Nine Stones

№ 05

2026

05

THE PRACTICAL SERIES

Found before *you're needed.*

Pipeline and brand distinction for established manufacturers and distributors — written for the people who have quietly outgrown repeat orders and word of mouth.

WRITTEN FOR

Made for sectors that account for *most of the British economy.*

READING TIME

About *24 minutes,* cover to cover — with marginalia.

PUBLISHED

London & Bristol, *June 2026.*

BEFORE YOU READ ANYTHING ELSE

If there's one thing you take away from this document, *it's this.*

The contract is won before the enquiry is sent. Nine in ten buyers choose from the shortlist they wrote on day one — and they write it **from memory, not research.** So your job is not to chase the five per cent who are buying today. It is to be the name the other ninety-five per cent already trust when their moment comes. Everything else in this guide is the machinery for getting there.

I. CONTENTS

Inside this *guide.*

A working document for owners, MDs and operations directors. Read it with a pen in hand — the marginalia is the point.

Nine Stones

HARD WORKING. DIGITAL.

i. THE GROWTH WALL

i.

The referrals are *retiring.*

For twenty years the work arrived through repeat orders and the people you knew. Now those relationships are slowing — and the suppliers that look smaller and newer than you are getting the enquiry. This is not a crisis. It is a slow leak, and slow leaks are the ones you notice too late.

POSITIONING · PIPELINE · TWELVE-MONTH VIEW

APPROX. 3 MIN

i. THE GROWTH WALL

Trying to appeal to everyone *reaches no one.*

When the founder's network dries up, most businesses make the same mistake: they try to be *safe for everybody.*

Relying on sporadic referrals and repeat work leaves a business exposed — to a market dip, or to a competitor willing to undercut. So when businesses finally look beyond their personal network, they hedge. They widen the message to avoid alienating anyone, and the result is diluted positioning, rising acquisition costs, and a pipeline that runs hot and cold with no pattern you can plan around.

The sea of sameness

To look professional, businesses reach for the same words: "quality you can trust," "precision engineering excellence," "your reliable supply partner." Every competitor reaches for them too. Conforming to the category does not make you safe — it makes you invisible. The buyer cannot tell you apart, so they default to price, or to whoever they happened to hear of first.

A long, quiet buying cycle

High-value industrial contracts take six to eighteen months to buy. Through most of that, the buyer is not talking to you. They are managing risk, building internal consensus, and reading — consuming a stack of material long before anyone reaches out. Without a system to carry them through that journey, warm leads go cold, and your people end up chasing prospects who were never ready.

+ Referral volume has shifted, not stopped.
+ The buyer researches you anonymously, first.
+ Generic positioning gets filtered out, not shortlisted.
+ Every quarter you wait, the gap widens.

IN SHORT

Distinction is a system, not a slogan.

Breaking through means moving from passive, founder-dependent business development to an active engine — built on a distinctive brand and a pipeline you can see.

The rest of this guide is how that engine is built.

BY THE DATA

6–18 months

Typical evaluation cycle for high-value industrial contracts. Most of it happens before you hear a word.

II. THE MATHEMATICS OF DEMAND

At any moment, 95% of your buyers aren't buying.

The 95/5 rule, from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute, holds that only about five in a hundred buyers in any category are in-market today. The other ninety-five are under contract, without budget, or simply not looking yet. Performance marketing only ever reaches the five. Growth comes from being remembered by the ninety-five.

5%

Of buyers are in-market and ready to buy at any given time.

EHRENBERG-BASS · THE 95/5 RULE

46 / 54

The optimal B2B split — brand building to sales activation.

BINET & FIELD · LINKEDIN B2B INSTITUTE

80–90%

Of buyers draw up a day-one shortlist before they start researching.

BUYER-BEHAVIOUR RESEARCH

9 in 10

Ultimately choose a supplier from that original shortlist.

IF YOU'RE NOT ON IT, YOU'RE NOT IN IT.

THE QUARTERLY ODDS

If customers change supplier once every *R* years, the chance a given customer enters the market this quarter is small — but predictable. In a five-year cycle, that is just one in twenty per quarter.

$$P_{qtr} = \frac{1}{4R} = 5\%$$

“

Chase only the five percent who are shopping today and you join a price war. *Win the ninety-five percent who aren't,* and you are the name they already trust when the day comes.

On mental availability

III. CATEGORY ENTRY POINTS

The triggers that *bring you to mind.*

Buyers don't search for brand values — they react to real situations. A category entry point is the cue that makes someone think "we need help with this." Map them with Jenni Romaniuk's 7Ws, then anchor your business to the ones that matter most.

THE W	THE QUESTION	A WORKED EXAMPLE
Why	What problem is being solved?	A key supplier has failed, or lead times have blown out.
When	At what point does the need arise?	A contract renewal, or a major customer's re-tender.
Where	Where is the buyer when it hits?	On the shop floor after a line-down day; in a supply-chain risk review.
While	What else are they doing?	Commissioning new machinery; opening a depot in a new territory.
With whom	Who else is in the room?	At a major customer's request; to pass an OEM supplier audit.
With what	What sits alongside the need?	An ERP rollout; onboarding a new operations director.
How-feeling	What emotion drives it?	Anxious about capacity; exposed by single-customer dependence.

Commonality

How often does the trigger occur? Frequency gives you scale.

Credibility

Can you genuinely deliver here? The cue must fit your expertise.

Competitiveness

How crowded is it? Target the whitespace others have left open.

IV. DISTINCTIVE BRAND ASSETS

Recognised without *your name on it.*

A distinctive asset is any cue — a colour, a shape, a phrase, a layout — that triggers your business on its own. Marketing science grades each on two axes: *fame* (how many recognise it) and *uniqueness* (how exclusively it points to you). Plot your assets, then act.

HIGH FAME · HIGH UNIQUENESS

Core assets

Your instant trigger. Protect them, scale them, put them on everything. Non-negotiable.

HIGH FAME · LOW UNIQUENESS

Shared cues

Known but generic — the standard blue grid every supplier uses. Sharpen or pair with something yours.

LOW FAME · HIGH UNIQUENESS

Emergers

Promising and yours, but not yet known. Invest — show them next to assets people already recognise.

LOW FAME · LOW UNIQUENESS

Non-assets

Cognitive load, zero recall. Retire them before they dilute the rest.

VISUAL

A logo rarely carries the load alone. The businesses that stick own a structural device — a fixed grid, a consistent frame, an anchored accent bar — applied to every page and report without exception.

VERBAL

A point of view is an asset too. While the web fills with neutral, AI-written explainers, publish work that takes a stance — name the conventional trap, expose the hidden reality, offer the reframe.

V. THE POST-SEARCH WEBSITE

Write for the engine *doing the looking.*

Increasingly, your first reader isn't a person. It's a *language model* deciding whether to cite you.

Buyers now research through AI search as much as Google. To earn a mention — your share of model — the site has to be built as a clean, machine-readable directory, not a brochure. Lead every section with a two-to-three-sentence answer block a model can lift whole, and bind your pages together with a connected schema graph.

+ **/llms.txt** — a token-efficient Markdown summary of your business, frameworks and case parameters, for fast model ingestion.
+ **/llms-full.txt** — the full text repository: whitepapers, methodology, verified outcomes.
+ **/sectors/aerospace/** — a sector landing page, chrome stripped, focused on one action.
+ **/experts/[name]/** — a credentialed expert page, built for E-E-A-T and citation.

Each path does a specific job: some speak to crawlers, some to a named buyer. Together they make your expertise easy to find, easy to quote, and hard to ignore.

IN SHORT

Answer blocks, then everything else.

If a model can pull a clean answer from the top of your page, it will cite you. If it has to wade through hero copy, it won't.

GLOSSARY

GEO

Generative Engine Optimisation — structuring content so AI search engines retrieve and cite it, not just rank it.

E-E-A-T

Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trust — the signals Google and AI engines weigh to decide whose answer to believe.

VI. THE SALES FACTORY

Stop chasing leads *that were never ready.*

A predictable pipeline runs on a single CRM and a scoring matrix everyone trusts. Score each lead on fit and on behaviour, subtract for the obvious mismatches, and let the number — not a hunch — decide who gets a call. We favour HubSpot for mid-market businesses: weeks to deploy, one database, low admin.

FIT SIGNALS (+)	INTEREST SIGNALS (+)	DISQUALIFIERS (−)
C-level decision-maker +20	RFQ or capability enquiry +30	Competitor domain −100
Turnover £5m–£30m +15	Certifications page, twice in 48h +20	Student / job-seeker title −50
Operations / technical director +10	Direct email reply +20	Personal email domain −20
Company 50–200 staff +10	Datasheet / case study download +10	Careers page visit −15

80+

Tier 1 — sales is notified instantly, with personal outreach inside 24 hours.

50–79

Enters the automated nurture sequence to build conviction over time.

VII. IN-HOUSE, AGENCY OR DEPARTMENT?

Four ways to resource it. *One honest table.*

A junior hire lacks the strategic depth to write a growth plan; a fractional CMO leaves you to execute it. The outsourced department combines senior direction and a full delivery team under one predictable fee.

	JUNIOR IN-HOUSE	TACTICAL AGENCY	SOLO FRACTIONAL CMO	NINE STONES DEPT.
MONTHLY COST	£3k–£4.5k + on-costs	£2k–£5k per channel	£3k–£12k advisory only	*£1.5k–£4k fixed*
STRATEGY	Low	Low	High	*High*
EXECUTION	One skill set	One channel	None	*Full team*
ACCOUNTABILITY	Tasks	Clicks	Outcomes	*Leads & revenue*
RISK	High; 3–6mo hire	Long contracts	30-day rolling	*No surprises*

> One predictable fee. *Senior strategy and a full team — behind one desk.*

VIII. THE KEYSTONE ENGINE

A whole department, *on a fixed fee.*

Every engagement sits on **Bedrock** (£250/mo) — performance, security and CMS upkeep. The tiers build from there: **Fieldstone** (£1.5k), **Cornerstone** (£2.5k), and **Keystone** (£4k), our fully outsourced engine for ambitious businesses — strategy, content, trade and PR, with sales and marketing aligned to shared leads and shared revenue.

i.

Human first, AI behind.

Every strategy and every word is owned by a senior partner. AI accelerates research and drafting behind the desk — it never speaks to your audience.

ii.

Custodial authority.

If site health slips — Core Web Vitals, accessibility, integrations — we redirect retainer hours into fixing it, before anything else. The platform comes first.

iii.

A flex-bank, not a stopwatch.

Capacity runs on a £100/hour shadow rate. Unused hours roll forward into a three-month flex-bank — no timesheets, no surprise invoices.

iv.

The charity chase rule.

If you ever have to chase us for a reply or an update, £25 goes to a charity of your choice, in your name. Accountability, written down.

v.

Honest guardrails.

We work with businesses turning over £2m–£200m. Below or above that, we'll tell you straight — and usually point you to someone who fits better.

IX. YOUR NEXT MOVE

A checklist for the *Monday* after this.

Six things you can do this week — without us, without a contract, without new spend — that tell you whether your marketing function is fit for the next three years.

- ☐ **List the last six customers who came through marketing.** 15 MIN

  If you struggle past three, that is the answer — the referral channel has slowed and nothing has replaced it.

- ☐ **Audit your brand cues, then cut the weak ones.** 30 MIN

  List every visual and verbal asset you use. Bin the generic gradients and stock imagery; keep what is unmistakably yours.

- ☐ **Write down your top three category entry points.** 20 MIN

  What real situations make a buyer think of you? Score each on commonality, credibility and competitiveness.

- ☐ **Ask an AI engine to describe your business.** 10 MIN

  If the answer is thin, generic, or wrong, the post-search website is doing none of its job. Note what's missing.

- ☐ **Cost out a senior marketer, fully loaded.** 20 MIN

  Salary, NI, pension, software, recruitment, and the year to hire and onboard. Hold that number against a fixed fee.

- ☐ **Put thirty minutes in the diary to talk to us.** 30 MIN

  No pitch deck. We'll tell you honestly whether we can help. If we can't, we usually know someone who can.

Thirty minutes. *No pitch deck.*

We'll tell you honestly whether we can help. If we cannot, we usually know someone who can.

BOOK A CALL	ninestones.co.uk/book	→
OR EMAIL	hello@ninestones.co.uk	→
FIND US	London · Bristol	·

Colophon

SET IN FRAUNCES & HANKEN GROTESK.
WRITTEN, DESIGNED AND PUBLISHED BY NINE STONES.

Nine Stones
HARD WORKING. DIGITAL.