

10 TAKEAWAYS FROM 10 YEARS OF RUNNING MARKETING AT INVATA



BY WALTER HIGH

For 12 years, Invata Intralogistics provided advanced warehouse automation solutions for companies faced with fulfillment and distribution challenges.

They offered a highly sophisticated warehouse software platform, mobile robotics, and a proprietary, industry-specific, AI toolset for analyzing customer data and modeling/simulating strategic solutions.



Invata Intralogistics Annual Revenue 2011 - 2022

I was there for the last 10 and a half years. I began working with the company in January 2013.

At the time, all they had from a marketing standpoint was a logo and six-page website (3 pages and a blog) that did nothing to position them or articulate their offerings. Being privately held by the founders, Invata's growth was strictly limited by reinvestment of profits and the whims of the founders.

During my tenure, we matured from a small, boot-strapped start-up with big ambitions to a formidable, but flawed business that stood toe-toe with multibillion dollar competitors 100x our size and frequently won.

During that time, we also evolved from being a company with zero brand recognition and a difficult to pronounce name to one that was widely recognized and trusted throughout the industry.

By the end of 2022, we had **grown annual revenue 12x in ten years** and captured 4 of the top 10 ecommerce retailers as customers as well as many notable others.

I learned a lot during those years that I believe can be of value to other businesses of all sizes.

Here are 10 takeaways from my 10 years of running marketing at Invata:

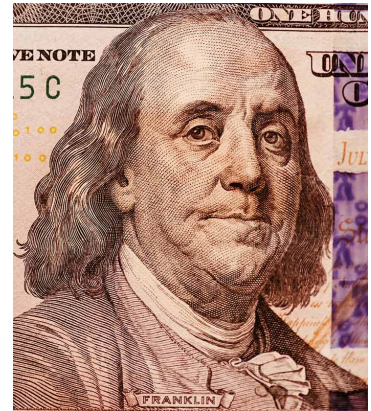
TAKEAWAY 1: MARKETING IS A CRITICAL DISCIPLINE FOR A B2B

Many B2Bs mistakenly view marketing as a nice-to-have versus a necessity. They see it as a luxury and an expense, instead of the investment that it really is.

As an engineering company, Invata struggled with that throughout my tenure and subsequently for a good bit of my time there I handled all aspects of Invata marketing by myself. I grew used to my budgets being mercurial and to creating strategies that were subject to change.

But Invata was actually better than most.

For many B2Bs, there is a kind of passive aggressive approach to marketing that seems to embrace it while keeping it at arm's length.



"An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest." ~ Ben Franklin

It all starts with the old adage that a company's marketing spend should be based on a small percentage of sales revenue. That sets up a dynamic that turns marketing into the equivalent of a gig worker: There in good times. Not so much in others.

In companies like these, marketing may get some respect, but will not likely get a seat at the C-suite table. Instead, mid-level marketers will be hired to perform marketing-like activities that are typically tactical in nature and in support of other departments.

Marketing strategy in these companies is commonly lax, if not non-existent. So all marketing activities are typically tactical and generally do little to build brand awareness.

Not surprisingly, returns for these marketing efforts are usually less than hoped, and that in turn sets up a viscous cycle of marketing outlays that show little to no return — which justifies the company's lack of commitment to marketing.

In these cases, companies put greater emphasis on sales related activities, features selling, and activities that are easy to measure, while neglecting activities that are more likely to create and capture demand.

It's the Achilles heel of B2B businesses. And an approach that overlooks a number of critical marketing truths:

1) The Buying Process Has Changed.

Gone are the days when buyers looked to B2B sales reps to learn about your company offerings. Today, buyers do their own research without announcing their intentions until they have likely determined the potential providers they will solicit.

When buyers are finally open to speaking with someone from your company, it will not be to a business development rep to set up an introductory demo, but rather to someone who can actually close a deal.

But that will only happen if your marketing effort was strong and savvy enough to get to that buyer early in their research cycle.

If your company is not providing value early and often, then your potential buyers will look elsewhere for help. But if it is, there's a good chance you'll win their business. In fact, according to TechTarget, over 90% of B2B companies end up purchasing from companies that initially provided them with valuable information.

2) Marketing Success Requires Consistency.

Marketing done on the cheap or only when times are good is the reason many B2B companies suffer from weak brands.

Inconsistency creates a credibility gap with the market and prospects alike.

Inconsistency undermines your brand.

If a business drops off their marketing cadence in bad times, it actually exacerbates the bad times by allowing competitors who stay the course in those times to garner more attention and ultimately position their businesses for upcoming sales when the market bounces back.

In fact, down turns are the times when businesses should double down on building their brand, so that when the market turns, they'll be positioned to take better advantage of the market resurgence.

3) Relationship Selling Will Only Work for the Short Term.

Start-up companies often rely on their founders to do their selling out of the gate. Initial successes can be deceiving in that it may initially seem like a company can survive without marketing.

But founders get very busy very quickly. And typically within a few years, the need for marketing becomes obvious.

Smart businesses that see marketing as an investment in their brand act early so as to avoid the loss of initial and critical brand building.

You should, too.

TAKEAWAY 2: DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

Marketers like hype. And every time you turn around, there seems to be some marketer hyping a new trend.

The past decade, for example, has given birth to a host of “new” forms of marketing including digital marketing, data-driven marketing, performance marketing, and even attribution science, to name a few.

Each touts a scientific, data-driven, metrics-based approach to marketing that promises to magically provide instant revenue returns and that elusive ROI that’s been missing from marketing all these years.

The only problem is, despite the hype and endless buzzwords, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Can you get lots more data now than ever before? Sure.

Is it accurate? Well... not exactly.

In fact, much of it is either hugely misinterpreted and unverifiable, or just plain pretend. (See Bob Hoffman’s book *Adscam* or talk to me about email marketing data, if you want more on that.)

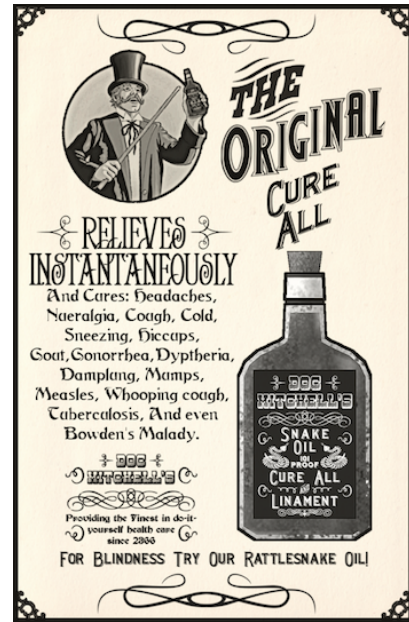
More importantly, is it useable?

Well, that all depends on your perspective. Those trying to sell you on digital advertising or the software to report your digital marketing data will tell you it is. And those whose job security depends on KPI justifications of all things marketing, might even agree.

But from my experience, meticulously measuring much of the marketing data available now largely boils down to busy work and vanity metrics (i.e. metrics that might make you feel good, but won’t give you any real actionable data.)

We spent a few years analyzing our marketing data at Invata with a fine tooth comb. We reported on every metric we could find and even married email marketing data with Google Analytics data to validate and better understand prospect activity and intent.

But what we learned more than anything else was that the harder we looked, the more unreliable the data became.



What we often thought to be that perfect prospect showing intent by clicking on a link for more info, too often upon closer inspection revealed itself to be an email server verifying a link before forwarding our email to someone's junk folder.

And when we were actually able to verify real activity, the data typically still didn't provide us with enough of a picture of a prospect's intent to eliminate conjecture and doubt.

Most importantly — and this is the part that matters — *none of the endless data we analyzed changed our approach.*



What worked for us instead was the consistent creation of strong, relevant content that brought value to would-be Invata customers at all stages of their buyer journey.

It's a formula that doesn't change.

A strategic approach to building quality, creative content, thought leadership, providing valuable information, and creating clarity from complexity through clear concise messaging is what fleshed out our offerings, helped our buyers in their journey, and built the Invata brand.

Footnotes to this topic:

On metrics: This is not to say that all metrics are useless. You just have to be aware of their limitations and keep them in perspective. And realize that efforts made in measuring metrics are typically efforts not being made in producing quality marketing content.

On prospect data: There are numerous tracking software providers that will give you a greater degree of reliability in the data you get. But, frankly, given the legal climate we're in and their infringement on privacy, I would not recommend them.

On privacy: Class action law suits have been filed fairly recently in California, Pennsylvania and Florida asserting that the use of tracking technologies on websites violates state wiretap and privacy laws. The penalties if found guilty can be steep: \$1,000 to \$50,000 per violation. Either way, the cost of litigation compared to the usefulness of the data received should raise serious concern in using tracking software. I know it did for me.

TAKEAWAY 3: IT'S YOUR BRAND YOU NEED TO WORRY ABOUT

As I mentioned in my first takeaway, the buying process has shifted.

Shifted away from sales to marketing — at least in part.

Buyers are connecting more with brands these days than they are with people — meaning a large part of your sales effort is being made before your sales team ever gets involved.

Here's why: Your buyers are doing a majority of their research online, long before they ever let you know they're interested in your offerings. As a result, your company's digital presence is taking on the role that used to be the responsibility of your sales team.

Your sales team will still play a critical role in closing deals, of course, but the more traditional role of information gatekeeper/disseminator is shifting to your company's digital footprint.

And since your company's digital presence is your first and possibly only touch point with prospective buyers, real emphasis should be placed on making sure your digital presence is as articulate, creative, informative, reassuring, and persuasive as possible.

This is why your brand strategy is so important today.

Your brand is the sum of everything your prospects, clients, investors, employees and anyone else experiences in interacting with your company and its offerings. Some have called it your overall company image. Others refer to it as the promise you make and keep with the market.

In short, your brand is the tool your business uses to reach and influence prospect behavior.

It's the perception the market has of your business. And hopefully, it's the reason customers choose your company over the competition.

When you focus on your brand, you tell your company story the way it should be told.

You control the narrative.

You provide the lens through which prospect perceptions are formed.

You use marketing as a value-add, connecting your prospects with your message early and often in their customer journey.

You assist them in their research, even before they know what they're looking for, and provide the insights they need to make informed decisions.

In doing so, you turn bystanders into buyers.

But that's not all.



Strong brands enjoy perks others don't. Self-perpetuating perks that grow businesses year over year:

- Strong brands pull from a larger pool of prospects, require fewer resources to convert prospects to customers, and have lower customer acquisition costs.
- Strong brands enjoy more unsolicited opportunities (think RFPs), win more bids on reputation versus pricing, and garner higher profit margins.
- Strong brands benefit more from customer loyalty, enjoy greater repeat business, depend less on new customer acquisition, realize higher lifetime customer values (LCVs), and profit more from referrals.
- Strong brands attract more potential funders, investors and merger/acquisition opportunities.



Most importantly, your brand is an investment that, if managed properly, will pay dividends throughout the life of your company.

So mine your brand to profit from its potential.

TAKEAWAY 4: YOUR MARKETING SUCCESS HINGES ON GREAT WRITING

Want to build your brand? Expand demand for your offerings? Increase revenue?

It all hinges on writing.

Think about it. Every service, product, idea, and concept your business hopes to share with your potential buyer will need to be conveyed primarily through writing of one form or another.

Messaging copy. Web copy. Ad copy. Social media copy. Blogs. White papers. Video scripts. Presentations. Emails. Headlines. Sub heads. Slogans. Tag lines. Press releases. Internal communications. And on, and on.

It all hinges on writing.

That puts a lot of burden on sourcing great writing.

And so it should, because great writing — intelligently disseminated — is how you cultivate, communicate, and calibrate your competitive edge.

But wait. Everybody can write, right?

Wrong. And it's that sentiment that sums up the mistake too many businesses make: Not recognizing the need for — and the value of — great writing.

Sure you've got engineers, subject matter experts, and even Chat GPT at your disposal. Certainly, that should be enough to cobble together a narrative that will at least inform your prospects of your offerings enough to get them to take a meeting, right?

If you believe that's enough, then ask yourself how you respond to confusing, meandering, and mundane messaging. Do you put in the work to try to decipher it? Or do you move on?

Most will move on — quickly. And when they do, opportunities are lost.



That's why your marketing success hinges on great writing.

Great writing captures attention and simplifies complexity into clarity. It hooks readers, and enlightens and persuades them as decisions loom.

It defines, differentiates, and articulates your brand, helping your prospects early and often in their customer journey.

Which is where you need your best efforts, and why you should see it as your strategic weapon.

TAKEAWAY 5: NUANCE DIFFERENTIATES

While we're on writing, there's a ton of advice on the internet about how writing should be snackable to meet the frenetic attention spans of the audience.

The idea is to make all copy in bite sized portions and easy to read.

Nothing long. And certainly nothing nuanced.

Bullsh*t. Don't buy it.

I spent 10 years writing highly nuanced, focused, creative, persuasive copy of technically complex issues for Invata for all mediums from websites, to blogs, to videos, social media, and more. Before that, I wrote for Harvard Business School Publishing. Before that, for Hollywood.

In every instance, nuance was the hook that educated, reassured, and persuaded prospects.



Nuance is what will differentiate your brand and sell your offerings.

If you're selling the same thing as your competitors, then you're selling on price. And it doesn't matter if your offerings are better than your competitors if your prospects think they're the same, by the way. *Their* perception is *your* reality.

That's why the optics of your brand matter so much.

And that's where nuance comes into play.

Nuance can turn your company from an also-ran to industry leader in your prospects' minds.

That's what will grow your business.

TAKEAWAY 6: VISUALS PLAY A LARGER ROLE THAN MOST PEOPLE THINK

Visuals, if used at all in B2B offerings, are typically an afterthought.

Most people don't think visuals matter. If anything they grab what's handy without regard for the quality of the image, the readability of the table, or the clarity of the slide.

People will get it, they think.

But people don't.

To the contrary, they get stuck trying to figure out what they're supposed to be seeing and how it relates to what is being said. Suddenly, what was supposed to speed comprehension is slowing it down.

Too much friction, and people give up.

Good visuals, on the other hand, grease the proverbial wheel of comprehension.



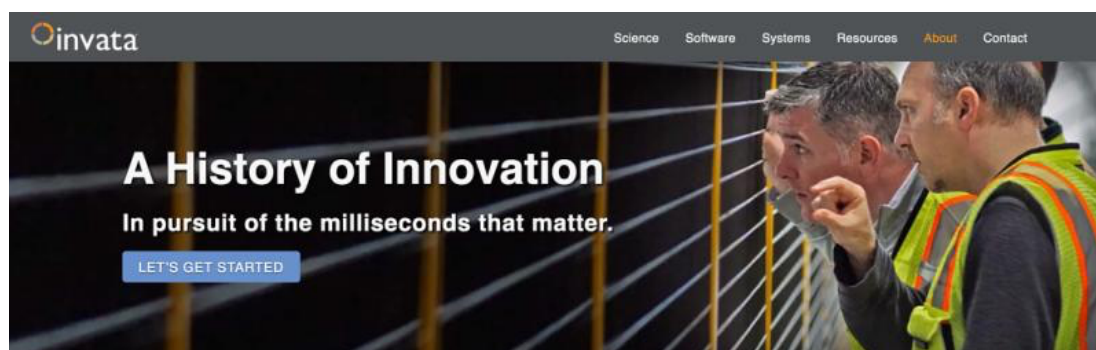
They empower prospects to see the big picture sooner. They facilitate speedier understanding of the information you're trying to convey. And they help prospects "get there" faster.

If there's any doubt, consider this: Visuals are processed 60,000 times faster than text based messaging by the brain, and 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual in nature.

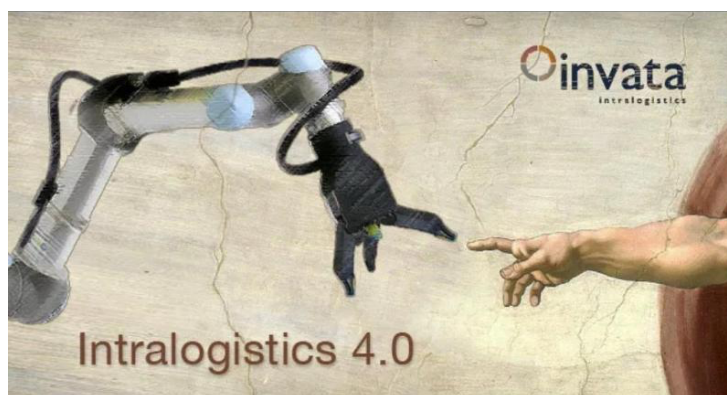
Beyond that, the visuals of strong photography, graphic design, and videography send a subliminal message of professionalism to your prospects.

Strong visuals make whatever your marketing more enticing, alluring, and, most importantly, memorable to your audience.

With a strong background in photography, Photoshop, design, and videography, I relied heavily on visuals at Invata.



Those visuals helped to promote us as a much larger more experienced brand than we actually were in the early years. And they gave us a level of clout that often eclipsed our competition due to their lack of attention to visuals.



Visuals Pro Tip 1: Stay away from shiny, generic stock photos that say nothing. Focus on what makes your business unique, whatever it is. You don't have to show the product, but you do need to show something relevant to the conversation.

Visuals Pro Tip 2: Engineering-led companies tend to rely on engineering data. But engineer-level data is not easily consumable by non-engineers. And while some clients may be engineers, many key decision makers will not. So always create visuals for a general audience.

TAKEAWAY 7: CREATIVE MARKETING CREATES MARKETS

B2B marketing is known for being staid, features-focused, and, well, not exactly creative.

That's a mistake.

Creativity helps prospects make associations they might not otherwise make. It helps them think about your offerings differently than they otherwise might. And it helps them form perceptions they might not otherwise have formed.

Creativity simplifies ideas. Colors them in ways that enable emotional connections. And makes them memorable.

At Invata, our offerings were not only hugely complex, but never the same from client to client.

The range of issues needed to bring prospects up to speed was onerous, including equipment systems, controls systems, software systems, data science, storage strategies, algorithms, not to mention interconnectivity, orchestration, and implementation issues, to name a few.

The sheer density of topics to be discussed from a marketing perspective was overwhelming.

And nearly every competitor was making the same pitch: Industry leader. Trusted partner. Turnkey solutions. Optimized efficiency. Precision. Innovation. Support.

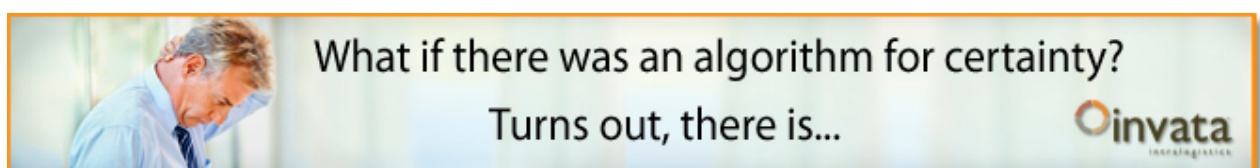
They all sounded the same to the marketplace.

So I knew creativity would need to play a significant role in our marketing strategy.

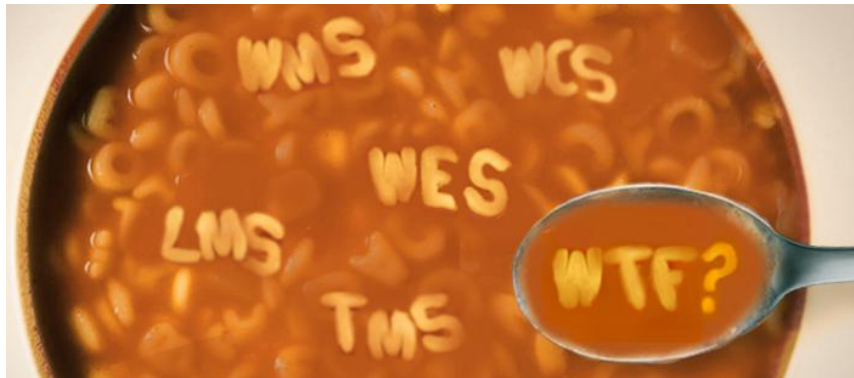
So while developing websites, blogs, white papers, videos, and social media focused on differentiating us through insightful, educational, thought leadership content, I also spent time on the creative ideas that would make us stand out against the competition.

Rather than pursuing the features-approach to marketing our competitors were engaged in, I focused on concepts our prospects could relate to. Ones to which they could emotionally connect.

To draw attention to the fact that we offered all the disciplines needed to provide and fully support transformative warehouse automation under one roof, I turned our entire client-side process into an algorithm and ran a campaign discussing the importance of certainty around large capital expenditures. Here's a banner ad example:



To highlight the fact that our Automate^{AI} Warehouse Software did away with the alphabet soup of warehouse software offerings (WMS, WCS, WES, TMS, LMS) and replaced it with one comprehensive solution, I created an image for social media to which our prospects could emotionally relate.



And to really drive home the one thing Invata did that differentiated us from the rest of the field, I wrote an ad that focused on our obsession with the milliseconds it took to perform a database query in our software. Only I associated it with something to which everyone could relate: Life.



People measure time in many ways: the age of a child, the months since a significant event, the minutes before the end of the game, the blink of an eye.

At Invata, we measure time in milliseconds, because when it comes to the advanced automation systems we build for our clients, the number of milliseconds it takes to perform transactions or execute decisions can make or break system performance.

And while milliseconds may seem insignificant or even immeasurable to most, we know that wasted milliseconds added together throughout the course of the millions of transactions that occur in any given fulfillment operation on any given day, can translate to hours of lost productivity.

Over the course of a year, those hours can add up to the difference between our clients achieving market advantage... or revising market expectations.

We look at time differently than most, because we believe that the key to success in automation, as in life, is to make every millisecond count.



Omni-Channel Distribution • eCommerce Fulfillment • Reverse Logistics Processing • Automation/Modernization

In using creativity to simplify ideas, color them in ways that enable emotional connections, and make them memorable, we were able to differentiate Invata while influencing our prospects' perceptions of our brand.

TAKEAWAY 8: CUSTOMER ENDORSEMENTS MATTER TO EVERYONE

I spent the better part of my tenure at Invata being unable to share any customer names or imagery from our installations with the general public.

Proof points? What proof points? I had none.

I had to find other ways to get prospects to our door without them. It was not easy.

When we did finally get an opportunity to promote one of our sites, we made the cover of Modern Materials Handling.

But that was a rare exception, because most of our clients were buttoned-up tight by their legal departments and the backward belief that any acknowledgement of even a partnership could somehow be bad for business.

To the contrary, what was bad for their business were the no-endorsement clauses in their contracts — the literal equivalent of shooting themselves in the foot.

Such clauses actually cause substantial damage to all companies involved, because they thwart their partnering companies' abilities to grow their businesses.



As Invata faded away recently, so too did the knowledge and support behind the \$100 million systems we built for those clients.

And now those companies will be left holding the bag on massive capital expenditures while their corporate legal teams pat themselves on the back for "protecting" their firm.

To avoid a similar fate, providers should push to reframe endorsements from favors to insurance.

Smart clients will recognize the value in acknowledging the partners who play a critical role in their company's success.

Bottom line?

Your customers need you to stay in business. Make them understand that one way they can ensure you do is by allowing you to publicize the work you do.

TAKEAWAY 9: INTERNAL MARKETING = LEADERSHIP

Real marketing success comes when all departments in a company speak the same language, share the same phrasing, and promote the same message to prospects and clients alike.

But that only happens when company executives are on the same page in endorsing and continuously reinforcing company messaging.

If your website says one thing, but your employees are saying others, your message will get muddy. And if you aren't focused on the details, your prospects and clients will likely get frustrated and move on.

Bottom line, there's simply too much competition for companies to neglect internal communications anymore.

Employees depend on company leaders to stay inspired, focused, and motivated.

They look to their leaders for critical directions on how to communicate with clients and what messaging to convey.

And they rely on internal marketing to promote cohesion between departments. Otherwise, silos can form within departments as different managers promote different perspectives on company news, strengths, and weaknesses.

In many companies, management assumes that to their employees, no news is good news and they therefore don't see a pressing need to keep employees abreast of strategies, updates, and activities.

But employees that are left in the dark don't just plod along in their jobs, assuming the best.

They assume the worst.

To them no news is bad news. And the lack of internal communications can create a void in leadership that they try to make up for through internal gossip and playing out worst case scenarios in their heads.

Company-wide buy-in to a unified message and strategy is critical to operational success.

Without executive leadership and endorsement of the message as well as company-wide participation in disseminating that message, a company's marketing efforts will be relegated to the website and social media posts.



When that happens, would-be clients get a barrage of creative interpretations on what your company does, depending on who they interact with and how each employee interprets the message.

We wrestled with a lack of cohesive messaging in the upper echelons at Invata and as a result our prospects got many interpretations on what we were offering them.

I'm sure the subsequent muddy messaging played a role in some key lost opportunities.

TAKEAWAY 10: SEND A MESSAGE TO YOUR MARKET

Invata succeeded as well as it did in part because of the market's perception of our brand.

We had a great offering no doubt, but our brand was what enabled us to have a seat at the grown-ups table. And when we did, it was often toe-to-toe with competitors 100 times our size.

By positioning Invata as fighting against the status quo, we created a market perception of a disruptive force embracing new approaches to problem solving, solution design, accountability, and support.

In doing so, we sent a message to the market that Invata could solve our prospects' complex logistics challenges in ways others couldn't.

That set us apart and differentiated our market edge.

Without a strong brand, we would never have gotten a seat at the table. But with it, we landed some of the most revered clients in the game.

A strong brand establishes your company's competitive edge.

It provides the lens through which prospect perceptions are formed. And it tells your company story the way it should be told.

Send a message to your market (aka your buyers).

Build a strong brand.





If you're interested in getting help with your company's marketing effort, we'd love to talk.

Please email or call Walter High at your convenience:

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