Complex, fast-moving, disruptive

The challenges of marketing a tech brand - and how to overcome them

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Introduction

Technology goes hand in hand with the new. Here discoveries turn into products, innovations turn into income, iterations become competitive edges. The market is ever shifting, as is the thinking behind each invention. Whatever holds true today, might not hold true tomorrow.

There are inevitably new challenges too. Content strategies quickly go out of date, familiar brand positioning loses its relevance, and many old marketing tactics simply stop working altogether.

At RH&Co. we've spent years in conversation with technology brands, helping them to spot these emerging pitfalls and find new workarounds, and we wanted to share our learning with you.

We've identified three macro communication challenges:

Complexity
Your technology or industry might be complicated but the way you communicate must be crystal clear.

Fast-moving industry
When your industry is moving at the speed of light, your comms need to keep pace without overstretching.

Disruption
Breaking new ground exponentially increases the pressure to define and defend your position.

Of course, we're talking about the technology industry here, and that means there's a lot more to these challenges than we can summarise in a few sentences.

We'll keep it practical. In the following guide we're going to:

1. Outline each macro challenge
2. Break it down into clear micro challenges
3. Propose a solution to each one.

Let's get into it.
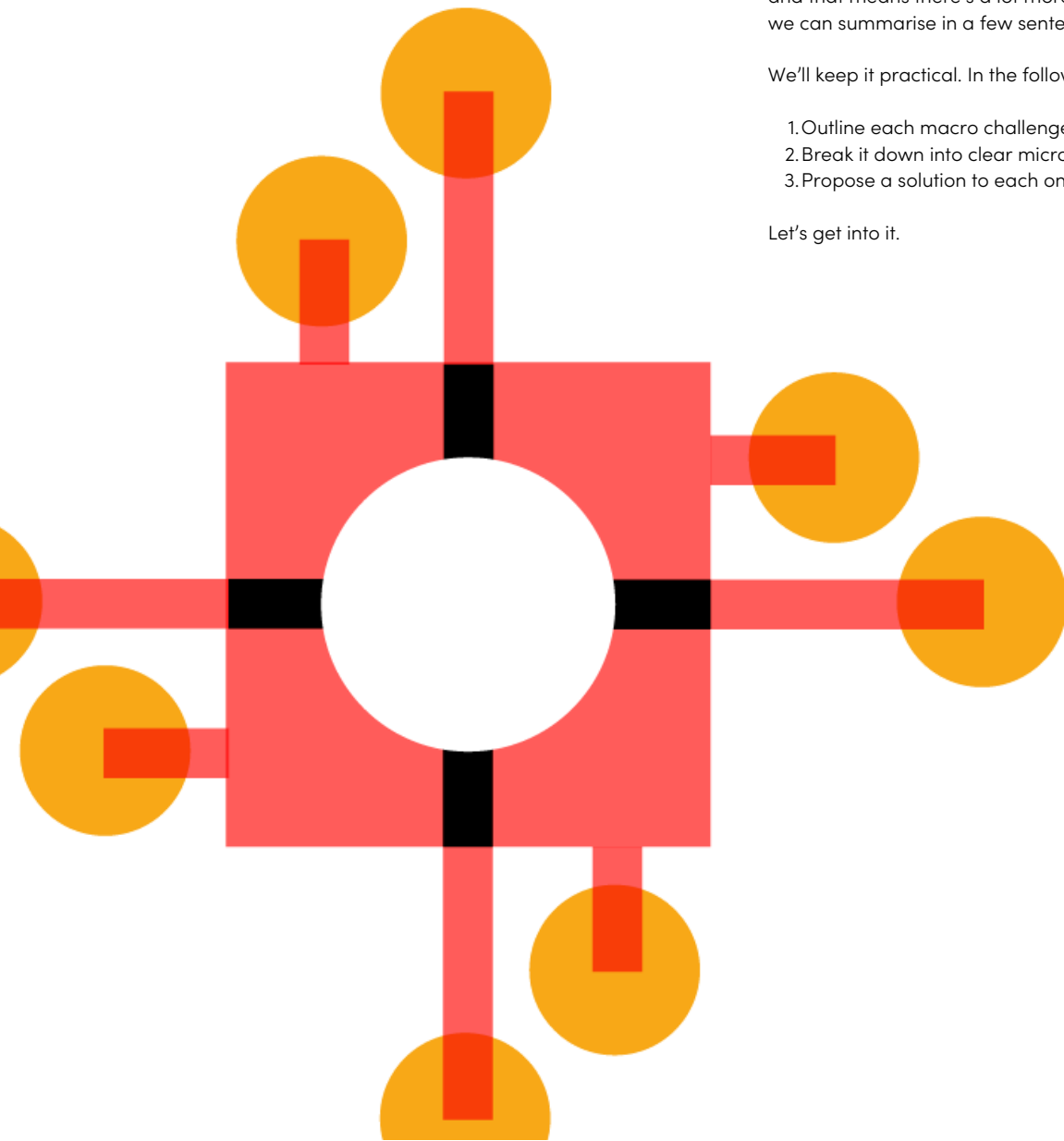
Macro challenge 01: Complexity

How to be clear as nanocrystal

Sell the benefits, not the features. Sell the lifestyle. Simplify. That's the marketing advice you might have followed before you started marketing complex technology. Then you hit a brick wall. Or possibly one made of plasma.

That classic marketing advice has its place – but it doesn't always work when your company has a chief science officer, or your target audience includes CTOs, or when 50% of your audience doesn't understand what your industry even is.

Here we outline the communication challenges that complexity brings, why traditional marketing advice doesn't always suit, and what alternatives actually work.

Micro challenge 01: Your audience is often confused

It's not just innovation that can get complex, it's often the context too. Cybersecurity products provide nuanced solutions to multifaceted threats. Biotech addresses gaps within disease detection that impact a sprawling NHS infrastructure. Embedded finance solves money flow issues that most businesses don't even know exist.

Audiences don't always see the wider picture.

Sometimes it's like starting in the middle of a Christopher Nolan film and expecting a new audience to understand why solving that equation on Michael Caine's blackboard really matters. Or why it's a bad thing to die when you're in a dream within a dream.

If people don't really understand the problem, they're not going to be won over by the solution.

Solution: Don't just simplify; make people curious

Simplicity works. To a point. While you can't afford to distract customers with superfluous detail or technical language that won't resonate, you also can't afford to simplify your product or service's true value away.

Instead of aiming for simplicity, aim to capture attention. If you can find the one line that will disturb your audience's status quo, they'll become interested enough to grapple with what you have to say. And if you can make someone curious enough to learn about their problem, they might become interested in your solution.

This is a challenge that one of our clients, Weavr, is tackling head on.

Their emerging industry of embedded finance is full of brands offering solutions that appear almost identical. All seem to offer digital cards, a better payment experience and so on, but the blurred lines around compliance are causing some buyers to invest in the wrong technology for their business.

As a result, Weavr are doing everything they can to communicate the difference – smart messaging, thought leadership, and strategic content campaigns. While they don't burden their audience with every detail behind how embedded finance works, they're very good at getting you to care about the next thing they have to say, so that buyers can make an fully-informed decision.

Micro challenge 02: Your audience is sceptical

Complex technology in the B2B space usually falls into one of two categories:

- It's emerging technology and relatively unknown
- It's proven but the market is flooded with similar products

Noise and unfamiliarity both breed scepticism – not in everyone, but enough to make it tougher once you've run out of early adopters. That scepticism is fuelled by the habits of some technology marketers, who are determined to make a multi-faceted product or service sound as simple as possible.

The oft-touted argument is that people don't need to understand the combustion engine to buy a car. But this is often a flawed comparison. First, the car is a proven concept, and your technology might not be. If you were to step into a self-driving car in London traffic, you might want a bit more explanation about how it keeps you safe first.

Second, most car manufacturers are also known entities. People don't need as much context when they already trust a brand, which is why when Google released their Pixel phone, they could just advertise it as 'The Google Phone' with no additional copy. People understood the brand, so they understood the value of the product.

Too many marketers act as though they have this luxury when their brand hasn't earned it yet. Over-explaining features used to be a flaw of the technology industry, but now too many of us have swung to the other extreme, relying on hype language and presenting a company's technology as if it's a magic show.

You can do this once you've got an expert reputation, but when you're relatively new in the market, or the market itself is new, you can't afford to dish out too much hyperbole. Particularly in B2B. Hype never works on the sceptical – in fact, it puts them off.

Solution: Don't offer hype; make the technology human

It's easy to lead with hype, which is why so many brands do it - recycling adjectives like 'adaptable', 'state of the art' or 'innovative' until they all sound like generic keys to a vague future.

Instead of hyping up your product or service, drill down into your audience. What do they care about? What are they already doing that your tech reimagines? What will be their experience of your product on a human-level?

Libeo's accounts payable platform does this brilliantly, without falling into the trap of so many automation-led products, which usually say things along the lines of 'less paperwork', 'no admin' or the most cheesy line in all B2B

marketing, 'We take care of X, so you can focus on what you do best.'

Instead, Libeo, who we worked with on a series of customer-focused blog posts, plays to specific verticals in their small business audience, talking to hospitality with phrases like "wait on your tables, not for your invoices" or speaking to e-commerce: "sell in a single click? Then pay that way, too."

Stories are complex tech's best friend – real accounts of real people experiencing your product, working behind the scenes of your organisation, or taking the lead through your services. If you're interested, you can see how we did this for one multichannel sales tech company.

Micro challenge 03: Your audience is sometimes expert

Some technology companies are lucky: they have one customer persona – expert or non-expert – and they can pitch their product or service at this exact frequency.

This is rare, however, particularly for B2B technology that requires purchasing sign-off from multiple departments, some tech-fluent and others not. We've often had to tailor a tech company's messaging five ways – between startup level CTOs and CEOs, as well as enterprise level CSOs, CIOs and CEOs.

Alternatively you might be skipping a tech audience altogether but you still might be talking to experts of

another kind – ecologists, HR directors, civil servants. Here you need to translate your technical expertise, not so anyone can understand it, but so a specialist in another field can appreciate it.

The danger here is your content marketing can easily come across as patronising, or ill-informed. The number of HR-tech platforms with blogs offering basic HR advice – sometimes generated by AI – to seasoned HR professionals is surprising, since it's the kind of content that would make a potential customer think a brand's technology is beneath them.

Solution: Don't silo the marketing dept; build your brand together

Since your audience is likely to have many faces and facets, you'll want your messaging and comms to be as complete and rich as possible.

That means you mustn't silo your marketing team. Gather members of your wider team to help define your brand, and create messaging pillars that will resonate with every level of your audience. Check out our Brand Roundtable discussion on 'Defining your brand: who should be involved?' to learn more about how to do this.

The same applies to content. Your team is full of specialist understanding, so mine their expertise and showcase it if it's relevant to your audience. Get your marketing team to interview external experts when you need to talk beyond your remit, complete original research if you can, and – whether your team is full of

data scientists, technical advisors, or mathematicians – keep them talking to your marketing people.

Having interviewed a plethora of technical authorities over the years – from algorithm auditors to penetration testers and leaders in fintech – we've learned they're the ones who can often pull out a new conceptual model on the fly, or drill down into the nuance of a subject.

They might want to say too much, sure. And you might need a copywriter to arrange what they say on a page, or hone it into a video script for your audience, but your experts' input is what gives your brand the depth and authority it needs. That's what enables you to begin a lasting conversation with your audience, one where they'll listen long enough to see why they need your technology.

Up next...

Macro challenge 02: Fast-moving
When tomorrow is out-of-date

Macro challenge 02: Fast-moving

When tomorrow is out-of-date

Technology is defined as the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes. And in some fields, all those aspects are constantly on the move – the knowledge, the application of it, and the purpose behind it.

You might be in:
- An emerging field like generative AI
- An established industry like martech, constantly competing for the next edge
- A reactive industry like cybersecurity, constantly evolving to meet the next threat.

Whichever way, you'll probably be selling the future, commenting on what's next, and trying to keep up with everything that changed yesterday.

It's a challenge to market in such fast-moving industries. How do you present a consistent brand when you need to constantly evolve? How much do you say about your product roadmap when it's always shifting? And how do you convince the world you're still one step ahead of your competitors?

Micro challenge 01: The industry is changing

You wake up, and suddenly aluminium-sulphur batteries exist. New neural-implants are viable. And, although plenty of companies haven't finished the build of their last closed loop payment system, open loop solutions are everywhere.

Many of the technology industries move as a kaleidoscope moves. It's part of what makes these sectors so interesting to work in, and it's also what makes life so challenging for marketers.

As Deloitte wrote in their 2023 Tech Trends report: "Before the economic landscape of the metaverse changes from fluid to concrete, pioneers will need to make their moves." That is just as applicable to the fields of XR, embedded finance or haptics as it is for the metaverse – both on a business level and a brand level.

It's not always about changing your product pipeline today. Sometimes it's enough to show you're aware you might need to change it tomorrow. If you're a mathematical forecasting company, for instance, your brand content might need to address quantum computing. Or if you're in open payments, you might need to be talking about future government regulation and how your platform will be ready for it.

The danger is that in an attempt to seem ahead of the curve, technology companies can overreach. Everyone wants to talk about the next big thing so they can catch the attention of those scanning the horizon. But you'll want to stay within the boundaries of your expertise, otherwise customers with a better understanding of the emerging technology will see through you.

Solution: Don't just simplify; make people curious

This is an area where siloed marketers are a bad idea (though to be honest, are siloed marketers ever a good idea?). Marketers often the ones with their finger on the pulse but they rarely understand the circulatory system of veins and arteries beneath that pulse.

If marketers can work with the experts in their company, and extract their perspective on an emerging subject, they're much more likely to talk to an audience with the right level of depth, nuance and cautious optimism. In our experience, data scientists, CTOs, and product leads are also more aware of when they shouldn't comment on a topic at all.

Micro challenge 02: Your products are changing

You're used to selling a journey to a destination you haven't finished laying the rail tracks to. The build might not be locked in, there's still end-to-end testing to be done, but you have to market what you're building next – because everyone else is too, and you need to show that you're ahead.

Of course, this status quo comes with its fair share of high profile vapourware products. Whether it's Google Stadia simply promoting features they were never able to release, or the extreme 80's case of Ovation's office suite programme,

which was advertised with a fake demo to try and gain the funding the product team finally needed to finish it (they never did).

Overpromising isn't an option, but neither is under promising. For a number of our clients it's a constant balancing act: knowing when to say a feature is 'coming soon', using the future-facing words investors want to hear (did somebody say blockchain?), and holding fire when a feature just isn't ready to be talked about.

Solution: Sell the future but don't speculate

Marketers here need to keep two hands on two pulses – your audience's needs, and your product team's ongoing struggle to build, test and fix according to schedule.

There's one senior product marketer we work with who is particularly skilled at doing this. As a result they're very adept at knowing the nuances of when, how and at what frequency to advertise a feature or benefit. At times, we've seen them put the hard brake on the company's content or advertising, and there

have been occasions where they've suggested winding down the selling of a product altogether.

In our conversations, it's been important for us to listen to their input but it's been equally important not to hit delete on a claim unless we had to. Often it's been a matter of suggesting alternatives and tweaks that position the messaging exactly where it needs to be. That way the brand could still sell the essence of what they're building towards without slipping into speculation.

Micro challenge 03: Your customers are changing

Tech is affected more by trends than almost any other industry, with perhaps the exception of fashion. The difference is that in the fashion industry, at least historically, people make impulse, almost-instant purchases. Whereas in the technology industries, product purchases can take months, or even years to complete.

This means that the B2B technology you're selling when you complete a sale is never exactly the same product as when you first pitched. You need to catch your addressable market's attention now but you need to anticipate what their wants and needs will be next year. Or possibly the year after, if you're selling to an enterprise.

A different but related issue: your audience might shift entirely. 73% of technology startups pivot to a different market over time, and even if you stay the course in a single sector, almost inevitably the size and maturity of organisations you'll be targeting will increase.

Sometimes this change needs to happen suddenly for tactical reasons. One brand we work with has recently switched from just targeting new challenger companies, to targeting long established organisations in the energy market, based purely on new activity of these companies' sales reps.

Solution: Keep evolving your brand intentionally

Recently, in preparation for a brand voice and messaging workshop with a scaleup, we combed through several documents that detailed the company's customer personas and brand strategy. Even though they were created in the last 9 months, we were told they were already out of date.

No brand can remain static, and in fast-moving technology industries, you've got to be even quicker

on your toes. As we explored in our roundtable discussion on how much should brand evolve, your messaging needs to hit the sweet spot between brand consistency and brand relevance. And to do this, you need to be constantly revising your customer personas and reevaluating your brand strategy to match.

Sometimes this is about crafting vertical-specific messaging that speaks directly to the up-to-the-minute ambitions of specific target markets. But you'll also want to step back occasionally to reevaluate your overall brand and content strategy to make sure it's going to resonate with your audience as a whole.

The trick is to be intentional. We've seen fast-moving technology companies evolve their brands unintentionally – which is a natural outcome of hiring, scaling and trying to swim in bigger ponds.

Maybe the company starts using the same tech-normative language as their new peers, or possibly their values fade into the background as they focus on selling their technology's bottom line benefits. At this point they often need intentional <u>brand engineering</u>.

Up next...

Macro challenge 02: Disruption
Disrupt or die

Macro challenge 03: Disruption

Disrupt or die

As a technology brand, you're always breaking new ground. That's a tough enough task in itself. Before long though, another brand is breaking the ground you're currently standing on.

This is the circle of life in the startup, scaleup and enterprise world, and it requires some nifty work from marketers to create a strategy that doesn't get swallowed by the shifting landscape.

It's a precarious situation. You're either disrupting, failing to disrupt or in danger of disruption. And for brand marketers, this presents a series of hurdles to overcome.

Micro challenge 01: Disruptors need to change the rules of engagement

If you're a disruptive business, you're not just trying to improve the way things are done, you're trying to fundamentally change them. That could be as simple as switching the standard of social media content from curated pictures to scrappy 30 second videos, or it could be as complex as changing the way enterprises procure and pay their supply chain.

If your onboarding process takes minutes, and if there's no cost or a negligible one, you have an advantage here: you can take people straight to proof of concept.

That's definitely not the case for every brand though. What if your disruptive technology requires a minimum investment of £20,000? Or if onboarding is going to take several months? Or if your users are going to need to upend their techstack?

Here you've got your work cut out for you. You can't rely on people trying your product and seeing it's so much better than the way things used to be. So what can you do to change the rules of engagement?

Solution 01: First convince people a new idea is true or possible

Behind every disruptive product lies a disruptive idea, such as:
- Ethical clothing doesn't have to be artisan
- Instant coffee can be as good as barista coffee
- Any house or room can be an airbnb

The trouble is that in technology this premise is often far more complex:
- Open loop payment systems are better than closed loop
- Embedded finance is the future of SaaS
- An employee's experience of the internet is a HR issue
- Mobile QA tooling is broken without automated, end-to-end testing on real devices

Yes, there is a small subsection of the universe that will get it at first glance. They'll probably be your early adopters. But the rest will need to understand the context first (why is mobile QA tooling broken? What are the limitations of closed loop systems?)

You might be able to communicate what you need with a single, ingenious line. Like the 2014 campaign "Slack replaces email in your company," or UiPath's "We make robots so people don't have to be robots." Or, to take a favourite one-liner from our client Weavr: "We help cloud accounting apps move cash, not just watch it."

That's rarely enough on its own though. Some of your audience will need more detail before they'll believe a new idea. Our client BaseKit wants to help big businesses understand that micro businesses need better access to new technology. To drive that premise home, we created an 8,000-word report with original research, interviews and stories.

Micro challenge 02: You're reaching the disillusioned or neglected

Disruptive technology rarely starts out by targeting the mainstream. It usually goes after the outliers, the excluded, and the underserved, who either feel overlooked or actually are overlooked by the current products on the market.

That's an opportunity, but it's also a challenge. As an example, your audience of small businesses and sole traders might not have had a reason to care about accounts payable and receivable technology before – they couldn't afford it and they didn't have the time to learn to use it. Historically, your product would be totally irrelevant and out of reach. You have to convince them they're now included.

Alternatively they might be a disillusioned or disengaged audience – for instance, a Gen Z employee, an entrepreneur from a BAME background, or a team of developers who are tired of using catch-all platforms like Google Firebase to build products. Your task is to show them you relate to their pain and you have the beginnings of a cure.

Solution 02: Show empathy before you sell

In some ways this is marketing 101 but sometimes the simplest principles are the toughest to execute on well.

Particularly in technology, it's easy to get straight to the features, the metrics and the bottom line benefits. First though, it's best to take a moment to talk like a human. That's ultimately what will cut through the disillusionment or alienation that your audience is currently experiencing.

Storytelling is your biggest ally here. We're talking real stories from real humans, ideally talking from the heart. It's a great opportunity for:

- Expert-authored articles
- User-generated content
- Employee-generated content
- Influencers
- Interviews

For instance, one of our clients wanted to shine a spotlight on the transit system of California. In that state, it's typically only the poor that travel by bus. Our client wanted to serve that community while creating a payment system that attracted new riders, so that the whole transit system could become a better funded, green alternative to driving in the region.

It's not just the riders that felt disenfranchised here, it's the bus agencies too. One glance at a neighbouring big city's metro system tells you "this has funding". But the rest of the region was stumbling along with antiquated or non-existent technology.

To set the stage for a new norm, we created a campaign, full of stories, interviews and real world examples. All of these showed how a new, accessible, affordable technology changed everything: these poorly-funded bus agencies could create a transit experience that rivals the big cities.

Micro challenge 03: You can't build forever on a foundation of disruption

The truth is, you're never a disruptor brand for that long – in tech, everything simply moves too fast.

You may start at the low end of the market but to expand you'll need to appeal to premium or enterprise customers too. Or you begin by helping one community but pretty soon you're trying to help many communities. Now you have investors, client expectations to meet and newcomer competitors who are right behind you.

Although they're often held up as an example, Uber is no longer disruptive. They're being chased down by the carbon neutral Bolt, the VAT-paying Kapten and community-focused brands like the woman-exclusive London Lady Chauffeurs. Uber has to stay ahead by providing more features and better quality control – and whether they'll succeed, only time will tell.

Likewise, Slack once summarised their offering rather elegantly in the phrase "Slack replaces email in your company." It was disruptive and interesting at the time but now there are plenty of solutions that replace email. So the company's current campaigns focus on discounts, big feature lists ("over 1800 integrations!"), and a confidence vote from other established brands like Spotify.

This might not be the ideal way to do it but brands do need to grow up a bit eventually. As Deloitte put it in their 2023 tech trends report: "Startups often embrace the mantra 'move fast and break things.' It's easier for them to be disruptive because they're definitionally starting from zero and don't yet have a legacy to protect. Established organisations, on the other hand, very much do."

You can't build on a foundation of disruption forever, so what do you do next?

Solution 03: Find the heart of your brand and keep it fired up

It's a natural fact of life in the startup to scaleup world: your brand must evolve. Your last campaign is no recipe for the next one, and your core brand message might no longer resonate with your new target audience. You need to stay relevant while staying in touch with what made your company special in the first place.

For instance, new Slack-likes such as Mattermost and Rocket.Chat are taking on the juggernaut by staying open source – a point that instantly endears them to developers and sets them apart from incumbents like Slack and Microsoft Teams.

The trick will eventually be, if every work platform becomes open source, to find a new way to differentiate their brand. They could join the feature/discount/price race and try to live on historic gains in brand recognition. This does work for some, after all. But "more, better, cheaper" is a tiring message to keep up, and it's one that's vulnerable to the more emotionally-resonant messaging of new competitors.

And there is an alternative and more compelling option. If you're going to defend your position, you're better off finding the stories and parts of your feature-set that appeal to the emotional makeup of your audience.

For instance, one of our clients has created extremely sophisticated software that's years ahead of other brands. Even though there are new digital-native offerings out there now, the newcomer software is scrappy to the point of being non-compliant and incomplete. Meanwhile our client's solution is watertight – so they double down on this in all their messaging, bringing home the sense that they are the smarter brand.

You can't always play the scrappy startup game. You can't focus on your MVP's single feature for all time. But you can stay distinctive – you just need to engineer your brand at the right time.

Hone your brand's edge with us

This is the end of our guide, but it doesn't have to be the end of our conversation. For a monthly dose of brand strategy, marketing and business advice each month, make sure you sign up to The Right Words.

There are always new communication challenges to overcome. Particularly if you're on the startup to scaleup journey, or you're post-acquisition, or you're looking to stand out as an authority in an emerging industry. To see how we can help you on the journey, check out our solutions:

- Clarify and communicate your message
- Build your brand authority