidly with the introduction of new technology, which has shifted the landscape of power and control into buyers' hands.

Today's go-to-market strategies must be insight-based and centered on buyer understanding. Product-centric approaches no longer get you the ear of buyers willing to listen. To be effective, B2B technology companies need to build core competencies in acquiring buyer insights. Those insights are needed more than ever today to inform how companies go to market and ensure they are speaking the same language as their buyers.

¹ [The 2012 IT Buyer Experience Survey: Accelerating the New Buyer's Journey](#), IDC USA.

In “Buyer Insights Research: How to Understand Your Buyers So You Can Eliminate the Guesswork,” OpenView gives B2B technology companies a path to building such competencies. The eBook provides a systematic research and insight generation process aimed at helping them to better understand specific buyers’ paths to purchase. By reading it, responsible teams will be able to execute the types of tailored sales, marketing, and product strategies that drive conversion and improve customer retention.

In many ways, the goal of the research and insight generation process that OpenView lays out in this eBook is to remove much of the guesswork and inefficiency from the B2B buying process for buyers and sellers alike. Buyer-seller dynamics are being redefined as buyers seek more than just a product provider. Their need for buying efficiency comes with higher expectations and standards on the part of sellers, who must now provide insight into how to make a buyer’s business more efficient.

To be a market contender today you have to know what your customers are attempting to accomplish and how they think. You also need to possess deep insights into how, when, where, and why your customers make buying decisions. If you do, you will understand the path to purchase your buyers follow when making the decision to buy. Having those insights will not only lead to a speedier buying cycle, but also to happier, more satisfied customers.



Tony Zambito,
[Founder of Buyer Personas](#)

Chapter 1:

Understanding the Power and Purpose of Buyer Insights

Many B2B companies use the terms customer segmentation and buyer insights research interchangeably. It's a seemingly innocent mistake — both are research tactics that companies can use to focus on understanding their target customers' characteristics, such as their interests, tendencies, and pain points.

In reality, segmentation and buyer research aren't at all synonymous in the B2B space, and using one term in place of the other can prevent you from effectively analyzing your market (or specific buyers within it) in a systematic and meaningful way.

Whereas customer segmentation research evaluates the various organizations that make up your target market, buyer insights research analyzes learnings from specific people within those organizations who are responsible for making buying decisions. Put another way, segmentation paints a broad picture of the faceless organization that you should be selling to. Buyer research takes things a step further, giving those organizations within your target segment a name, face, and profile that you can use to better understand them.

Although the term business to business is widely used, it's important to remember that it isn't the businesses conducting transactions. It's the buyers within those organizations — living, breathing people with individual pain points, interests, and goals.

Understanding these people and the paths they take to purchasing your product is crucial to the success of any B2B solution. That's why your go-to-market strategy shouldn't revolve around your software, company, or salespeople, but rather around your buyer. The best strategies make it clear that the product solves the buyer's core problem better than any other solution because it is tailored to his or her specific needs, objections, and process.

Achieving this level of understanding takes more than just critical thinking. It requires systematic research. This eBook illustrates how expansion-stage technology companies can conduct that research.

Admittedly, OpenView certainly isn't the first to write about buyer insights research. Buyer personas, complete with fictional names and pictures, are a common tool in the arsenal of virtually every marketing department in the Fortune 500. However, in our experience, much of the existing buyer persona literature falls short because it:

- » Is geared toward larger companies with larger budgets
- » Is over-generalized across both B2B and B2C
- » Misses many of the steps you will need to execute the project in a real-world environment
- » Doesn't address the organizational complexity of business buyers
- » Doesn't reveal how a prospect might move along the path to purchase over time

We have found that expansion-stage companies are intimidated by the quantity of information typically gathered in buyer insights research projects — especially demographic data, where it is difficult to translate how it will positively impact their revenues. And they are right to be skeptical. In most B2B settings, fluffy demographic information won't help you. Buying decisions are made in the context of a complex buying process with very specific technical requirements, none of which can be inferred from a superficial understanding of the buyer's demographic characteristics.

This guide, which is intended for senior executives at expansion-stage software companies who understand that insights into their buyers and their buyer journey are essential to their go-to-market strategy, delivers this and other crucial information in a way that allows a small staff with limited resources to quickly execute relevant and actionable research. While not the focus of this eBook, it is important to note that there are other types of research that you can conduct to gain insights into your buyers. For example, you can also learn about your buyers by studying the influencers and sales and marketing channels that influence them during the buying process or by researching your competitors' and target partners' impressions of them. These additional approaches to buyer insights research will be covered in a separate, forthcoming eBook.

“As technology companies begin experiencing rapid growth, customer research becomes an essential function that informs strategic and operational decision-making. Yet it often takes a back seat due to resource constraints. OpenView has developed a systematic research approach to help you gain valuable insights from customers and prospects as efficiently and effectively as possible.”



Tien Anh Ngyuen, Senior Associate, OpenView Venture Partners

The following pages outline all of the phases of a buyer insights research project, beginning with the scoping and planning that are essential to a smooth project, as well as how to execute the meat of the project, which includes interviews with actual buyers in your target segment. Finally, we will help you distill those interviews into insights and work with your colleagues to maximize their impact.

While the full range of insight you will gather from buyer research about your buyers depends on your company's specific needs, a typical project will increase your organization's understanding of some or all of the following areas:

- » The distinct buying roles that exist in an organization, their common traits and how to identify them, and the process for addressing their specific concerns and needs.
- » The different stages in the customer's buying process, including when each internal role should become involved, and the triggers or events at each stage that may move buyers closer to the end of the buying process.
- » The most important product features or characteristics related to your buyers' business goals and objectives.
- » How each type of buyer acquires information on products like yours, and how they evaluate such solutions.
- » The alternative or competitive solutions that buyers consider, and how they compare to yours.

Gaining insight and clarity on the items above will ultimately supercharge your go-to-market strategy and execution in numerous ways. From a strategic perspective, knowing who your best prospects are will help your sales and marketing teams become more sharply focused on targeting them. That will help you have greater impact on the *right* prospects.

Additionally, having mutually accepted and institutionalized knowledge of your buyers allows sales and marketing teams to speak the same language, which will promote quicker agreement on tactics, campaigns, and resources, and improve the collaboration on and the efficiency of those activities.



“There is a vacuum of insight into how buyers make decisions to buy the company's products, a competitor's, or no one's at all. That's because no one, in the normal course of business, has the exposure to the buyers' thinking that this role requires. In fact, the only way to gain the needed non-obvious insights is to engage directly with buyers through unscripted conversations. The interviewer must skillfully probe beyond the buyers' first answers to get to as-yet unarticulated facts about how and why buyers make the choices the company wants to impact.”

Adele Revella, President,
Buyer Persona Institute, Inc.

Why Your Company Should Be Conducting Buyer Insights Research

A buyer insights research project will provide your company with strategic and actionable information about your buyers, thereby enhancing the focus, efficiency, and effectiveness of your go-to-market activities. It accomplishes this in the following ways:

- 1** **Introducing a more customer-centric way of thinking across your company:** Conducting buyer insights research is a way to put yourself in the customer's shoes and try to understand why they would purchase your product. Framing and evaluating the elements of your go-to-market strategy — messaging, positioning, pricing, sales and marketing channels — from the customer's perspective is immensely helpful because it allows you to discover and truly deliver what the customer wants.
- 2** **Improving your customer acquisition effectiveness through a greater understanding of buyers' pain points:** Conducting a buyer insights project allows you to be far more targeted in your outreach to prospects, build messages that will resonate with the right set of buyers, and be more efficient in the channels and media you use to reach them. Having this focus is essential to success for expansion-stage companies that are constantly strapped for resources and are competing against much better established rivals. Having such strong focus also lets your go-to-market strategy become extremely agile and responsive to market movement, a key competitive advantage.
- 3** **Allowing sales and marketing teams to focus on the decision-makers within a target company and their key influencers:** High-growth companies are often focused on rapidly expanding into new markets, new channels, and new customers, meaning that their sales and marketing team members typically have more work to do than they can handle. That's why they need to be sharply focused at all times. By understanding who in the buying process plays the most important roles and what their needs are, the team can allocate its limited resources most efficiently, creating more impact and ultimately leading to better sales and marketing results.

4

Helping your sales and marketing team understand the often subtle distinctions between different roles in the buying process:

In some ways, the most difficult thing about customer acquisition in complex software sales is information asymmetry, i.e., a lack of clarity and transparency between buyers and vendors. One typical manifestation of information asymmetry is a lack of knowledge on the specific role each buyer plays in the process and his or her relative importance at each stage. Those roles could include technical and economic buyers, users, and executive sponsors. Having a nuanced understanding of these roles will help you tailor your messaging and outreach to best resonate with them.

5

Building your pipeline through more targeted and more effective messaging: Just as having more clarity and insights into the buying roles helps the sales team focus its time and efforts more effectively, having targeted messaging is essential for successful marketing campaigns and demand generation efforts. Having validated insights on the right offers to make and the right hot-button issues to address in marketing materials will go a long way toward ensuring the success and effectiveness of the marketing dollars you are spending.

6

Allowing you to create compelling product package and pricing schemes for prospects in your target market segments: Product-centric organizations typically are very feature- and performance-focused, but often miss out on another crucial aspect of product marketing: developing product package and pricing levels and structures that are most suitable and attractive to their target customers. This can only be done with direct input and feedback from participants in the market. Gaining these insights and incorporating them into your product package will give you an enormous advantage in the market by reducing friction in the buying process and making your product's value proposition more compelling to prospective buyers.

7

Enhancing product and services delivery to improve customer success and retention: Having a better understanding of your buyers' needs will help your product team build products that meet their needs in a timely fashion, and help your services team to offer activities that truly align with their interests. When done well, these feedback loops ensure that your customers are always happy with the product, and that they ultimately become its advocates, further enhancing your relationship with them.

Buyer Insights Project Roles

Executing a buyer insights project is truly a team effort. While one person can conduct the research and analysis, driving real change across your organization using the results will require broad-based, cross-functional support. Additionally, the collective knowledge held by your organization can be a considerable asset to the project.

There are three main roles necessary to execute a buyer insights project. Although one person can hold multiple roles, it's important that the roles are explicitly identified early on, and that each of them is held by at least one person:



Stakeholders (Director Level and up in Marketing, Sales, and Product): The stakeholders in this project are senior managers in a range of business functions that involve direct interaction with buyers. They are responsible for sales, marketing, customer service, or even product management, and typically have some level of responsibility related to customer acquisition or retention. Because the outcome of the project will directly affect their team, goals, and strategies, it's very important that they are both committed to the project and excited for the results. They are also responsible for committing their teams' resources and time in support of the project.



Project Owner (VP Level/Head of Marketing): The project owner is typically a senior manager of the marketing or sales organization, and is generally also a key stakeholder. His or her primary responsibility is to act as the project's sponsor, building support and buy-in among the stakeholders for the project and its methodology. This responsibility is important not only in the initial phases but throughout the project, right up to the delivery of the final recommendations and oversight of their implementation. As the champion of the project, the project owner shares with the researcher the responsibility for the quality and impact of the final delivery, and the two roles should meet frequently to review results and adjust the work plan if necessary.



Researcher (Director Level and Below in Marketing/Product Marketing): The researcher will have the most involvement in the project and is responsible for the majority of the conclusions and output. In some cases, the researcher and project owner will be the same person, but if not, the researcher likely reports to the project owner and should be closely aligned with his or her vision for the project. Most research steps, including generating call scripts and target lists, the calls themselves, surveys, analysis, and presentation of results, should be conducted by the researcher(s). For some of these steps, the researcher may benefit from a second opinion or review by the project owner.

See pages 54 and 55 in the Appendix for checklists for each of these roles.

How Buyer Insights Research Fits into Your Go-to-Market Strategy

Buyer insights belong at the center of your go-to-market strategy; however, they are not an end point. Understanding who your buyers are and what motivates their purchasing decisions opens the door for more granular research into adjacent aspects of your go-to-market strategy.

When you conduct a buyer insights research project, you will likely learn the types of other technology products that your buyers are using. This information will lay the groundwork for a more thorough dive into the technology ecosystem you sell into, which in turn can help generate ideas for strategic partnerships. Likewise, you may learn the names of some of the people or publications that influence your buyers, which can be further explored in a marketing channel discovery project. In general, buyer research informs and serves as a launching point for each of the more detailed facets of your go-to-market strategy.



Is Your Business Ready for a Buyer Insights Project?

Given the scope and the resources necessary to execute a buyer insights project, this is not an initiative you should take lightly. Before getting started, it is important to make sure that you have the manpower and bandwidth to take it on, and that you have already conducted customer segmentation research. Without segmentation, after all, the universe of potential buyers that you could research would be far too large to analyze effectively in a systematic way.

If you have the time and resources to execute this project, the information laid out in the coming chapters should provide everything you need to complete buyer insights research from start to finish. In the following chapter, for instance, we will cover steps for planning out the project and achieving stakeholder buy-in, while Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will provide a step-by-step guide for conducting research, analyzing data, and implementing results.

Ultimately, you should have a comprehensive understanding of how your product is bought and sold, which will allow you to pinpoint which organizations to approach, who to approach within them, and how to communicate with those people.



Case Study: ProBill Legal

Meet Tony, a fictional product marketing manager at ProBill, a SaaS professional services billing vendor with \$6 million in revenues. ProBill's new product, ProBill Legal, is designed specifically for law firms with fewer than 30 attorneys. The software has a portal for attorneys to input their hours billed to each client as well as a management portal for analytics and to facilitate billing.

Tony's VP of marketing, Heather, has asked him to do some research into the buyers in ProBill Legal's target segment to understand what makes them tick, and will be serving as the project owner. We will follow Tony throughout this eBook as he conducts a buyer insights research project, giving examples of his decisions and output along the way.

Chapter 2:

3 Steps to Planning and Preparing for Buyer Insights Research

Beginning buyer insights research without really understanding the time, money, and people necessary to execute it is akin to diving into a pool headfirst without gauging the depth of the water. You might be fine, but the safer bet is to do a little bit of homework before you put your health (or life) on the line.

This chapter will cover the planning and preparation you need to do before launching into full-fledged research mode. From creating an approved work plan that gives everyone a clear picture of what the project will entail, to deciding which questions the project will answer, every step in this planning phase is critical to the ultimate success of your buyer insights research.

1

Creating a Problem Statement and Work Plan

Before conducting any research, you will want to start by thoroughly scoping and planning out the project. Depending on your organization and level of organization-wide commitment, this may be a quick process lasting only a couple of days and involving several colleagues, or it could be a much larger effort.

Either way, the output is the same: an approved problem statement and work plan detailing the time, people, and resources that you will need to execute the project. The problem statement is a one-page document that explains at a high level why you are conducting the project as well as the methodology you plan to use to execute it. The work plan is a more detailed document that goes through each necessary step in the buyer insights research process, detailing how long each will take, who is involved, and outlining the project's dependencies and outputs. Perhaps most importantly, the planning phase is where you decide which questions need to be answered over the course of the project.

It's also an opportunity to build support for the project and get commitment from your stakeholders. The project owner will be crucial in this endeavor. If you lack a senior presence to secure buy-in and keep the ball rolling, the project has a chance to drag on, miss key input from stakeholders, or fall flat once complete.

2 Evaluating the Scope of the Project

The first step in the project-planning phase is to evaluate the depth and scope of the project you are about to undertake. To develop a problem statement that truly captures the most important issues to be addressed, you should consider doing research and brief interviews with stakeholders to answer the following questions:

- » What are the gaps in your go-to-market strategy?
- » What key buyer information are you missing?
- » Is a buyer insights project the best way to accomplish your objectives?
- » What are the project's constraints?
- » What is the expected impact?
- » What is the output?
- » Who will directly benefit from the output?
- » Which customer segments are you interested in?
- » How much research do you need to conduct for the results to be credible?
- » What is the project's overall budget and structure for interview compensation?

More detailed explanations of each of these questions are listed on pages 56–63 in the Appendix.

Seeking stakeholder input early on to help answer these key questions will help you frame your project, set stakeholder expectations, and drive their continued interest in your output. Their input may also expose the need for additional research projects outside of the scope of buyer insights for you to consider later on.



Using your stakeholders' answers, create two documents:



A problem statement that outlines in one page why you are conducting the project and how you plan to execute it. A problem statement typically has five components:

- » Central Question — What is the high-level purpose of the project?
- » Context — Why is the project necessary? What knowledge is it building on?
- » Constraints — What time, resources, and manpower limits are there on the project?
- » Scope — Given those restraints, what can realistically be covered?
- » Output — What are the concrete pieces of output that the project will produce?

These questions should be explicitly answered to your stakeholders' satisfaction before moving forward. For an example of a buyer insights research problem statement, see the callout on page 17.



Along with the problem statement, you should also create and circulate a work plan. This document provides a more detailed itemization of the actions you will need to take to accomplish the goals outlined in your problem statement. A work plan typically contains four pieces of information:

- » A very concrete description of each step in the process
- » The timing for each step
- » The number of hours it will take to complete each step
- » The people who will be involved in completing each step

See page 18 for an example.

Since you will likely need to revise both the problem statement and the work plan as you execute the project, don't spend too much time making this a visually attractive document. These are meant to be high-level documents that summarize the project and get everyone on the same page.

Achieving Stakeholder Buy-In

Since much of the direct impact of the project will come from changes made by the stakeholders after the research has been completed and delivered, stakeholder buy-in and commitment is extremely important. Without getting major stakeholders on board with the work plan from day one, you may not have the pull to accomplish certain key steps of the research. Worse yet, your hard-won results may gather dust without ever making an impact.

The best way to avoid this is to get complete clarity from the beginning of the project. Circulate the work plan, listen to and incorporate feedback, and take the time to understand what output the stakeholders would find most useful and how they plan to use it. Update them regularly to foster a sense of ownership and flesh out any discrepancies between the actual project and their expectations.

 The best projects involve stakeholders who are informed, aligned, and excited.

Here are some simple steps you can take to ensure buy-in from your stakeholders during and after your presentation of the work plan:

- » E-mail the key stakeholders an introduction to the project with some very high-level bullet points about its purpose and goals
- » Host a brainstorming session at the start of the project. Introduce the rationale for the project, the anticipated outputs, and the process you will use. Ask for feedback from your stakeholders. Seek their input on what are nice-to-haves versus must-haves in terms of specific data or insights they require from the research.
- » Get agreement on an approximate timeline and end product for the project.
- » After the session, send a brief list of bullets to the key stakeholders regarding the action items and next steps.

It is also a good project management practice to ensure that you continue to have buy-in and support from stakeholders as the project progresses. You can do that by using some of the simple tactics below:

- » Establish a regular progress update rhythm with key stakeholders via e-mail, teleconference, or in-person meeting.
- » Circulate early results and insights with some or all stakeholders to get their feedback and comments, and to ensure that their concerns with methodology, data, or analysis are addressed.
- » Maintain transparency with digital paper trails of project documents, data collected, and analysis conducted so that interested stakeholders and participants have access to these materials and can understand the research and analysis process in greater detail.
- » Be willing to raise controversial or unexpected findings as soon as you have collected a reasonable amount of evidence to support them. Stakeholders will appreciate the ability to address these as soon as they arise and to make agile business decisions based on these early results.





Case Study: The Problem and the Plan

After briefly meeting with the project's three key stakeholders, the VPs of marketing and sales and the product manager for ProBill Legal, Tony has put together a problem statement and work plan to submit to the stakeholders for approval. In these documents, Tony outlines the timeline, resources, and outputs of the project.

The highlights include:

- » The planning phase will take one week, research four weeks, and analysis and presentation another two weeks.
- » It will involve substantial input from ProBill's marketing intern, Mark, primarily in scheduling interviews and standardizing notes.
- » The stakeholders require a minimum of five responses per persona.
- » The budget is \$800 for interview compensation and data acquisition.
- » While the mandate is to learn more about the buyers in the target segment, Tony decides to focus on the characteristics of different buying roles and their buying criteria. His rationale is that his stakeholders are most concerned that their sales team is unable to connect with the contacts with the most leverage at the target organizations, and that the team is getting stumped by a complex, unexpected product evaluation process.
- » The output will be a presentation for the stakeholders with recommendations for assets that should be created or updated.

ProBill Legal Buyer Insights Problem Statement

Central Question

Who are the typical buyers of ProBill Legal in our target segment?

Context

ProBill Legal is a new SaaS billing product intended for law firms with under 30 attorneys. Since this is a relatively new focus area for ProBill, we need to do some more research to understand the following:

- » Who are the key software buyers at small law firms?
 - » What are the key criteria that they pay attention to when making a decision?
 - » Who are the people that influence the buyers, both inside and outside their firms?
-

Project Roles

- » Project owner: Heather
 - » Researcher: Tony, with help from Mark
 - » Stakeholders: Heather, VP of Sales, ProBill Legal's Product Manager
-

Constraints and Limitations

- » The project should take no more than two months
 - » The available budget is \$800
-

Minimum Requirements

- » Five in-person or survey responses per persona
-

Deliverables

- » A final presentation to stakeholders summarizing the findings
- » Summarized data and raw interview notes
- » Recommendations for specific assets that need to be created or updated

ProBill Legal Buyer Insights Work Plan

	Work Item	Owner	Output	Timing	Status
Planning	Initial conversations with stakeholders to sort out and finalize the project scope and outputs	Tony, stakeholders	Finalized problem statement and work plan	Week 1	Complete
Internal Research	Collect all relevant materials and data from prior project, CRM, and Prognosis team	Tony, stakeholders	List of hypotheses	Week 2	
Internal Research	Interviews with the stakeholders to build out their hypotheses on buyer personas (gain understanding of pain points, buying criteria, value proposition, etc.)	Tony, stakeholders	Interview guide and contact lists	Week 2	
External Research	Preparation for primary research (calling into the target buyer and user groups) — develop interview guide/survey and gather contact information	Tony and Mark	Interview guide and contact lists	Week 3	
External Research	Schedule and execute primary research interviews (target: 5+ responses per persona)	Tony and Mark	Raw interview notes	Weeks 4-6	
Analysis	Standardize interview notes and analyze data	Tony	Spreadsheets and analysis	Week 7	
Analysis	Build presentation and clear with project owner	Tony and Heather	Finalized Presentation	Week 8	
Execution	Present findings to stakeholders and answer follow-up questions	Tony, stakeholders	Presentation	Week 8	
Execution	Work with stakeholders to revise or create necessary assets	Tony, stakeholders	Revised assets	Week 8+	

Preparation is the Key to Success

As eager as you might be to get started with buyer insights research, preparing and planning for the project is a critical component to success. Yes, this phase can be grueling on its own (particularly if any key stakeholders object to the time, resources, or people necessary to complete the project), but it allows everyone to get on the same page and commit to a shared set of goals and outputs.

Once you have done that, you should be ready to begin the actual process of buyer research. In the next chapter, we will explore the various steps to buyer insights research, including assembling your organization's existing database of buyer information (CRM files, customer service files, etc.) and acquiring fresh insight via external sources.

Chapter 3:

Knowledge is Power: Researching, Interviewing, and Surveying Your Buyers

Market research isn't an exact science, and a project such as buyer insights research doesn't always yield clear right or wrong answers. But it is a process that can very often be improved by scientific methodologies.

That is why, whenever possible, employing the scientific method to organize your thinking and process can be hugely helpful to conducting this kind of research. For instance, with a buyer insights research project, you could start by building a hypothesis that represents all of your organization's prior research and preconceptions of the buyers in a particular target segment.

Next, you can test these hypotheses on actual buyers in your target segment. While the bulk of the value of buyer insights research will come from new information gathered through external interviews or surveys, beginning with a basic understanding of your buyers will lend much-needed structure to those conversations. During the interviews, you will likely uncover surprising findings that your company wasn't aware of, and you may also validate some of what you already knew.

This approach is beneficial for three reasons:



Efficiency: It allows you to build on the existing knowledge accumulated by your organization during sales and marketing interactions, rather than starting from scratch.



Accuracy: By incorporating previous institutional knowledge into the project, you will ensure that your perspective is not holding back the accuracy of your research results.



Increased Stakeholder Buy-in: It creates a better sense of ownership among your stakeholders, since each of their ideas was taken into account and updated when necessary.

Assembling Your Organization's Existing Knowledge

During the project-planning phase, you built a list of questions that you will attempt to answer over the course of the project. During this phase, you will do your best to come up with possible answers to these questions based solely on your organization's existing knowledge. In addition to exposing gaps in your knowledge, these answers will act as a starting point to provide structure for your external interviews. The output of this stage will be a brief presentation or spreadsheet of hypotheses about your buyers.

Generally speaking, there are four types of ideas that you will want to collect during this phase:



Positive: Factor A is important to most of our buyers.

Example: Buyers need the product to integrate with their accounting system.

Negative: Factor A is not important to our buyers.

Example: Our buyers don't want the product to have high Internet bandwidth requirements during the day.

Relative: Factor A is more important than Factor B to our buyers, or...Factor A is more important to X-type buyers than Y-type buyers.

Example: Usability is more important on the mobile app than the website.

Clustering: Buyers with Characteristic A behave similarly.

Example: Architects tend to prefer a cloud solution, while CFOs prefer on-premise solutions.

This stage is an exercise in collective brainstorming. You want to accumulate everything your organization thinks it knows about its buyers, as well as identify areas where your stakeholders believe they are missing information. Conflicting viewpoints should be welcomed; they are an opportunity to drive alignment by providing fresh and unexpected results.

Additionally, your stakeholders may already have a formal or informal framework for thinking about their buyers and buying process, and this is a good chance to understand what that framework is. While it's important to correct perceptions that are flat-out wrong, it is often more effective to revise and update an existing framework rather than start from scratch. For example, if your organization considers product marketers and database marketers to be two distinct buyer personas, it is important to note this distinction and communicate your results in these terms, even if just to say that the two groups behave similarly. Doing so will help your stakeholders reconcile their existing knowledge with your results.

There are multiple places this existing knowledge may be found. For instance, let's say you are trying to understand how the buyer perceives your product relative to a key competitor's. Start by looking into the following internal sources and compiling hypotheses into a single document:

1 Prior Research

This may seem obvious, but all too often research ignores previous similar studies in the interest of objectivity. Since you will be testing the hypotheses you begin with anyway, there's no harm in acknowledging and assembling prior research, even at the expense of a small degree of impartiality. Market research projects that could contain useful information include buyer persona, segmentation, competitive messaging, win-loss analysis, and lost customer analysis.

2 Customer Interaction Databases

A large percentage of customer interactions with your company are now stored in databases, which can be mined effectively to draw insights on your prospect buyers' behaviors and interests — from their first interaction with your company's website through the marketing funnel and sales cycles. There is already a lot of available information on the many ways data from these systems can be analyzed to support a company's sales and marketing strategy. Below are the areas that are most pertinent to buyer insights, organized by source:

WEB ANALYTICS

There are two main types of Web analytics to consider:

- » **Traffic sources information:** Referring sites, inbound keywords, and inbound link anchor keywords are important data points that reveal the topical interests of organic (non-paid search) visitors to your website, of which a substantial percentage would be prospect buyers.
- » **Navigational history:** If you can filter Web analytics data to a subset that is representative of a segment of your buyers, then tracing those buyers' navigational paths through your website will reveal important insights on their interests regarding the content on your website and their priorities when considering your product/solutions.

MARKETING AUTOMATION SOFTWARE

Marketing automation software, such as Marketo or Pardot, can also provide useful information, including:

- » **Lead information:** Marketing automation systems typically have rich information at the individual lead level, including information that prospects submit on lead capture forms, as well as their interactions with your company's marketing campaigns. Corporate information can also typically be inferred through a reverse IP lookup.
- » **Prospects' interaction history:** The value of marketing automation software is in the rich, unified interaction data it maintains for each prospect. As with Web analytics, aggregate data such as the conversion rates of different marketing campaigns or content. The interaction flows of prospects on various landing pages and microsites provide valuable information that helps you build hypotheses on the needs and behavior of particular segments of buyers.

CRM

Depending on the level of detail in your customer databases, information from customer relationship management (CRM) systems can be mildly to extremely useful in building your hypotheses. Most CRM systems are organized as relational databases that have records for customer organizations and individual contacts there, information regarding individual deals (sales opportunity), and records of activities and interactions with each contact and/or others who are related to sales opportunities.

You can easily extract information about customer companies based on their market segmentation or assemble customer contacts at one or multiple companies, or records of activities with one or multiple contacts. All of these could be useful in your analysis and hypothesis development.

Internal Interviews

While a CRM ideally documents every communication between your colleagues and prospective customers, in reality much of the knowledge gained through these interactions is never formally recorded. That's why conducting one-on-one interviews with your sales, marketing, and customer service personnel is a great way to uncover additional knowledge. During the interviews, you will want to develop ad-hoc personas (or personas based on personal anecdotal evidence) to flesh out answers to each of your questions (see the examples on the following page).

Some of the internal roles you will want to interview, and the general questions they will help you answer, when assembling your organization's existing knowledge include:

Sales

- » What are the titles and roles of the individuals being spoken with in the target segment?
- » What are their needs and objections?
- » What alternative solutions are they evaluating and how do they compare?
- » What does the typical buying process look like?

Marketing

- » What marketing channels are being used to reach the customer and why?
- » If there is a content marketing strategy, who is the intended audience?
- » Which content or messaging seems to resonate the most and what does it emphasize?

Product

- » Who is the product being designed for?
- » Are the users also the people you have identified as the buyers, or will some other role(s) make the decision?

Customer Service

- » From whom are they receiving complaints?
- » What is the nature of those complaints?
- » How do issues escalate on the client's end?
- » What are common reasons for customer churn?



Case Study: Buyer Persona Hypotheses

After interviewing his stakeholders and analyzing ProBill's CRM, Tony has developed a solid understanding of the firm's internal knowledge of the segment. The stakeholders agree that the three most important buyers in their segment are the managing partner, the head of IT, and the head of operations. While the CFO was originally considered a buyer in the work plan, the stakeholders generally agree that this persona is only occasionally influential in the sales process, and have decided to restrict the scope to the other three roles.

Below are a few of the hypotheses Tony has drawn up for the managing partner persona based on what he learned from the CRM and his internal interviews. While Tony has similar details on each of the personas, we will exclusively follow this one for the duration of Tony's project:

Managing Partner Persona

Titles: Managing Partner, Executive Partner, Managing Principal

Reports to: Partnership

Oversees: COO, CFO, Technology Director, Group Leaders (larger end of the segment)

Business Role:

- » Acts as the CEO of a law firm, usually part-time. In ProBill Legal's Attorneys Under Age 50 segment, people in this role spend about half their time as a practicing attorney and half on firm administration.
- » Typically has diverse responsibilities, including client-facing duties, PR, vendor management, and financial administration.
- » Also oversees and approves the firm's billable hours.

"Who you interview is just as important as what you ask them. Make sure you're interviewing actual buyers, and whenever possible, try to get a healthy mixture of different attitudes toward your product."

Nick Petri, Market Research Analyst, OpenView Venture Partners



Buying Role:

- » If the firm has a COO and/or head of technology, these positions and the managing partner make up the core buying committee and have relatively equal power.
- » Otherwise, decisions are made by a vote of the partners, in which the managing partner has the tie-breaking vote. This is true at most small law firms.
- » Due to limited administrative staff, the managing partner is the key person in the buying process.

Software Ecosystem:

- » The managing partner is the only person in a law firm who uses both the attorney and administrator portals of ProBill Legal.
- » As a practicing attorney, the managing partner uses the firm's file-sharing system extensively.

Key Criteria:

- » Must be Web-accessible to allow attorneys to bill from the road or from home.
- » Needs to integrate seamlessly with the firm's financial system, which the managing partner also uses frequently.
- » The managing partner does not have a technical background, so the system needs to have intuitive, out-of-the-box dashboards and analytics.

Existing Solution:

- » Most small firms use Microsoft Excel to keep track of billable hours.



Building New Insights Through External Interviews

The purpose of external interviews is to build on, clarify, and update the existing knowledge you uncovered in the previous phase. In this section, we will explain how to execute this process.

Building a Target List

The first decision to make when building a list of targets is the mix of companies. The chart on the following pages shows the four types of contacts that are generally included, along with where to find the data, how to reach them, and the expected conversion rate and value of the interviews.

	Data Source	Contact Method	Conversion Rate	Value
Recently Signed Customers	CRM	E-mail followed with a call	High	High
Long-tenured Customers	CRM	E-mail followed with a call	High	Low
Lost Customers	CRM, Salespeople	E-mail followed with a call	Low	High
Lost Sales Prospects <i>(Qualified prospects who dropped out of a sales cycle before or after becoming an opportunity)</i>	CRM, Salespeople	E-mail followed with a call	Very Low	High
Lost Marketing Leads <i>(Prospects generated by Marketing but never became a sales opportunity)</i>	CRM, Marketing Automation Tool	E-mail followed with a call (if phone number is available)	Very Low	High
Unconverted Web Visitor	CRM, Marketing Automation Tool, Website	E-mail (if address is available), retargeting, website survey (Qualaroo)	Very Low	Medium
Cold Prospects	Jigsaw, Manta, LinkedIn, Industry Directories	Cold call	Very Low	Low

Because contact information is readily available on current customers and you already have relationships with them, these tend to be the easiest interviews to execute and are a logical place to start. Long-standing customers, however, will be less valuable as interviewees for a number of reasons:

- » The sales cycle is no longer fresh in their minds
- » Your product and messaging has likely changed considerably
- » The buyers may have left the company, and their perspective of the sales cycle will be skewed by how their relationship with your company has evolved over the course of their tenure as a customer

{ The best solution is a healthy mix of contact types to minimize sample bias. }

Having your interview list too heavily weighted toward current customers, for example, will skew your buyer insights toward the messaging or value proposition that you already provide and away from what the current buyer really thinks or wants. Likewise, a list comprised mostly of lost customers will give you an unduly negative view of your product and go-to-market strategy.

It's important to note that warm prospects aren't included in the list above. That's because reaching out to them can disrupt the sales cycle and potentially threaten a deal. Even if you were to reach one of these customers, they may be reluctant to give you sensitive information that, in their mind, could be relayed to one of your salespeople and used against them in a negotiation. In general, it's advisable to keep the project strictly segregated from any sales activities. If the interview targets believe you are trying to sell them your product under the guise of market research, it will undermine the credibility of you and your company. Resist the urge to talk up your product, and only refer the interviewee to a salesperson if they specifically ask.

When building call lists, it is strongly recommended that you reach out in multiple rounds. Doing so will give you flexibility to make adjustments based on the outcome from the earlier rounds. This could include changes to the script or survey, or changes to the total number of targets based on early response rates. External interviews are inherently unpredictable and it's important to plan for contingencies and to stay flexible.

Finally, when reaching out to current or potential buyers, it's important to obtain the proper permission. This could mean getting an OK from your VP of sales, VP of customer service, or CEO, or clearing each interviewee with the account executive who owns the customer. Again, you don't want to threaten an account, so defer to the account owner's judgment if they believe a poorly timed interview request could be the final straw in your company's frayed relationship with a client. It may also be beneficial to have the account owner set up an introduction or send an e-mail notifying the customer that a member of the research team will be contacting them; however, make sure you are copied on communications so that you have the ability to follow up with the customer yourself.

Calling Versus Conducting Internet Surveys

Up to this point, you haven't had to decide between calls or Internet surveys for your contact method. This is an important decision that requires careful consideration. While Internet surveys provide an extremely scalable option and offer built-in tools for analysis, they are also extremely rigid and aren't suited for qualitative answers or exploratory questioning. We strongly advise against using them until you have at least conducted a handful of phone conversations to sharpen and revise your hypotheses, and in many cases they shouldn't be used at all.

The reason is that a phone interview can be adjusted on the fly. In particular, there are three scenarios where calls are considerably more effective than Internet surveys:

- » If there are points in the conversation where the respondent becomes confused. A conversation will allow you to offer additional explanation or prompt answers.
- » If there are responses that you don't fully understand. Calls will allow you to request clarification or elaboration.
- » If there are responses that the interviewee would like to qualify or explain further.

If any of these scenarios occur during an Internet survey, you may be stuck with a misleading answer, or the respondent may simply decide to stop completing the survey altogether. After you have conducted a handful of phone calls and worked out the kinks in your guide, it may be sufficiently robust to work reasonably well as an Internet survey.

Still, some pieces will have to be adapted when moving from call to survey. Because of the rigidity of a survey, it's even more important to have absolute clarity in your questions. Offering multiple choice or multi-select responses wherever possible will help guide a respondent in the right direction, but be sure to leave space for text in case they have additional commentary.



"At RocketScope, we believe a great marketing plan starts with a deep understanding of how buyers make decisions. OpenView's eBook not only contains a process for conducting buyer research but also a sample interview guide to help companies get started. It's a great resource for any company looking to get a better understanding of how their buyers behave."

April Dunford, Managing Director
and Founder, RocketScope

Designing an Interview Guide

Your interview guide will make or break the project. It provides a structure for the interview and contains all of the possible questions you will want to ask. A poor guide will aggravate interviewees, leave you with ambiguous answers, and neglect the stakeholders' most burning questions. Fortunately, since you have already developed a prioritized list of hypotheses to test, most of the work is already done. All you have to do is convert that information into a list of questions that will help you gather the essential answers.

The guide should have three broad types of questions:

- 1 Validation Questions.** Make sure you ask a few quick questions to verify the person as an appropriate interview subject. These questions should also identify whether the company is a reasonable target and unearth what the interviewee's involvement was/is/would be in the buying process. However, keep in mind that validation questions are probably the most boring part of the interview for your subject, so if you can glean the information you need over the course of the conversation through more open-ended questions, you do not need to ask them. If the questions have not been answered by the end of the conversation, ask them at that time.

- 2 Open-ended Questions.** The purpose of open-ended questions is to get your subject to tell the story of their buying process for your product (or a competitor's) from their point of view. Adele Revella of the Buyer Persona Institute recommends as an opening question, "Take me back to the first time you started looking for a solution to this problem. What happened?" This question, or a similarly open-ended one, is an engaging way to start the conversation, and gives the subject an opportunity to surprise you with insights that may not have been revealed in a direct line of questioning.

- 3 Hypothesis Testing.** During your internal interviews you amassed a lot of organizational knowledge about how your buyers operate. If these ideas are not directly covered by the interviewee during their open-ended responses, it's important to address them directly. Typically, we list these questions after open-ended ones and will only ask them if they haven't been answered, or if we seek a more detailed answer. For example, if all of your stakeholders listed cost as a key objection to your solution, and the subject has not come up in a more general question about objections, you may want to interject a prompt such as, "How about cost? Is that a meaningful obstacle?"

When writing your interview guide, it's important to keep in mind that very few phone interviews go exactly as planned. Inexperienced interviewers tend to overestimate the number of questions they will be able to complete in their allotted time. That causes them to rush the subject, doesn't leave enough time for follow-up questions or open-ended responses, and may result in missing crucial information that was intended to be captured at the end of the guide.

It's best to include no more than 10 questions per half-hour interview, most of which are fairly open-ended, while including optional follow-ups and prompts if the interviewee prefers to give short responses.

You may want to add a few quantitative questions using a 1-5 or 1-10 scale just for reference purposes. When presenting results, it makes for a more interesting story when you can present some statistics or quantitative insights.

In many interviews, the most relevant or surprising information comes from the buyer simply telling his or her story. Don't feel you have to cover every specific question in your guide or offer a prompt for every question unless the subject hasn't offered a satisfactory response during the open-ended questions. Think of the guide more as a reminder of the essential information that needs to be gathered, rather than a literal script.

See page 69 in the Appendix for a sample interview guide.

Enlisting Targets and Scheduling

Whether by phone or e-mail, you want to catch your target at a time when they are at their desk but not overly busy. That's because an incoming communication is much more attention-grabbing than a latent one in their e-mail or voicemail inbox, and therefore much more likely to result in a response. Below are some tips:

- » Most experts consider late morning (approximately 10 a.m.) or mid-afternoon (approximately 3 p.m.) on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, or Thursdays to be the most likely times to reach a target interviewee at his or her desk in most businesses. Remember to pay attention to your target interviewee's time zone.
- » Monday and Friday mornings tend to be the busiest times of the week, due to most planning and wrap-up meetings taking place then; target interviewees are unlikely to be reached or have time for your call.



- » Avoid reaching out to people during their busy time of year, as this can drastically affect response rates. For example, tax consultants are going to be next to impossible to reach during tax season. Salespeople can be equally difficult to reach at the end of a quarter when they are trying to close out their numbers.
- » Friday afternoons and the day prior to a holiday weekend can be slow business periods and great times to catch people on the fly, but you also may find people are out of the office or in a hurry to leave. Gauge for yourself whether or not this is a good opportunity to reach your target audience.



Reaching Out

The first medium of contact should generally be an e-mail, as this allows you to capture the largest number of respondents per a unit of effort and puts you on the respondent's radar, which can make them more receptive to other requests. Still, different audiences are comfortable being contacted via different mediums, so don't limit yourself to this one form of communication. The table below breaks down the relative effort and response rates of the most common outreach techniques, based on OpenView's experience:

	Effort	Response Rate
Call	High – must be called individually and may not be at their desk	Medium – high for lower titles who are reachable directly, but low where gatekeepers are a problem
Mass E-mail Merge	Low – can be done in a batch	Low – may be caught in a spam filter and easy to ignore
Twitter	Medium – cannot be done in a batch	Medium – respondents get fewer solicitations than on e-mail
LinkedIn	Medium – cannot be done as a batch	Medium – respondents get fewer solicitations than on e-mail

Presenting Yourself, Your Project, and Your Company

Regardless of the channel, your introduction should be clear and concise. A long-winded introduction that explains your company's product and project in detail will probably result in your target hitting the delete key or hanging up on you. Conversely, interviewees may be suspicious of a request for an interview that doesn't give any detail into where you work or why you are contacting them. Find a balance by keeping your introduction to a sentence or two and making sure it addresses the following points:

- » What your company does
- » What you are trying to learn
- » How much time you are looking for
- » Why you think they are qualified to answer
- » Why the person should participate

Response rate is a function of trust, perceived effort, and perceived reward, so it is important to give respondents sufficient information on these points.

When reaching out by e-mail, the most important information must be distilled into a subject line, as this may be the only information that respondents use to determine whether or not they open your e-mail. Be sure to follow these three rules when crafting yours:

- » Restrict the subject line of the invitation to 35 or fewer characters to ensure the whole title appears in e-mail preview formats.
- » Avoid using words, phrases, formats, or symbols that will trigger spam filters such as "important message" or "free," using multiple exclamation points, or putting words in all upper case.
- » Avoid pushing the incentive in the title as this can instantly detract from your credibility.



Following Up

In today's connected world, business people are constantly bombarded with offers, questions, and requests. This is especially true of the senior executives who are typically buyers in a B2B tech cycle. Even if they are a current customer, you may be surprised by how low the response rate is on your initial request. Consider reaching out three to four times before deeming the target non-responsive. Try to vary the time of day, day of the week, and method of communication to increase your chances of success.

Scheduling

If you are reaching out by phone and only looking for 15 minutes or less, be prepared to take the call on the spot in case of a connection. Scheduling a call for later always has the potential to fall through, especially when compensation isn't a major incentive for the interviewee. If you need to schedule a call, try to schedule it for as soon as possible to minimize cancellations, and be sure to send out a calendar invitation.

Conducting Interviews

If you have done your homework and crafted a good target list and interview guide, the interviews themselves should be relatively painless. To make the process even smoother, be sure to pay attention to the following areas:

- 1 Data collection.** Generally, it isn't necessary to record calls if you take clear enough notes. The best way to do this is by hand or in a word processor for conversational, free-form interviews, or by entering them directly into your survey software for more structured engagements. Inputting directly into the software will make the standardization and analysis stage easier, in contrast to paper notes, which will require transcribing and are often hard to decipher. However, if you do choose to input directly into survey software, make sure to leave space for notes that don't fit neatly into your question format.

- 2 References.** If the interviewees agreed to take your call, it means they either saw value in your compensation or just wanted to help out. Either way, they will probably be happy to pass you along to a peer.

- 3 Post-call questions.** For longer calls where you are offering compensation, it is usually OK to ask several follow-up questions by e-mail if necessary. Let your interviewees know at the end of the call that you might be following up.

- 4 Thanking the interviewee.** Be sure to thank them by e-mail for their participation. This is also the time to provide a gift code or any other digital compensation. If you are offering a physical gift, be sure to get their address at the end of your call, and in your thank you e-mail let them know that you have mailed the gift.



Case Study: Conducting Interviews

Tony begins by purchasing a list of 600 senior law firm operations executives for \$300. He e-mails 50 of each of the three personas he's researching, offering a \$20 gift card for a 30-minute conversation. For the heads of technology and operations, he succeeds in getting four interviews each. For the managing partner, he only gets one positive response, so he ups the incentive to \$50 and e-mails 20 more. Four respond positively to his interview request.

After completing his phone interviews, Tony designs a 10-minute Internet survey and sends it out to the remainder of his list. The compensation for these is an offer for a free month of service for ProBill Legal. He e-mails the survey to 530 respondents, three times each, over the course of a week and a half, and receives a total of 18 responses.

Using a Sample Vendor

In some situations, as you launch the survey, interviews, and other outreach approaches, you might find that the response rate is too low to be representative of the market. In those cases, your analysis, while still valuable, is at risk of lacking validity and persuasive strength.

You might consider going to a market research sample vendor to bolster your survey effort. Such vendors typically provide access to their proprietary panels of prospects, prequalified by criteria that you specify, who would be more likely to respond to the survey, boosting your response rates. In many cases the sample vendor handles the entire process, from outreach to reimbursement, for a fee (typically per completed response), saving you time and resources that can be spent on survey development and data analysis.

For an additional fee, many sample vendors also help boost interview participation rates by allowing you to offer survey respondents a chance to participate in the interview research. This can ultimately be more cost- and time-effective than the traditional approach of reaching out to prospects directly via e-mail, phone, or social media.

See page 74 of the Appendix for an in-depth discussion on sample vendors, including when to use one, how to select a suitable vendor, and how to use samples in your survey research.

Bringing Buyer Insights into Focus

After completing the internal and external buyer research steps highlighted in this chapter, you should now possess a much more composite view of your target segment's buyers. What is their story? Which marketing channels do they prefer? What pain points keep them up at night? If they were to buy a solution like yours, what features or value would they be looking for?

Of course, that information is only helpful if you do something with it. The next chapter will guide you through the process of analyzing your research results and compiling it in a way that creates very detailed buyer personas based on factors like a person's buying criteria, use case, or buying influence. And while many buyer insights research resources would stop there, we take the project a step further, showing you how to use that information to map out your customers' buying process at an organizational level and incorporate insight into your existing sales, marketing, and product development strategies.



Chapter 4:

Analyzing Research Results, Converting Data into Insights

Buyer research creates a mountain of data, much of which is likely to be textual and not exactly analysis-friendly. Standardizing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions from that data can be frustrating, and if you don't have a process for managing those steps, all of your hard work laid out in the previous chapter could end up being wasted.

Thankfully, this chapter covers each of those challenges. It will show you how to:

- » Finalize your dataset
- » Standardize data and responses into a singular file
- » Determine buyer personas by four key buying criteria
- » Incorporate those results into your existing strategy

By the end of this chapter, you should possess new insight that can be seamlessly incorporated into your sales, marketing, and product strategies, which will ultimately have a tangible effect on your organization's ability to find, close, and retain the right types of customers.

Adopting a Hypothesis-driven Analysis Process

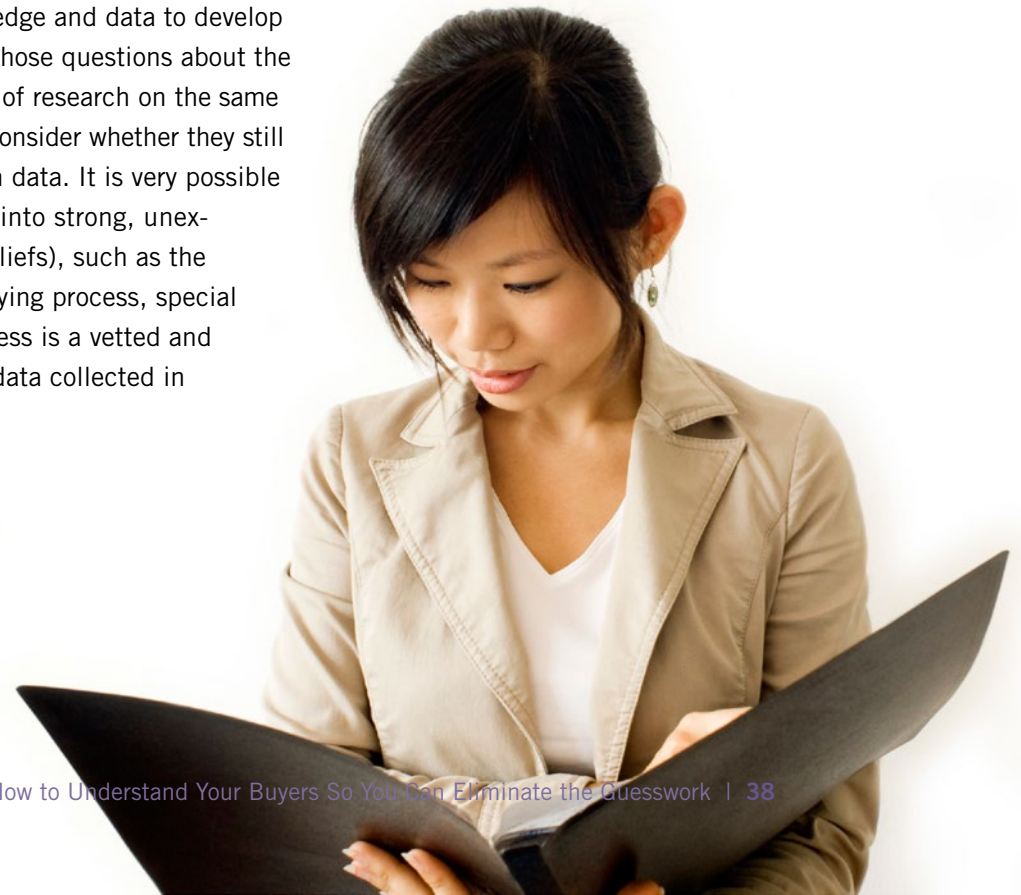
There is a simple challenge in the analysis phase of the buyer insights project: there is usually too much valuable data to be analyzed. After all, a company does not typically get the opportunity to systematically interview its customers and hear their structured feedback very often. Nor does it have the chance to study customer usage patterns and correlate those findings with information from all across its CRM and other customer data systems to put together a multi-faceted, richly detailed perspective on its customers as a whole. It's just that this massive amount of data is very hard to consume and will turn off any potential stakeholder who attempts to dive straight into it to glean insights and information.

Therefore, the market research analyst has to be strategic in choosing how to delve into this mass of data, in order to pull out the most valuable insights that are also ultimately actionable to the customer-facing teams. There is a real risk of falling into analysis paralysis by considering too many different cuts of the data, or by trying to boil the ocean with all types of calculation and analyses that consume time and resources, only to miss out on the simplest, most actionable insights in the process.

Therefore, you need to adopt a surgical, hypothesis-driven approach that is targeted and efficient — a hypothesis-driven analysis plan. This approach is counterintuitive in that the analysis proceeds from the expected outputs/insights, from which the relevant analytical steps are defined, even before any data analysis is done or planned. In a nutshell, the analysis process works backward from the conclusions, back to the raw data, and it really starts with the business objectives of the project.

Chapter 2 emphasized the efforts put into project scoping and problem framing (developing the problem statement, its constraints, and scope), because that process enforces the focus of the project by tying the business objectives to the anticipated impact of the insights to be uncovered. This step will then lead you to focusing on the questions that the buyer insights research would need to answer to generate that anticipated impact. This can be summarized as the development of a set of core hypotheses that can be tested and validated/invalidated by the collected data and clearly defined analytical steps.

In the preliminary research steps, we leverage existing knowledge and data to develop a set of hypotheses that are your best directional answers to those questions about the buyers. At this stage, after having done a substantial amount of research on the same matters, you should review those preliminary hypotheses and consider whether they still stand as the best hypotheses to be validated with the research data. It is very possible that there are obvious new insights that can be incorporated into strong, unexpected new hypotheses (that can even contradict existing beliefs), such as the existence of a new, unknown buyer role, a new step in the buying process, special purchase requirement, etc. Therefore, the output of this process is a vetted and updated list of hypotheses to be validated and tested by the data collected in the research phase.



Developing an Analysis Plan

Having updated the set of hypotheses on buyers that would lead you to impactful insights, you now need to develop an efficient analysis plan.

This is a more detailed work plan that shows how each hypothesis is going to be tested and how the results affect the overall output. For each hypothesis under consideration, you need to determine how that hypothesis is going to be validated, what the validation really means, and how rigorous the requirement for this validation is.

Be aware that when conducting B2B buyer insights research, the breadth and complexity of research data necessitates many different approaches to seeking evidence to validate or invalidate a claim. If you have a large enough data set on the hypothesis, you can adopt a statistical approach to analyzing these data, using tools from descriptive statistics, significance testing, or regression to mathematically validate hypotheses on the key measurable characteristics of buyers, or to differentiate clusters of buyers that correspond to different roles or personas.

However, if you have more qualitative data than quantitative data, or a very small sample set (fewer than 10), then the validation can be based on simple data averaging, identification of exception rather than norms, or weighted in a way that more reliable data sources have more weight.

{ The key is to ensure that each hypothesis is attached to a clearly defined validation approach. This will dictate the data transformation, analysis, and validation process for each hypothesis. }

To bring together all of the hypotheses and their associated analytical plans, you then build a matrix of the analytical steps, where each row corresponds to a hypothesis, and the columns represent one or more validation approaches and their associated analytical steps. Once you have completed this list, you may quickly discover that the same data transformation and analysis steps are performed again and again, and the same data fields are also used repeatedly. As a result, instead of creating a plan for each hypothesis, you can now create a matrix where each row represents a particular analytical process/tool, and the columns are different hypotheses that this particular process validates.

In summary, this approach lets you first define a very concrete set of specific hypotheses to be tested as rigorously as possible with the collected data on buyer insights, and then lets you define an efficient, logical set of data analytical steps that helps you answer those questions/hypotheses in the most suitable manner.

Sample Matrix

Analysis of Buyer's Titles Distribution

Hypotheses Addressed	Input Data Format	Input Data Range	Expected Output	Analysis Steps
Role and responsibilities of buyers Most common types of buyers	List of names and titles of buyers	Titles of buyers from all sales opportunities generated in the last two years	Counts and percentages of buyers with each title/group of titles, with a specific title/group of titles having the highest number of occurrence	Review each buyer's title from CRM system and validate the title using LinkedIn profile or direct validation Create pivot table to summarize total count and percentage

Analysis of Buying Criteria Priorities

Hypotheses Addressed	Input Data Format	Input Data Range	Expected Output	Analysis Steps
Relative importance of buying criteria Relevance of buying criteria at each stage of the buying cycle	Internal interview notes External interview notes Notes on sales opportunities	All relevant sales opportunities in the last two years	Distinct buying criteria ranked by occurrence, stated importance Distinct buying criteria mapped against each stage of the buying cycle	Standardize responses from interview notes relating to buying criteria and infer relative importance of each criterion by the number of mentions or explicitly stated importance Standardize sales opportunities notes and historical interactions data to validate or adjust relative importance of each criterion Analyze unsuccessful sales opportunities by the stage at which they were lost and the buying criteria that were not met at that stage

Typical Types of Analyses

Below is a list of types of analyses and the buyer insights they apply to:

For Buyer Personas:

- » Characterizing the typical buyer by averaging group measures (Typical buyer has X years of experience, etc.)
- » Sub-segmenting by describing the prevalence of sub types (X percent are A, Y percent are B)
- » Sub-segmenting by the prevalence of roles (X percent are champions, Y percent are project sponsors)
- » Analyses of force-ranked preferences
- » Listing and analyses of most commonly cited pain points and mapping them against demographic areas

For Buyer Journey Definition:

- » Standardizing the records so that a common structure for the buyer's journey arises
- » Calculating the average time spent in each stage
- » Evaluating the relative importance of each stage

Matching Gaps Between Buyers' Expectation and the Current Execution of Marketing and Lead Generation

- » Analysis of existing content and mapping it against new insights on customers
- » Analysis of coverage of target segment contacts against actual contacts

Comprehensive Profiling of Buyers

A comprehensive qualitative documenting and profiling of all potential buyers can reveal key insights on a large swath of customers, and identify common characteristics as well as emerging ones.

Now that you have turned around the hypothesis analysis, you will find that there is a low number of mostly simple analyses that will answer a majority of your original questions, and you might already have those answers in your data waiting to be discovered. Conducting these analyses first reduces the amount of data work required, improves project completion time, and yet provides incisive, solid evidence to support your buyer insights findings and recommendations.

Finalizing Your Dataset

Before you can analyze data from your interviews, you need to decide what data to analyze and what to discard. Some common reasons to exclude interviews from your analysis include:

- » The company is not in the target segment
- » The interviewee was not involved in the buying process
- » The interview was cut short or the interviewee was unwilling to answer key questions
- » The source didn't seem credible or knowledgeable

This step is often necessary even if you have been very targeted in your outreach, because no matter how thoroughly you pre-screened interviewees, you may find that some interviews need to be discarded because the information you used to screen them was misleading or incorrect. If a target fits your segmentation and buyer criteria and provides a full interview, you should not exclude them just because they were uncharacteristic or had a radically different buying cycle from your hypothesis. The fact that they don't fit into the rest of the sample is useful in itself, and even if you don't end up designing your sales and marketing strategy around this person, the knowledge that alternate cases exist is an important counterpoint to your conclusions.

Standardizing Your Data

Before proceeding with the remaining interviews or surveys, you will have to make sure that they are set up to be documented in an analysis-friendly format. In the case of an Internet survey or phone interview recorded into a survey program, the software should do most of this work for you. If you have taken handwritten notes, you will likely have to standardize responses into an Excel file, with questions on one axis and respondents on the other. Textual data should be converted to numerical values or dummy variables (1 or 0) wherever possible. Some data reclassification is unavoidable, because in a qualitative interview, you are never exactly sure what type of response will be common enough to warrant a dummy variable.

Establishing Your Buyer Personas

Once your data has been standardized, the next step is to divide your subjects into buyer personas. This is not as simple as grouping them by title, which can be misleading. The same title can have completely different responsibilities and roles in the buying process at two different companies. Instead, you should consider a more multi-dimensional perspective in determining how the buyers fall into groups that can be described by concrete personas. At a minimum, you should consider the following aspects when deciding how to group your buyers into personas:

- 1** Their role in the buying process
 - » How much decision-making authority do they have?
 - » When do they become involved?
 - » Who do they influence and who are they influenced by?
 - » Are they an economic or technical buyer?

- 2** Their job function and responsibilities
 - » What is their core function?
 - » Who do they report to and who reports to them?
 - » Are they a user of the product?
 - » What is their level of technical knowledge or sophistication?

- 3** Their most important buying criteria
 - » What features do they need?
 - » What characteristics (e.g., performance or uptime) matter to them?

- 4** Their use cases
 - » How much or how often do they use your product?
 - » What features do they use?
 - » What specific problems do they use it to address?

Ultimately, the key goal in deciding on personas is for each persona to require different treatment during your organization's sales and marketing cycle. If you would treat two personas in exactly the same way, then you should combine them. If a single persona would be treated very differently depending on an outwardly observable characteristic, you may consider splitting it into two or more distinct personas.

In building your personas, using existing terminology can be useful, but it can also be dangerous. A familiar vocabulary and framework will make the firm-wide adoption of your insights progress more smoothly than uprooting the existing terminology and starting from scratch. However, it can also be confusing; some of your colleagues may confuse characteristics of the previous persona with your revised one.

Mapping the Buyer Journey at the Organization Level

Many buyer persona projects would stop here, having divided the most important people in the buyer journey into several personas. However, we have found that a complex B2B buyer journey is more than just a collection of individual personas. Fitting each of these personas into the context of the organization's larger buyer journey is equally important.

Your results should also evaluate the buyer journey at the organizational level. At each stage of awareness, research, validation, and negotiation, how are each of the buyer personas involved? What are the key triggers that move the organization to the next stage? What does the organization require for a final decision? Understanding how to approach the organization as a coherent whole is an important benefit of the project.

Buyer research creates a finished set of insights that humanizes those involved in the buyer journey. You will learn about the job title/function, pain points, and needs of each persona in the buyer journey as well as the messaging that will make your product most appealing to each. You will also learn about the unique buyer journey for your chosen segment. The buyer journey entails the crucial steps that the stakeholders must go through to purchase your product from need identification to a signed contract. By understanding each step of the customer's buyer journey, your sales and marketing teams will be able to create more compelling messaging and incentives that will be more successful in pushing customers to the next step in their buyer journey.

The next step is to understand at what points in the buyer process do the buyers get stuck or face obstacles. Examples of this could include getting budget approval, preparing a business case to get management approval, or vetting providers at the RFP stage. Once you have identified the obstacles, try to answer the following questions:

- » Who is the key buyer persona or personas involved at this stage?
- » What actions is the persona considering at that specific stage in the buyer journey?
- » What are the criteria to move to the next stage?
- » What, if any, are the competitive solutions they're considering at this stage?
- » What information or collateral are they looking for at this stage?
- » What are potential objections/hindrances that exist from the buyer's perspective?
- » How do other influencers and buyers' roles affect the decision in this stage?
- » How can buyers become "unstuck" from these objections/hindrances?
- » What can the sales, marketing, and product teams do to aid this unsticking process?

Probing into these sticking points will enable your sales and marketing teams to push the buyer to the next steps in their buyer journey.

Finally, communicating the buyer process to your internal teams is a challenge. Consider your audience; a single comprehensive document may be best if you want to ensure that everyone has the same knowledge base. However, you may choose to create multiple versions of the buyer role description, personas, and buyer's journeys. For example, if you wanted to present an analysis of sticking points to your marketing team, you would want to include a more detailed analysis of the buyer process, versus a more generic document.

The collective output of buyer insights research is that it provides a foundation and structure to build your go-to-market strategy around. The final deliverable also provides a central knowledge base for all of your teams to draw from. The results will serve as a common thread as your teams craft a go-to-market strategy.

Matching Results Against Existing Go-to-Market and Product Strategy

While validating your existing beliefs is always nice, the real impact of a buyer insights project will come from the brand new information you discover in the project. If you can bring new insights to the table that were not already incorporated into your sales, marketing, and product strategy, your results are likely to have a tangible positive effect on your organization.

To make sure these discoveries are front and center, you will want to go back and look at the internal interview notes and assets that you used to formulate your hypotheses. Using these, you will want to answer some of the following questions:

- » How are each of our personas currently being addressed in our messaging and by our salespeople?
- » How are we reaching them?
- » What assumptions is our company making about the buyers, their process, and their criteria?
- » Are those assumptions appropriate given what we now know about them?
- » How do the planned changes or additions laid out in the product roadmap better address our buyers' needs?
- » What other dimensions of the whole product strategy (product, as well as customer services, professional services, customer onboarding) need to be adjusted or improved, based on the needs and characteristics of the buyers?

Don't underestimate the impact you can have by addressing these issues. Insights about your buyers are not just important for your sales and marketing teams, but they can help prioritize new features for your product team as well. Ultimately, new sales will come from tailoring the product to the buyer, so he or she shouldn't be overlooked in favor of the user. Input about the features and functionality your buyers are looking for should be a key input into your whole product strategy.

A matrix of go-to-market assets such as white papers, ROI calculators, or technical product sheets can be an additional tool to reveal gaps in the information (see the sample Go-to-Market Asset Matrix on page 80 in the Appendix of this eBook). You can create one using an Excel spreadsheet by placing the buyers along the top, the asset down the left side, and the assets that apply to each buyer in the intersecting squares. Blank squares or assets that do not closely map to what you now know about your buyers should be highlighted, as they offer the greatest potential for impact. This matrix can be included in your results report and will help prioritize assets that demand the most attention from your stakeholders.

In all, your gap analysis will point you to key areas where your current strategy or execution do not match with what the buyers really look for. It will also help you determine the most immediate next steps, whether it is to refine the buyer personas that inform your marketing activities, enhance your sales team's knowledge of a sales cycle, or create a better understanding of the buying criteria.

Analyzing One-off or Qualitative Data

In speaking with or surveying buyers, you are likely to come across information that doesn't fit neatly into your project but is nonetheless valuable to your stakeholders. This could be information about competitors, industry trends, insights relevant to your customer segmentation scheme, or commentary about your product. Certainly make note of these, but don't let them distract your stakeholders from the true focal point of your project: the buyers. Typically, this type of data is grouped in a separate document or a slide at the end of a presentation to keep it conceptually separate from the buyer research.

Striking a Balance Between Old and New

The reality of buyer insights research is that you will probably end up confirming or validating some things that you already knew or suspected. And while that might seem like redundant work, the real value of this project is the ability to combine that previous knowledge with new information to create a contextually balanced portrait of your buyers.

After completing the processes laid out in this chapter, you should be able to not only paint a much more vivid picture of your target buyers for your sales, marketing, and product teams, but you will also likely possess new information about your competitors, market, and industry that can be used by executive team members to influence the business's long-term strategy.

We will touch on that last point in the next chapter, exploring the importance of crafting a clear results presentation that allows the various stakeholders impacted by this research to understand and implement the insight gleaned from this project.



Case Study: Insightful Responses

After discarding one partial response to the Internet survey, Tony analyzes the nine managing partner respondent interviews and matches them against the firm's existing information. The most surprising piece of information is that eight of the nine are full-time administrators, unlike the stakeholders' perception that the role was usually part-time in this segment. This information was corroborated by two of his phone interview subjects, who mentioned that the trend was toward full-time administrators. Additionally, seven of the nine had a director of technology or CTO at their firm.

These facts lead to several other insights revealed in the data:

- » Managing partners are generally full-time and delegate their technical responsibilities to a technical professional. This includes the early stages of vendor research and screening.
- » Managing partners won't be working directly with the attorney billing portal, so they bring in another partner to get a user's perspective.
- » Since their full-time responsibility is firm management, they are less interested in out-of-the-box functionality for the management portal and more interested in customization and power.

Chapter 5:

Designing and Managing an Effective Implementation Strategy

With the research and analysis phases of your buyer insights research complete, you might think that your work is done. That's not the case. True, you now have critical information about your buyers that you can use to improve your sales, marketing, and product development focus, but what are you going to do with it? How will you ensure that it is properly integrated into your organization?

Deciding what to do next is just as important as conducting the research that yielded that information in the first place. Without an effective implementation strategy, much of the hard work that has led to this point will be for naught and your company will continue to operate with a disjointed and incomplete understanding of its buyers.

This chapter describes how to prepare your research results into an effective presentation, manage objections to your results, create sales and marketing assets from your research, and conduct ongoing follow-up research that will allow you to continuously validate and adjust the information from your buyer insights research.

The Results Presentation

Some of your stakeholders may find your raw data and analysis most compelling, but most will probably prefer a narrative. The final report of your results is your chance to draw a narrative from your analysis that can be shared throughout the company. Creating a visual, well-structured PowerPoint presentation is the key to getting buy-in for the key conclusions you are trying to draw.

In general, it's best to present topics in descending order of impact on the organization, leading with the highest-level, most impactful information and gradually getting more granular. Methodology can be explained later on. Create a summary slide of key takeaways that organizes your primary findings into an easy reference guide. This structure will make your key points clear to a reader who only has time to skim the first few pages, while also providing background for more detail-oriented colleagues.

As you craft the presentation, make sure your slide headings contain a compelling headline that summarizes the key points from the slide. This keeps the presentation organized and allows readers to quickly grasp the overall story line as they review the deck.

Exactly what will be most impactful for your organization will depend on the outcome of your research, and how sharply it differs from your current practices. Keep this in mind when deciding by which of the following to emphasize your insights:

- » Persona
- » Segment
- » Organization-wide buying cycle

Within each section, you should also lead with the newest or most surprising information. Once you have built the presentation, circulate it among your stakeholders, encourage feedback, and set up calls where necessary to give further color.

Handling Objections

A well-managed buyer insights project, like any other research project, clearly delineates scope and achieves stakeholder buy-in during the planning phase. Still, some of your colleagues are likely to object to a portion of your results, particularly when your findings conflict with their existing perceptions of your buyers. If they have been selling, marketing, or designing your product for months or years with a particular vision of their buyer in mind, they may be somewhat protective of this vision. To achieve the desired impact from this project and make real changes in your organization, however, you will have to overcome any defensive inclinations from your stakeholders. It isn't always easy.



It's important to present new findings in a positive light, and as new information, rather than dismissing your stakeholders' perceptions as incorrect. Their perceptions are likely rooted in fact, gathered from their own interactions with buyers. However, your conclusions from this project are trustworthy for a number of reasons, which should be reiterated to skeptical stakeholders:

- » It's fresh data, whereas their knowledge has likely been accumulated over years and could be outdated.
- » It's more systematically documented and analyzed.
- » If achieved correctly, your results represent the majority of buyers, whereas theirs represents only their personal experience — a narrower set of observations.
- » The stakeholders all agreed during the planning phase that your methods were the best way to conduct the project.

Revising or Creating Sales and Marketing Assets

Whether you conduct this step or it's done by the manager responsible for the specific document, relevant company assets will have to be updated. Brainstorm any buyer-facing communications that need to be reviewed for consistency with your results, such as:

- » Website copy
- » Marketing content: white papers, case studies, and webinars
- » Outbound call scripts
- » Newsletter/e-mail templates
- » Training materials
- » Advertisements

Validating or Adjusting Your Insights on an Ongoing Basis

No matter how thorough your research or how strong your results, no project is relevant forever. Your product, buyer, personnel, and competition will eventually drift away from the environment that you encountered. Furthermore, since your sample size was limited, some of your weaker conclusions may be proven incorrect given more data. Regardless of the reason, what seems set in stone today may soon change, and your project should be designed with a system for making ongoing adjustments.

The best way to do this is to set up processes for systematically monitoring your key insights. Our preferred method is by tracking relevant fields in the CRM so that sales representatives can continue to collect the information you gathered during your research on an ongoing basis. While tracking everything is too cumbersome and time-consuming, it does pay to track several of your most potent or surprising insights as an ongoing evaluation of their accuracy. This can even be done on an automated, systematic basis by sending surveys from your CRM whenever you lose a customer.

Follow-up Research

Deep research can sometimes expose gaps in your knowledge that you didn't know were there. Often, a well-executed project will leave stakeholders thirsty for deeper knowledge about their buyers and the market. Some follow-on projects to consider after the completion of a buyer insights project include:

- » **Marketing channel** discovery to fully understand the marketing channels that you found were important to your buyers.
- » Competitive research to understand the strengths and weaknesses of your product in relation to competing solutions.
- » User research or usability testing to provide the same level of understanding on users to your product team.
- » Revised segmentation research to find new **customer segments** where the buyers have similar problems and available solutions.
- » More buyer research into segments or roles you didn't focus on the first time around.
- » **Messaging research** to hone the specific wording of your value proposition in your marketing assets.



Case Study: From Insights to Actions

Based on the insights gathered from his research, Tony meets with his stakeholders to go over his findings. He then decides to work with:

- » The ProBill Legal product manager to add some customization functionality that was particularly important to his interviewees.
- » His VP of marketing, Heather, to update the website copy for ProBill legal and write a white paper detailing the new customization features.
- » The VP of sales to amend their touch-point model and sales training assets to reflect the new information, and asks ProBill's sales reps to track, among a handful of other key items, whether the managing partners they speak with are full-time or part-time to verify the results of his research. When he notices that one sales rep isn't tracking this, he asks Heather to send him a reminder by e-mail.

The result is a company-wide strategy for the product that is tailored to each person involved in the process. All client-facing functions now understand how the software-buying process works at small law firms, how the different buyers interact with one another, where they get their information, and what their most important buying criteria are. Because of the success of the project, Tony is asked to repeat it with another of ProBill's older products.

Making the Most of a Valuable Asset

The bottom line is that the process of actually conducting buyer insights research is just one-half of this project's equation. The second half is actually doing something with the information you collect from that research. After all, if you do nothing with the buyer insights data you gather, then you are simply allowing a potentially valuable asset to gather dust — and what good does that do for your business?

The key to truly leveraging the insight you gather from this project is to create a plan for communicating its potential impact to key stakeholders, and a process for implementing it in both the short and long term. Doing so will allow you to set and manage expectations, justify future investment in buyer insights research, and establish a process for iterative implementation of your findings. And each of those things will ultimately strengthen the value you are able to extract from this project.

At the end of the day, it is critical to make sure that you — and the stakeholders you plan to present your findings to — are crystal clear on what this research project means for your business and how it can help it improve going forward. If everyone is on the same page and able to unite around a shared set of objectives and responsibilities, then buyer insights research can have a significant impact on every part of your business.

End Note

The buyer insights research process laid out in this eBook will not suddenly allow you to read your customers' minds. And if your business is not truly prepared to execute a project of this scope, you certainly run the risk of overwhelming your staff with information that it doesn't know how to interpret or implement.

As discussed at the beginning of this guide, it is absolutely critical that you fully assess your company's preparedness to execute this project before you dive head-first into it. If you feel like your team is not ready or that you lack the resources to invest in buyer insights research, do not rush into this project. Hastily executing something like this will likely waste your — and your buyers' — time, which most expansion-stage companies can't afford to do.

If, however, your B2B technology company does have the staff and bandwidth to execute buyer insights research, the payoff can be enormous. Not only will this research process make the buying process much simpler and enjoyable for your buyers, but it will also help you cultivate the kind of customer-centric focus that allows everyone in your organization to better target, engage, service, and retain those buyers. That's a win-win for everyone involved.

Appendix

Checklists for Participants in the Project

For the Stakeholders

- ☐ I have reviewed and given feedback on project definition, scope, work plan, and deliverables provided by the project owner and the market researcher.
- ☐ I am fully committed to the project, as defined by the above-mentioned project documents, having ensured that my feedback has been fully considered and incorporated as appropriate into those documents.
- ☐ I am committed to helping the market researcher facilitate data collection, data analysis, and to providing feedback on major outputs during the duration of the project.
- ☐ I am committed to facilitating the adoption of insights and recommendations of this project by my team members and the rest of the organization.

For the Project Owner

- ☐ I have clearly defined the project goals and stakeholders and communicated them to the project stakeholders and the market researcher.
- ☐ I have provided guidance and final vetting on the scope of the project, the selection of research methodology, and the development of a detailed work plan by the market researcher.
- ☐ I have requested and obtained full commitment from all stakeholders on project definition, work plan, and deliverables.
- ☐ I am committed to supporting the market researcher in the development and review of major intermediary and final analysis and outputs.
- ☐ I am responsible for coordinating continuous flow of feedback between the stakeholders and the project team for major planned and unplanned milestones in the project.

- ☐ I will ensure the adoption of the insights and recommendations of this project by the go-to-market organizations in the company, specifically the sales, marketing, customer service, and support teams.
- ☐ I will ensure the implementation of measurement or review mechanisms to evaluate future impact and effectiveness of the outputs of this project.

For the Researcher

Planning

- ☐ I understand who the various other stakeholders in the project are.
- ☐ I understand the output they expect.
- ☐ I understand the resources, constraints, and timeframes of the project.
- ☐ I understand how many interviews/surveys I'm expected to conduct.
- ☐ I have a complete list of customer, prospect, and expert interview targets.
- ☐ The list has been approved by the appropriate owner of each account or prospect.
- ☐ I have an interview guide that incorporates any specific questions my stakeholders asked me to include.

Execution

- ☐ I have reached out to an appropriate mix of customers, lost customers, prospects, and lost prospects, according to the goals of the project.
- ☐ I have reached out to each contact a persistent but respectful number of times.
- ☐ I have conducted the number of interviews or surveys decided in the planning phase, and distributed my notes to interested parties.
- ☐ I have distributed the compensation promised to my respondents and thanked them for participating.
- ☐ I have kept my stakeholders up-to-date on developments throughout the process.

Key Questions to Consider When Scoping Out a Buyer Insights Project

What are the gaps in your go-to-market strategy? What can you improve in your go-to-market execution?

While the ultimate output of this project takes a buyer-centric vantage point, it's practically impossible to learn absolutely everything about your buyer. Therefore, you need to start by scoping the project based on concrete issues that a buyer insights project can address. The most natural area where these issues arise is in strategy and execution of go-to-market initiatives (go to market here means sales, marketing, customer onboarding, and retention). Typically, a go-to-market issue is the impetus for a buyer insights project, in which case the issue at hand is clear. However, sometimes what we see are symptoms of issues that overlap or intersect with each other, making it hard to grasp the most pressing issue. The challenge for you as an analyst is to trace through the issues and find the key leverage point or the bottleneck that is the root of the problem. Some common issues that ultimately can be addressed by buyer insights are:

- » Your website is generating few or no inbound leads.
- » Your sales team does not have time to follow up on all leads, but you cannot increase the size of the team.
- » Your content marketing efforts are not resulting in sufficient engagement.
- » Your outbound lead generation team is targeting too many titles, forcing their messaging to be too broad.
- » You are losing head-to-head in the RFP process against a particular competitor.
- » Prospects are not responding to the pain points your salespeople prompt them with.
- » Many of your prospects are already deep in the buying process by the time you first speak with them.
- » The champions you are cultivating within the target company are not strong enough to get a deal done.

The key to success in this step is to find ways to most succinctly define the specific issues that you encounter and then rigorously evaluate them to find the most critical bottleneck to address first.

What key information are you missing about your buyers?

Once you have identified a performance gap or areas for improvement in your go-to-market process or strategy, you should then consider their root causes. More often than not, companies' initiatives and strategy fail in execution not for lack of talent, resources, or ideas, but rather because they lack some key information that would help focus their efforts on the right activities.

For example, a sales team can be a lot more effective if it is prepared with information about potential buyer personas it might encounter in a sales cycle in a particular segment. The marketing team will be able to create more effective campaigns if it understands the pain points and has the messaging that raises the interest of the company's prospects.

Therefore, you should be able to map the go-to-market performance gaps to specific missing information about your buyers. For example, if prospects are not responding to the pain points you describe, it is likely that you are either (1) targeting the wrong people or (2) targeting the right people but don't fully understand their business needs. To be safe, you will want to test both.

Some of these information gaps should be relatively easy to fill using basic knowledge of the buying cycle. Others will be harder and will require very specific knowledge of the technology, organization, or buyer's journey in question. A list of typical possible information gaps follows:

Easy:

- » We don't understand the buying roles at our target companies.
- » We don't understand the profile of the people/positions that fill the key buying roles.
- » We don't know how to prioritize the leads that are coming to the sales team.
- » We don't understand the role of other thought leaders/management within the buyer's company.
- » We don't understand our buyers' journey and their involvement at each stage.
- » We don't understand what each buying role needs during each stage in the buyer's journey.

Intermediate:

- » We don't understand where the key points are in the buyer's journey or the specific buyer roles/positions where we should focus our go-to-market efforts right now.
- » We don't understand how the buyers currently perceive our company/products/services relative to our competition.
- » We don't understand the potential regulatory and industry pressures our buyers face.

- » We are unsure of the attitudes toward technology at our buyers' companies. Are they very conservative toward embracing new solutions and ideas?
- » We don't understand the ecosystem of other products and services that the buyers interact with regularly.
- » We don't understand the roles of thought leaders and third-party research firms in the buyer's journey.
- » We don't understand who the people are who influence the buyers at different stages of their buying journey.
- » We don't understand the best marketing channels that can be used to reach the buyers.
- » We don't understand the best sales channels that the buyers use to make purchases like our product.

Advanced:

- » We don't know which of our messaging ideas is best.
- » We are not aware of the potential objections buyers will have to our outreach efforts.
- » We don't understand the elements of the business case for our solutions for our buyers.
- » We don't know the criteria our buyers use to evaluate and purchase a product/solution.
- » We don't know the best creative strategy to use.
- » How do we instruct our business development team to reach the right personas (e-mail and phone conversation guides)?
- » We don't understand the right pricing structure and packages to use.
- » We don't understand the buyer needs after the sale is made (to help us improve customer retention and grow customer revenue over time).
- » We don't know how and where our competitors are marketing their products.

The list is not a comprehensive one — you can always add specific questions or even categories of questions — but the key here is to understand how they correspond to specific issues with your marketing and sales performance.

Note also that the questions above mostly revolve around the buyers and their behavior, processes, and preferences. This is because the buyers are at the center of the go-to-market strategy and learning about the buyers, either directly or indirectly, as this guide shows, is the best way to fill the information gaps. However, there are other questions around marketing channels, competitors, or potential ecosystem partners whose research scope requires techniques other than buyer research. So, it is important that you understand where the most leverage is and that you determine whether a question is best answered by buyer insights research or some other method.

Is a buyer insights project the best way to accomplish our objectives?

After scoping out the project, you may realize that it is not a good fit for the primary objectives you are looking to solve. This project is intended to give you a comprehensive view from the buyer's prospective, and not all organizations need, want, or have time to execute market research on this scale. Alternatively, the problem you are trying to solve may reside outside of what we've defined in Chapter 1 as buyer insights. In the course of discovering gaps in your knowledge, you may find tangentially related problems that aren't best answered through a buyer insights project as we have constructed it. These are best addressed in a separate project, with somewhat different methodology. Some examples are:

- » If your problem is that you don't understand which companies to sell to, you aren't ready for a buyer insights project. Answer that question by diving into [segmentation research](#) before thinking about buyer insights.
- » If you are unsure about how your organizations will use your product, take a few steps back and look into doing some [user research](#).
- » If you are unsure of how the technology landscape looks — that is, what other technologies exist in your space and how they are sold — consider doing [ecosystems research](#).
- » If you require more clarity on which marketing channels are best to use to approach your buyers, consider looking more deeply into [researching marketing channels](#) that might be appropriate for your product/solution.

Whatever your situation, there may be a more direct way to solve your problem than the methods outlined in this guide. Before continuing, verify that this guide will efficiently deliver the insights you're interested in learning.

What are the project's constraints?

While the easy information gaps should be covered by most projects, your ability to answer the intermediate and difficult questions about your buyers will be limited by the following constraints:

- » Human resources
- » Project budget
- » Your ability to find and enlist research targets
- » Your existing knowledge
- » Time limitations

Understanding any constraints on the project early on will help you keep the scope within your allotted means.

Who will directly benefit from the output of this project?

Identify the primary decision-makers within your organization who will benefit from greater knowledge of the customer. This will likely be one or two top people from each of the following departments: sales, marketing, product/user experience, and customer service. These colleagues will serve as contributors during the project, and will be able to answer many questions that you can't. However, be careful not to bring too many cooks into the kitchen; incorporating too many opinions and collecting feedback at each stage can bog down and dilute a project.

What is the anticipated impact of the project?

Information and insights on their own cannot have an impact. While a buyer insights project will yield substantial amounts of data, it can only have an impact if it leads to a change in how the organization thinks and acts.

For example, the project output might highlight some critical customer pain points that your sales and business development teams were previously unaware of. While the information is useful, what are some change processes that might result from the output?

- » The marketing team can update their messaging to better align with the customer. This will enable your business development reps to be more effective when calling prospects and produce more leads.
- » The sales teams can refine their sales pitches to be more relevant to the prospects' pain points and increase your conversion rates.

The above illustrates two impact points where the project was able to drive specific changes that benefited specific teams in the organization and ultimately the bottom line.

In another example, the project might reveal more information about your prospect's buyer journey (e.g., your prospect needs to prepare a business case to get approval to buy your product or service). The question you have to ask is, "Based on this information, what can we change or do better?" In this example two possible changes are:

- » The marketing team can create content that supports a business case for the product or service being sold. This can be used to increase inbound leads and help BDRs reach out to prospects.
- » The sales teams can approach the prospects and offer these materials or additional analyses that support their business case. This can result in higher conversion rates.

Ultimately the goal of any buyer insights project is to leverage the insights to drive change within the organization that yields positive impact. The two examples in this section are just a selection of the many positive impacts that can result from conducting a buyer insights study.

What is the output?

Discuss the project with your stakeholders to identify what form the output can take to be most useful to them. This will vary by each department in your organization. Keeping a tangible end product in sight throughout the project will keep your stakeholders excited for the outcome and keep you on the right track in your research.

There are eight primary outputs that you can present to your stakeholders:

- » The Key Buyer Personas and Their Roles: These identify the titles and roles of the key players in the buyer's journey at an organization. The personas will play a large role in helping your go-to-market team craft content and messaging that resonates with each buyer. The personas will also reveal more information about the influencers they consult and the sales/marketing channels that they favor for outreach purposes.
- » Unique Messaging that is Tailored to Each Buyer: A message is a quick sentence or phrase that speaks to a concern or pain point the buyer is experiencing. These messages are succinct themes (reduce IT costs, help meet compliance guidelines) that form the basis of making a connection with your prospect during the outreach process.
- » The Buyer Journey: This will reveal the key steps that an organization takes to buy your product. It enables your marketing team to identify the key steps and tailor outreach programs to a specific point in the buyer journey. It also informs your sales teams of critical steps in the process where buyers get “stuck” and often abandon the buyer journey altogether.
- » The Buying Criteria: Before you can sell to your buyer, you need to understand what the drivers are behind a selection of a product. This could be specific product features, industry certifications (SSAE 16, Microsoft Partner, etc.), or specialty in a specific industry. Your buyer personas will shed light on what factors matter to a potential customer when they choose a provider.
- » Go-to-Market Asset Package: This will bring all of your buyer insights into a single, cohesive, actionable deliverable and give your go-to-market teams — especially your business development team — a comprehensive overview of the buyer journey, personas, an industry/competitor overview, and a set of communication templates.
- » Competitive messaging: A core part of buyer insights projects is speaking with your customers and prospects. As part of these interviews, you will learn more about how your competitors sell their products to them, and how the prospect views them.
- » Decision Process Influencers: A list of factors that influences the decision of the buyers or buying organization when they are considering the purchase, or considering multiple vendors. A buyer might rely on external sources or referrals to help make a decision, or use consultants to carry out a rigorous evaluation process, and it is crucial to understand what these steps and the drivers are.

What are the segments you are interested in?

Ideally, you will have done some segmentation analysis to understand which segments are the most important points of focus for your buyer research. Without narrowing down your focus to a few top segments, your potential pool of buyers will be too large to yield actionable information. Strongly consider conducting some segmentation research, or at the very least an ad-hoc segmentation project to synthesize internal opinions. Finally, keep in mind that each additional segment you add to the project will suck resources away from the others. An explicit, prioritized list of segments will help keep your project from drifting out of control.

How many interviews do you need to conduct?

This decision depends on multiple factors, such as the manpower available, resources available for interview compensation, the size of the customer base within the segment(s) you want to examine, and the amount of information your stakeholders will need to confidently make impactful changes.

If the support, resources, and interview pool are there, there's essentially no limit to the amount of research you can do. However, the marginal advantage of conducting an additional interview does decline after more than a handful, while the administrative overhead continues to increase. More is not always better.

When our portfolio companies ask us how many responses they need, there's no concrete statistical answer we provide them for this type of research. Too many of the important insights are qualitative and don't lend themselves neatly to statistical analysis. The simple answer is that one interview is better than zero, and we generally shoot for 5-10 per persona to make sure a single outlying response doesn't skew the entire project.

The most important thing is conducting enough interviews so that your stakeholders will be confident in your results. If you only interview three people (as Steve Krug advocates for usability testing in "Rocket Surgery Made Easy"), you run the risk of getting three conflicting answers and no convincing conclusion.

Before moving on, make sure you have come to an agreement with your stakeholders on:

- » The minimum and maximum number of interviews /responses
- » The minimum responses per segment
- » The minimum responses per buyer role

What is the project's overall budget and the structure for interview compensation?

The project planning phase is the time to secure a budget for the project. This budget should include any information providers or paneling services you plan to use, but the primary expense will be compensation for interviews or surveys.

More interview compensation will generally result in a higher conversion rate, but the magnitude of the effect is often difficult to estimate. Some reasons you might need the higher success rate that compensation offers are:

- » Your pool of potential respondents is small
- » Your manpower is more limited than your monetary resources
- » The project is under tight time constraints
- » The respondents are highly paid executives and won't respond without being compensated for their time
- » Your targets are not on good terms with your company (e.g., lost customers) and won't agree as a favor

Don't forget that your time is an extremely valuable resource and must be considered in the budget discussion. Even modest interview compensation can often result in a much higher conversion rate and save hundreds of dollars in manpower. Before you push for a bootstrapped project, always consider alternate ways to get to the same outcome.

When deciding the type of compensation, the best option is generally a credit for your service. If this isn't applicable, the next best option is an electronic gift card, which can easily be delivered by e-mail. Cash is difficult to deliver, so we generally don't offer it. Also, you can offer a sweepstakes for a gift card. This technique is commonly used by large retailers who seek feedback on their customer experience surveys.

Common Challenges and Their Solutions When Conducting Buyer Insights Research

	Common Challenge	Solution
Planning	Difficulty getting buy-in or commitment from the stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Use your project owner's leverage to help drive buy-in across your organization » Present the project in terms of output: What concrete deliverables will you give them, and how will they be helpful? » Consider cutting them out of the project entirely. If they don't see value in your project or don't have time for it, they likely won't use the results anyway
Planning	Too many hypotheses to test given budget and time constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Force stakeholders to prioritize their ideas » Merge similar ideas that can be tested as one
Research	Inability to find e-mail addresses for prospect targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Look for common connections that could introduce you » Consider purchasing a list, if it's within your budget » Reach out via social media (LinkedIn or Twitter) instead » When all else fails, cold call
Research	Low response rate from early rounds of interview requests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Continue reaching out after an appropriate amount of time; often it takes three or more e-mails to get a response » Alter your request e-mail or your phone pitch » Consider increasing the compensation you are offering » Find more contacts » Switch to a more scalable platform (e.g., survey) and reach out to a larger list
Research	Difficulty reaching a certain persona or segment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Reach out to your previous interviews for references » Try to learn persona details during your conversations with other roles » Rethink the importance of the role or segment; is it less common than you previously thought?

Statistics on Research Outreach Efforts by Methods, Targets, and Information Requested

Project	Interview Method Internet/Phone	Number of Attempts	Length in Mins	Respondent Type	Target Industry
Buyer Insights Project 1	Phone	3	30	Customer	Retail
Buyer Insights Project 2	Phone	3	20	Cold Prospect	Consumer Packaged Goods, Retail
Buyer Insights Project 3	Phone	3	30	Cold Prospect	B2B Software, Information Services, Telecom
Buyer Insights Project 4	Internet	3	5	Cold Prospect	B2B Software, Information Services, Telecom
Buyer Insights Project 5	Phone	5	45	Current Customer	Technology
Buyer Insights Project 6	Phone	3	15	Lost Prospects	Technology
Buyer Insights Project 7	Phone	3	30	Cold Prospect	Health Care, Education, Manufacturing
Buyer Insights Project 8	Internet	2	10	Lost Prospects	Technology and Others
Buyer Insights Project 9	Phone	2	5	Cold Prospect	Insurance
Lost Customer Project 1	Phone	5	20	Lost Customers	Software
Lost Customer Project 2	Phone	5	15	Lost Customer	Media
Market Intelligence Project 1	Phone	1	2	Cold Prospect	Hospitals
Market Intelligence Project 2	Internet	3	2	Cold Prospect	Hospitals
Market Intelligence Project 3	Phone	3	30	Cold Prospect	Multiple
Market Opportunity Project	Phone	3	10	Cold Prospect	Higher Education
Market Research Project 1	Internet	2	3	Prospective Employee	Multiple
Market Research Project 2	Internet	2	3	Industry Experts	Staffing
Marketing Channel Project	Phone	3	30	Cold Prospect	B2B Software, Information Services
Messaging Project 1	Phone	1	10	Cold Prospects/Customers	Hospitals
Messaging Project 2	Internet	2	10	Cold Prospect	Hospitals
Partnership Research Project	Phone	3	5	Cold Prospect	Medical, Accounting
Segmentation Project 1	Phone	4	60	Prospects/Customers	Multiple
Segmentation Project 2	Phone	3	30	Cold Prospect	Brands, Consumer Packaged Goods, Retail, Technology, Hotels

Statistics on Research Outreach Efforts by Methods, Targets, and Information Requested, Continued.

Project	Respondent Level	Respondent Function	Compensation	# of Target Respondents	# of Successful Interviews	Conversion Rate
Buyer Insights Project 1	Director/VP	Marketing and Development	\$25	16	4	25.0%
Buyer Insights Project 2	Director/VP	Market Research	None	411	9	2.2%
Buyer Insights Project 3	Senior/Chief	Technical	\$25	98	4	4.1%
Buyer Insights Project 4	Senior/Chief	Technical	\$10	116	4	3.4%
Buyer Insights Project 5	Managers, VPs	Development, Engineering, QA	None	17	10	58.8%
Buyer Insights Project 6	Entry Level and Managers	Development, Engineering, Product Management	None	46	9	19.6%
Buyer Insights Project 7	Managers	IT	\$25	52	6	11.5%
Buyer Insights Project 8	Entry Level and Managers	Development, Engineering, Product Management	None	400	41	10.3%
Buyer Insights Project 9	Managers, VPs	Executive, IT	None	107	15	14.0%
Lost Customer Project 1	Manager/Director	Technical	\$20	17	8	47.1%
Lost Customer Project 2	Managers	Marketing, Media, Creative	\$20	34	10	29.4%
Market Intelligence Project 1	Manager/Director	Medical Records	None	91	33	36.3%
Market Intelligence Project 2	Multiple	Administrative and IT	None	822	73	8.9%
Market Intelligence Project 3	Multiple	Legal, Financial	\$20 - \$100	878	13	1.5%
Market Opportunity Project	Multiple	CFO, Technology	None	153	25	16.3%
Market Research Project 1	Multiple	Software Engineer	None	12558	120	1.0%
Market Research Project 2	Multiple	Recruiter	None	645	106	16.4%
Marketing Channel Project	Senior/Chief	Architect, Engineer	\$50	435	10	2.3%
Messaging Project 1	Primarily C-Level	Multiple	None	407	9	2.2%
Messaging Project 2	Primarily C-Level	Multiple	None	551	11	2.0%
Partnership Research Project	Senior/Chief	Executive, Sales	None	34	6	17.6%
Segmentation Project 1	Senior Management	Technical	\$50	389	22	5.7%
Segmentation Project 2	Managers	Market Research, Insights	None	80	23	28.8%

E-mail Templates for Primary Market Research

Request to Participate in a Survey

Subject: Quick Survey About Your Law Firm, With Compensation

Dear <<insert name>>,

ProBill, a billing software company, is conducting a survey to understand the purchasing decisions at small law firms like yours. The survey will consist of 15 questions that help us understand your and your firm's needs and criteria when evaluating a billing solution. It should take about 15 minutes to complete, and at the end you'll receive a \$5 Amazon gift code as a token of our appreciation.

Please follow this link to take the survey:

<<insert survey Link>>

Thanks for your participation!

We realize your time is very valuable, so if you'd like to unsubscribe from future e-mails, please follow this link:

<<Insert unsubscribe link>>

Sincerely,

Tony

Product Marketing Manager, ProBill, Inc.

(617) 848-0010

Request for a Phone Interview

Subject: Market Research Interview Request with Compensation

Dear <<Insert name>>,

We haven't met, but I work for a billing software company called ProBill and we are currently launching a solution for small law firms called ProBill Legal. Ahead of the launch, we're conducting market research interviews with decision-makers in our target segment to understand your and your firm's needs and criteria when evaluating a billing solution. The calls generally last 20-30 minutes and we're offering a \$20 Amazon gift code as a thank you for participants.

Once again, these are market research interviews, not sales calls, and I won't pass along any of your specific information to our sales team. If you'd like to participate, please reply to this e-mail with your availability for next week.

Thanks for your time,
Tony
Product Marketing Manager
ProBill, Inc.
(617) 848-0010

Sample Interview Guide

Below is a basic interview guide for a 30-minute phone interview. During an actual project, we would likely go into deeper detail on certain sections and provide more company- or product-specific questions and prompting. (For more detailed or longer interviews, additional questions follow this interview guide.) In the following list, “problem X,” “use case X,” and “product X” all refer to items related to your company or solution.

INTRODUCTION:

Thanks for agreeing to take the call. We’re currently doing a market research project for product X, and we’re speaking with customers and industry participants to understand their requirements, needs, and decision-making process when it comes to selecting a vendor for this type of product. Again, this isn’t a sales call, and none of the specific information you offer will be shared with our salespeople. The call should last about 30 minutes. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

QUESTIONS:

What were the circumstances that led you to start looking for a product X vendor?

Optional follow-ups:

- » What was the problem you were looking to solve?
- » Was there a specific event that highlighted this problem?
- » Was there an internal solution you considered?
- » Where did you look for more information? Prompt: Googling vendors, magazines, asking peers, associations

As you narrowed down your list of possible solutions, what were the criteria that you considered?

Optional follow-ups:

- » What were the features or value propositions that all of the solutions seemed to offer?
- » What made your short-listed vendors stand out?
- » When and how did you begin speaking to salespeople from prospective vendors?
- » Was criteria X important to you? Why or why not?

What were the common objections that would lead you to eliminate a vendor?

Optional follow-ups:

- » Why was that so important?
- » How about objection X?
- » What were the technical requirements of the product?

Who else was involved in the buyer journey and how were they involved?

Optional follow-ups:

- » Who was the main technical buyer?
- » Who needed to approve or sign the contract?
- » Was there a formal committee?
- » How was the final decision made?

What were the vendors you considered as finalists?

Optional follow-ups:

- » What were the major differences you saw between them?
- » Did you see any differences in their value propositions or marketing strategies?
- » What was your single most important criteria in making the decision?

How are you measuring the success of this project?

Optional follow-ups:

- » Are there specific KPIs that you monitor in relation to product X?
- » In your opinion, has the project been a success? Why or why not?
- » At this point, what would prompt you to switch vendors?

Validation questions (if they haven't already been answered):

- » Are you the decision-maker for this kind of product?
- » What are some of your responsibilities as <title>?
- » Would you consider your company to be in <segment X>?
- » Is there anyone else in your organization or company that we should speak with?

Wrap up: That's about all of the questions I have today. You've been a huge help. Thanks for your time!

Additional Sample Questions for Interview Guides

Validation Questions

- » Could you please summarize your background and current responsibilities?
- » Which division of your company do you work with?
- » Who do you report to?
- » Who reports to you?
- » How are you involved in the software vendor selection process at your company?
- » How were you involved in the buyer journey for product X?
- » What is your current solution for problem X?
- » Are you currently considering or researching solutions to problem X?
- » Does your organization have a need for use case X?
- » How is your organization currently using product X?
- » How many customers does your company have?
- » Does your organization meet segmentation criteria X, Y, and Z?

Hypothesis Testing Questions

General Buyer Journey:

- » Was the buyer journey for product X abnormal for any reason?
- » Who set the budget for problem X or product X?
- » Is there generally a committee to select software vendors?
- » Who is on that committee?
- » Does each member of the committee have a similar role, or do you divide responsibilities?
- » Who were the economic buyers in the process?
- » Who were the technical buyers?
- » Who were influencers or approvers in the purchase process?
- » How and when was <<insert title>> involved in the process?

Early Stage Buyer Journey:

- » How did you personally first hear about product X?
- » How did your company learn about its current solution?
- » Was there an in-house alternative to purchasing a vendor solution?
- » At what point did you disqualify the internal solution and why?
- » Who was the first person at your company to suggest product X as a solution?
- » How did they hear about it?
- » At the point you heard about product X, who else in the company had discussed it?
- » Who at your company is generally responsible for discovering vendors?
- » Were the vendors involved in your need education? How long did the need education process last?
- » Did any specific event trigger the buyer journey?

Late-stage Buyer Journey:

- » Was there a price negotiation process for product X?
- » Who at your company was involved in the negotiations?
- » Who at your company has final say when purchasing software?
- » Who signed the contract for product X?
- » Who has to approve the purchase?
- » Is there an RFP process at your company?
- » Does your company require an ROI evaluation for each solution?
- » Did you require a pilot or proof of concept in your deal process?

Buying Criteria:

- » What were the pain points that led you to start searching for vendors like product X?
- » Did you collectively decide on a set of criteria before evaluating vendors?
- » What were those criteria?
- » Were there different weights or levels of importance assigned to each criteria?
- » Which were the most important to you personally?
- » Were you responsible for the final say on any of these criteria in the purchase process?
- » Did any important buying criteria come up during the buyer journey that you didn't consider originally?

- » What were common objections to vendors you evaluated?
- » Who raised each of these objections?
- » Were there any criteria that were not satisfied by the solution you selected?
- » Were there any technical requirements?
- » Were there data or system integration requirements?

Competitive Positioning:

- » How many vendors did you uncover as potential solutions?
- » Of these, how many were finalists in your selection process?
- » How did your team perceive each finalist?
- » Did you believe their value propositions were credible?
- » Did you have concerns about any of the vendors' ability to execute?
- » What were the differences in features between viable solutions?
- » Were there differences in usability?
- » Was the service model a factor in your decision?
- » Did you perceive differences in customer support quality?
- » Now that you've selected a vendor, what would it take for you to switch to a competitor?
- » Was price a major differentiator?
- » Were any of the solutions you considered disqualified due to price?
- » Was contract structure a major factor?

User Information:

- » Who uses the product on a day-to-day basis?
- » How is the user represented in the buying cycle?
- » Who was present at product demos, and what was their assessment of each product they evaluated?
- » Who owns the support/customer service relationship at your company?
- » What do the users like or not like about product X?
- » How does that differ from their expectations?

Ecosystem:

- » Did you interact with any outside consultants or analysts before making your decision?
- » Are there any related technologies that integrate with your solution?
- » Are there any that don't but you would like to?
- » Did you ask any current vendor relationships for their advice when considering product X?

Peers and Marketing Channels:

- » How did you research vendors in the space?
- » Are there any events you attended that contributed to your knowledge of the space?
- » Are you a part of any relevant associations?
- » Do you regularly read any relevant publications?
- » When searching online for potential vendors, what were the specific search terms you used?
- » Have you noticed any related vendor advertisements targeting you since you began searching?
- » Did you speak with colleagues or peers regarding vendors?
- » What was your relationship with peers?
- » How did you connect with them?
- » Did analysts or online influencers like bloggers play a role in your product discovery?
- » Who else do you think I should speak with for additional information?

Using a Sample Vendor in Market Research

What is Sample Procurement?

Sample procurement is the process of paying a vendor to recruit respondents for a primary research project from one of their respondent panels that they maintain and sell access to as a service. Sample vendors specialize in recruiting and maintaining individuals who can be leveraged by researchers to answer research questions. Each vendor specializes in one or more types of target populations. These can be broader panels like a business-to-consumer panel (B2C), business-to-business panel (B2B), political panels, or very targeted specific panels like a panel of cardiologists at public hospitals, a developer panel, etc.

What Factors Determine Whether You Should Consider Purchasing Samples?

There are many options for recruiting respondents for primary research. One option to consider is sample recruitment. Below are five factors to consider when determining whether or not you should purchase samples for a buyer insights research project:

- » **Time Horizon:** One major benefit of purchasing samples is it generally is a very fast way of getting answers to your research questions.
- » **Target Completions:** The more completions you are looking for, the more difficult it will be to recruit these individuals directly.
- » **Difficulty Reaching Audience:** Some audiences are notoriously hard to reach due to the high level of compensation they expect, the fact that they are heavily burdened by research targeting or sales targeting, or because they are simply very busy. These factors will make utilizing samples more attractive because do-it-yourself recruitment will likely have very low yields and become very time-consuming.
- » **Financial Resource Constraints:** Purchasing samples can be very expensive. Depending on the accessibility of the target audience, there may be other ways to recruit the target audience in a timely manner that won't break the wallet. Generally speaking, this will be the case with less difficult to reach target audiences.
- » **Human Capital Constraints:** Recruiting research respondents does not come easy. In fact, it is really time-consuming. So you will need to have time to do so if you elect to not purchase samples. It is not a big deal to recruit a handful of participants, as you can usually draw from the team's networks, but it becomes much more difficult as you increase the number of completions or interviews you wish to execute.

How Does Sample Procurement Work?

Purchasing samples is a very straightforward process. However, it can be intimidating the first time you do it because sample vendors use a vocabulary set that is foreign to non-market researchers and the commonly used pricing system relies heavily on this terminology.

This section provides an overview of how the sample purchase process works and walks you through the need-to-know vocabulary for this process.

There are two phases of the sample purchase process:

1. Identifying sample vendors and requesting quotes. This is when the researcher identifies vendors that could potentially facilitate their sample needs for the research study and reaches out to them with specs for the research.
2. Quote evaluation and vendor selection. This is the process of selecting a vendor and doing any final validation, such as having the vendor run a feasibility assessment to get data to confirm that it can facilitate the research request.

Identifying sample vendors and requesting quotes

One of the more difficult parts of this process is identifying the best source(s) of samples for your research — this space is full of specialist vendors and lots of them. A great place to start for identifying an appropriate sample vendor is the [Greenbook](#), which provides a list of 71 online panel providers and short descriptions on the types of panel offerings these companies provide. A Google search can also be a useful secondary approach for identifying vendor options.

When reaching out to sample providers for quotes on facilitating a study, you will need to provide the following seven items of information:

- » **Qualifying Criteria:** These are the requirements for an individual to qualify for the survey. This could include firmographics and/or respondent demographics. It is really important to be crystal clear about the qualifications required for your research study, so that you get an accurate feasibility assessment. If you have the survey screener questions already written, it is helpful to provide them to the sample vendor.
- » **Length of Survey (LOS):** This is the maximum expected length of the interview or survey. If the survey or interview contains skip logic, this is the length of the longest track.
- » **Field Time:** This is the length of time from survey launch to close. Providing sample vendors with a longer time window to recruit respondents will increase the likelihood that vendors can facilitate the survey.

- » **Target Number of Completions:** This is the number of completed survey responses you are looking for via this survey.
- » **Quota Requirements:** If your survey has multiple respondent groups, then you will need to specify the target number of completions you are looking to collect from each respondent group. It is really important to provide a very clear definition of the respondent groups.
- » **Service Requirements:** This is the level of assistance that you are looking for with this research study. Specifically, you will need to specify if you plan to design and/or program the survey.
- » **Special Requirements:** You will also need to specify if you have any special requirements, such as if you want to be able to ask respondents if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Only some vendors can facilitate this request, so it is important to confirm your vendor's capabilities in the initial quote.

The more targeted a study you are running, the larger number of quotes you should request from sample providers. Always reach out to a few extra vendors, because the turnaround on quotes can take a couple of days, and having to wait for a quote will slow down the research process. For more targeted sample requests, we recommend reaching out to 10 sample providers; for less targeted ones, 5 to 7 sample vendors.

Quote evaluation and vendor selection

Each vendor will typically send you a quote via e-mail. This can be a formal document that lays out the exact formula for how the total expected cost was derived, or an informal estimate highlighting several line items.

Note that this is an expected cost, highly dependent upon the accuracy of the vendor's assumptions about the task, so it is important to understand what each of these input factors in an estimate means when evaluating a quote:

- » **Cost Per Completion (CPC):** This is the cost you pay for each completed survey response. This rate is generally contingent upon estimates of the following factors:
 - Incidence rate
 - Length of survey
 - Size of target audience
 - Difficulty of reaching target audience

For more targeted studies or ones with more stringent qualifying criteria, it is important to have the vendor run a feasibility assessment to make sure that you have realistic expectations of what the cost per completion will be.

- » **Project Minimum:** This is the minimum contract size for purchasing samples. Some vendors require a minimum purchase. This tends to be higher with groups that do not maintain their own panels and are leveraging other groups' panels, although this is not always the case.
- » **Incidence Rate (IR):** The rate that respondents qualify for the survey. This is an indication of how difficult it will be for the sample vendor to reach the target number of completions for the study. It also shows how many people from their panel will need to be invited to partake in the study to reach the completion goal. This is important because sample providers have a maximum capacity in this regard as their panels are a fixed size and their panelists agree to take only a certain number of invitations per week. The incidence rate is calculated as the number of respondents who satisfy the criteria in the screener divided by the number of individuals who enter the study and complete the screener questions.
- » **Completion Rate:** The rate of qualified respondents who are expected to complete the full survey. The completion rate is calculated as completions divided by qualified respondents.
- » **Number of Potential Respondents Available:** This is the number of respondents that the sample vendor has available for the study. This number will often fluctuate based on the field time.

Getting Your Survey Ready for Samples

It is important to decide whether or not you will be using samples to recruit respondents for your primary research, as this will affect how you should design the survey instrument that you will use to collect information.

Below are four factors to consider when designing a survey for sample data collection to ensure it is compliant and will not need to be reworked before the survey can be fielded:

- » Most sample vendors are open to you using any survey tool as long as it enables redirects. However, it is important to ask. Having the ability to quota is also a bonus for controlling the number for responses, but it is not necessary.
- » Sample vendors do not allow you to ask respondents for personal identifier information (name, company name, etc.) or contact information (e-mail, phone number). You will need to design questions that allow you to capture the related information you need without violating this requirement.
- » Sample vendors generally will charge you more to ask respondents if they would be willing to do a follow-up interview with you. Not all of vendors offer this option, so ask up front. Each vendor will have a different process for how they deal with connecting you with these individuals.

- » Sample vendors charge a per-completion cost that is a function of size of population, difficulty to access, expected incidence rate, length of study, and incentive level. Having more screener questions will lead to lower incidence rates and higher cost per completion. It is also important to review the language and test your screener questions for biasing that may cause low incidence rates. Many vendors will offer to field a test to evaluate the feasibility and/or expected cost of a research study. It is a good idea to take them up on this as it will provide you with a better sense of the feasibility and actual cost to complete your study.

Sample Request Template

Profile of Desired Sample: Give a brief overview of the audience you want to sample, being as specific as possible (survey length, audience segments, target company size if surveying B2B contacts, etc.)

Survey Type: Online, in most cases.

Survey Length (LOI – Length of Interview): Estimate as best as you can based on number and complexity of questions

Fielding Timeline: How long do you want the sample provider to solicit responses for your survey?

Target Number of Completions: How many responses are you looking for? State any specific quotas for segments (i.e., desired number of responses for each distinct audience)

Persona: Provide in-depth detail on who you want to survey. In the B2B space this includes:

- » Job titles (provide as many as possible, given that sample providers have limited samples)
- » Years of experience
- » Industry
- » Company type (size, revenue). Provide examples of companies that you have in mind to give the sample provider as much information as possible.

Survey Method: Are you hosting the survey internally? Using SurveyMonkey? Some sample providers will program the survey for you; indicate if that service is needed.

Persona Details That Can Be Relaxed: Indicate how strict your criteria are in the Persona section.

Sample Go-to-Market Asset Matrix

By Persona	Managing Partner	Head of IT	CFO
White Papers	“Managing your Billing with ProBill Legal” “Boost Employee Productivity Billing Software”	“Integrating ProBill Legal with your Accounting System” “Managing Login Credentials with ProBill Legal”	“ROI Opportunities with ProBill Legal”
Case Studies	Caulfield, Myers, and Welch		
Online Resources			Total Cost of Ownership Calculator
Slide Decks	ProBill Legal Overview	Technical Specifications Integration Flow Chart	
Analyst Reports		Gartner Magic Quadrant – Professional Services Management Software	

By Stage	Unaware	Qualifying	Qualified and Evaluating
White Papers	“Managing your Billing with ProBill Legal”	“ROI Opportunities with ProBill Legal” “Boost Employee Productivity Billing Software”	“Integrating ProBill Legal with your Accounting System” “Managing Login Credentials with ProBill Legal”
Case Studies	Caulfield, Myers, and Welch		
Online Resources		Total Cost of Ownership Calculator	
Slide Decks	ProBill Legal Overview		Technical Specifications Integration Flow Chart
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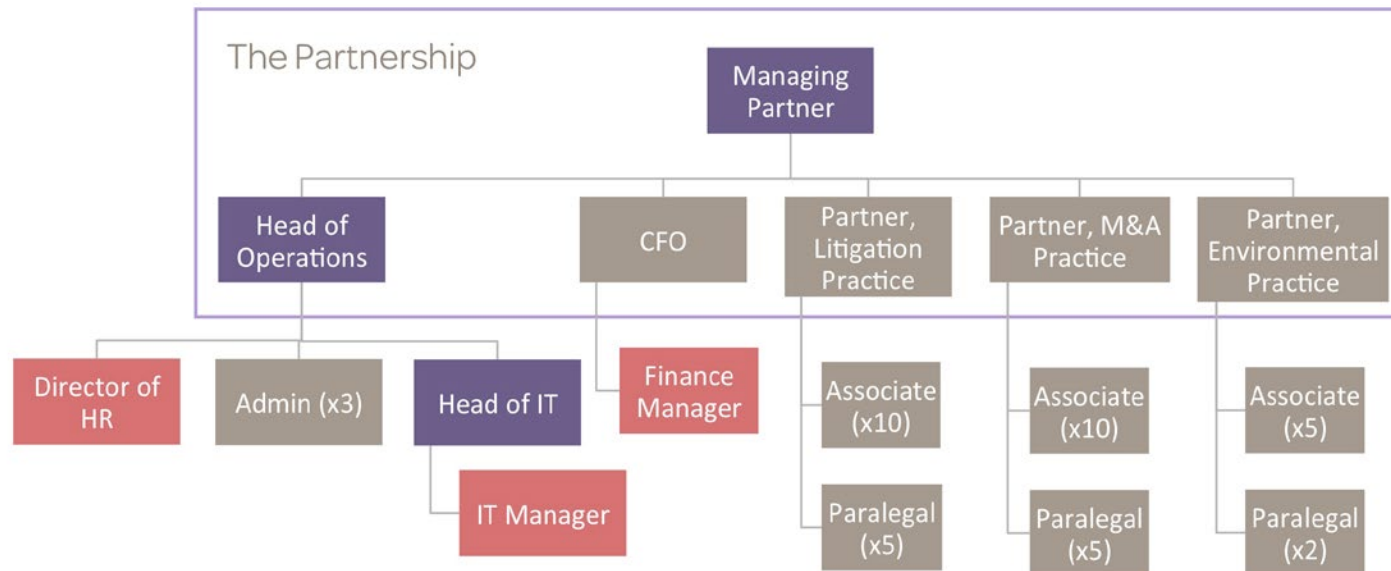
Sample Slides for Presenting Typical Outputs

Typical outputs of a buyer insights project includes information such as organizational structure, buyer persona, buyer journey, and competitive perception. These outputs generally take the form of:

- » Raw interview notes (Word documents)
- » Standardized and compiled interview notes (spreadsheet)
- » A presentation containing the following sections (see below for some examples)
 - Segment definitions
 - Organizational charts
 - Buyer personas
 - Buyer journey
 - Recommended messaging
 - Competitive position
 - Common objections and responses
 - Any other sales or marketing assets requested by stakeholders

Organization Chart

Typical 25-Attorney Law Firm



- This chart shows what we believe to be a typical 25-attorney law firm
- The partnership meets weekly, with the agenda set by the MP
- The CFO, attorneys, and admins may be brought in during the evaluation for user input, but will not typically drive a sale

Buyer User Neither

Buyer Persona Overview

Managing
Partner



- Effectively the CEO of a law firm
- Reports to the partnership
- Administration is a part-time job at sub-20 person firms. Spends about half his time as a practicing attorney
- Core technology decisions are made by the partnership, but the MP sets their agenda and has a strong voice
- Needs a product that balances economics and functionality

Head of IT



- Reports to head of operations, or at smaller firms, MP
- Oversees IT team of approximately 5% of overall headcount
- May use outside IT services firm for after-hours help
- Responsible for discovery and evaluation of new technologies. Presents a recommendation to the partnership
- Few in-house resources: wants something that works out-of-the-box and can be customized at the user level

Head of
Operations



- Does not typically exist in sub-20 person firms: responsibilities are rolled into MP persona
- Often a former partner who has moved into a management role: very familiar with attorney viewpoint
- Primary pain point is that opps reports are overwhelmed with billing responsibilities

Managing Partner Persona



Titles: Managing Partner, Executive Partner, Managing Principal

Reports to: Partnership

Oversees: COO, CFO, Attorney Partners

Business Role:

- The MP acts as the CEO of a law firm. In ProBill Legal's under 50 attorney segment, this is usually a part-time job. They spend about half their time as a practicing attorney and half on firm administration.
- This involves diverse responsibilities, including client-facing responsibilities, PR, vendor management, and financial administration.
- This includes overseeing and approving the firm's billable hours.

Buying Role:

- If the firm has a COO and/or Head of Technology, these positions and the MP make up the core buying committee and have relatively equal power.
- Otherwise decisions are made by a vote of the partners, in which the MP has the tie-breaking vote. This is true at most small law firms.
- Since they have limited administrative staff, the MP is the key person in the buying process.

Use of the Software:

- The MP is the only person in a law firm who uses both the Attorney and Administrator portals of ProBill Legal

Key Criteria:

- Must be Web-accessible to allow attorneys to bill from the road or from home
- Needs to integrate seamlessly with their financial system, which the MP also uses frequently
- The MP does not have a technical background so the system needs to have intuitive, out-of-the-box dashboards and analytics

Existing Solution: Most small firms use Microsoft excel to keep track of their hours

Buying Process

1. Trigger

- A partner or administrator recognizes their billing process as a major impediment and brings it to the partnership for discussion

2. Partnership Buy-in

- If the partnership agrees billing is a pain point, they approve the vendor evaluation initiative, along with a rough budget

3. Evaluation

- The project is handed down to the Head of IT. He and his subordinates build a list of vendors for technical evaluation, and bring in non-IT colleagues selectively for user input

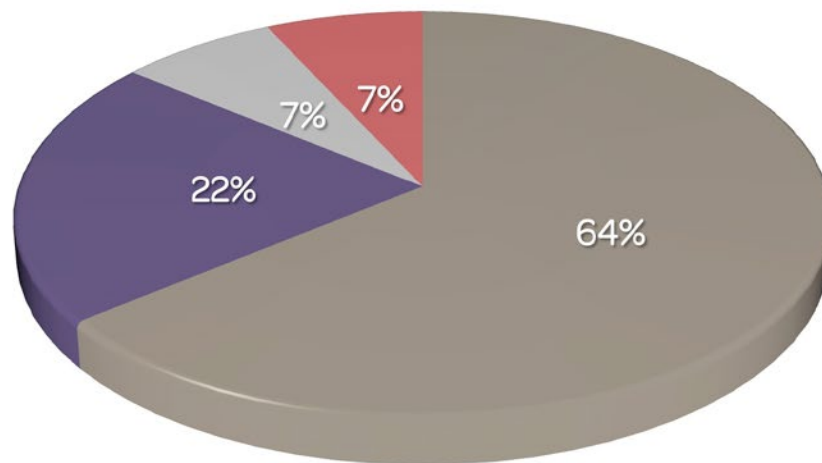
4. Selection

- The head of IT or MP present the top several solutions to the partnership, along with an overall recommendation. The partnership votes

5. Ongoing Evaluation

- Head of IT monitors feedback from attorneys and administrators on the product's functionality, uptime, and support

Competitive Solutions Evaluated by Interviewees



■ InvoiceSoft ■ Rogo ■ Interactiv Software ■ BillManager

InvoiceSoft: Good reviews on functionality, but 6 out of 9 interviewees mentioned cost as a major reason for not selecting this solution. They felt it was designed for larger firms

Rogo: Closest competitor based on cost and product. Integration is a plus, but usability was the main reason interviewees did not select it.

Interactiv Software: On-premise, perpetual license model quickly ruled out in the evaluation stage by most interviewees

BillManager: Good usability but lack of experience dissuaded the one interviewee who evaluated it



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About This eBook

“Buyer Insights Research: How to Understand Your Buyers So You Can Eliminate the Guesswork” is a practical guide to gaining useful insights about your buyers by understanding who they are and the journey that they are on. It provides step-by-step instruction about how to successfully conduct the kind of buyer insights research project your company needs to know about what your buyers care about, how they make decisions, and how to get them to make a purchase.

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OpenView Labs is the strategic and operational consulting arm of [OpenView Venture Partners](#), a global Venture Capital fund that invests in expansion-stage technology companies.

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