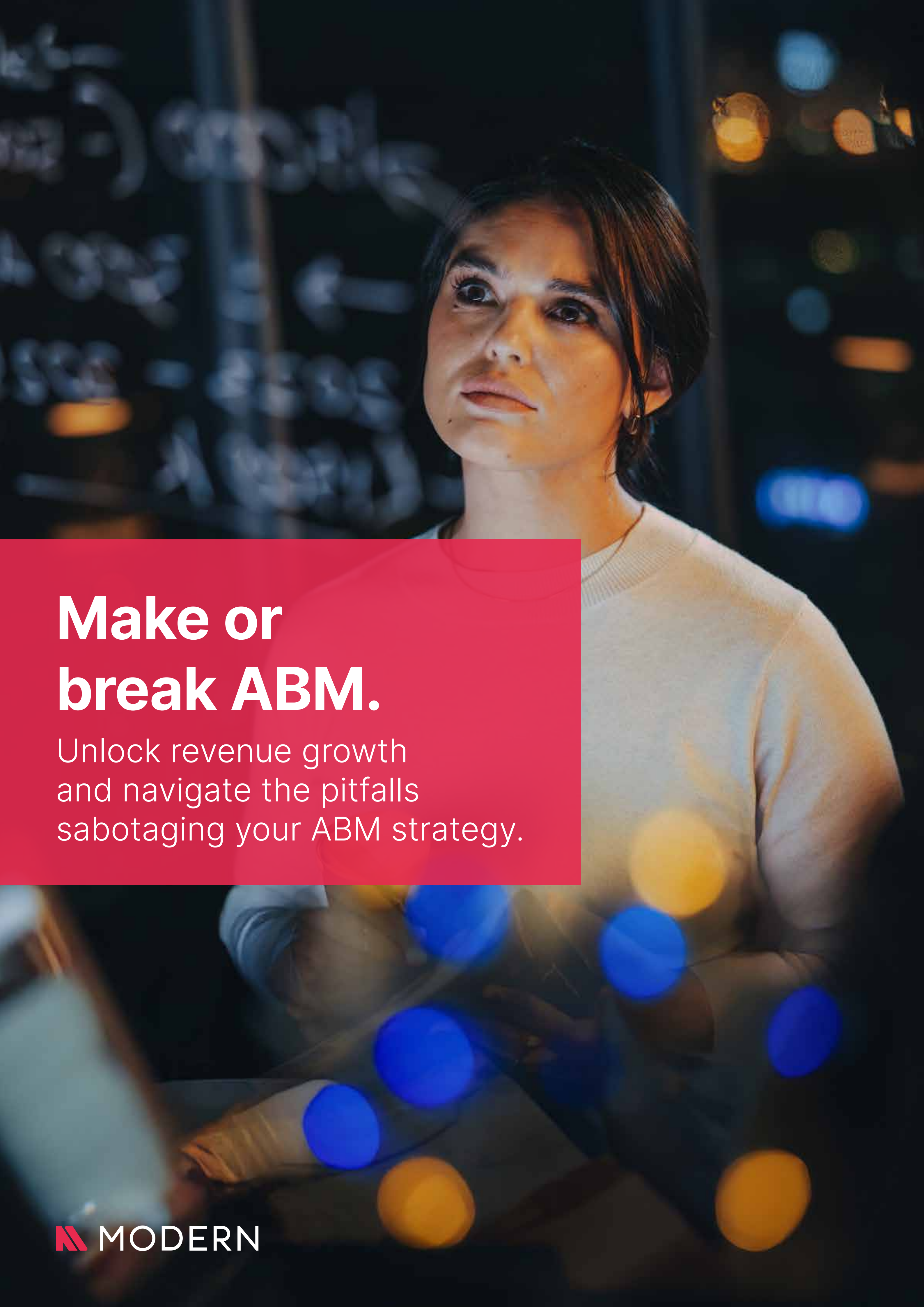

Make or break ABM.

Unlock revenue growth and navigate the pitfalls sabotaging your ABM strategy.

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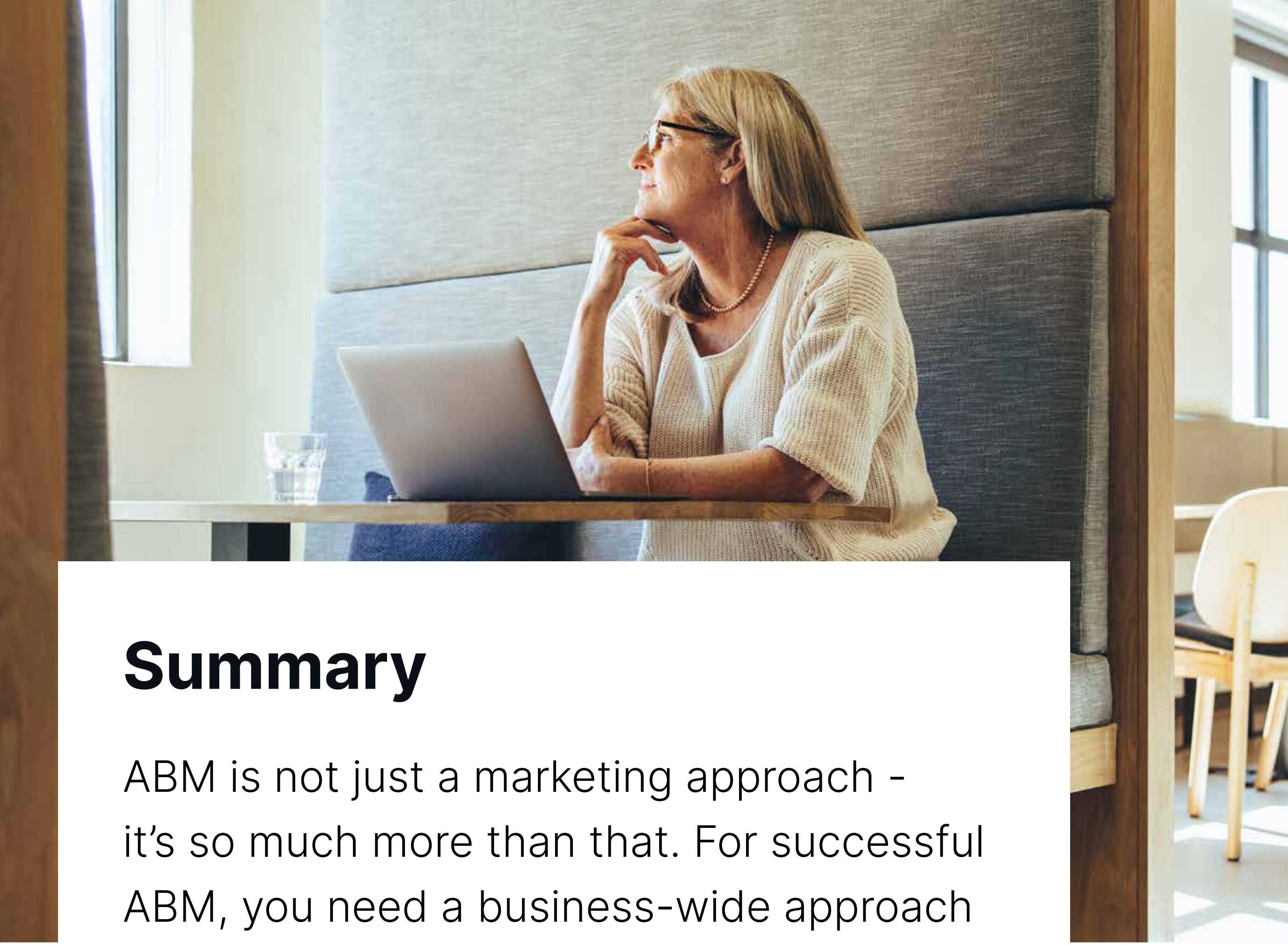


Summary

ABM is not just a marketing approach - it's so much more than that. For successful ABM, you need a business-wide approach that has executive sponsorship from the top.

ABM impacts sales, customer service and marketing - and to truly do ABM effectively, you need to change the way you approach and operationalise marketing and sales activities. In effect, for ABM to be a success, you need to rethink your target operating model across marketing.

In this guide we look at what ABM really is:

- Where organisations have been successful and why
- Common points of failure
- How to embrace ABM effectively for increased revenue.

ABM isn't a new concept.

Large B2B enterprises have been leveraging ABM as their default marketing methodology for decades.

Arguably, the original name for ABM was 'enterprise marketing' where large organisations developed defined strategies for their top accounts.

For some, they'd apply the principles to groups of high value accounts, but overall, the approach was high touch, white glove treatment to retain customers and extend growth within key accounts.

Over the last ten years, B2B organisations have shifted from a 'let's talk to all' through a demand strategy to a more refined approach centered around 'how can we be more nuanced, thoughtful and cost effective about how we go-to-market'.

The answer to that is often 'ABM'. This style of ABM is the opposite end of the spectrum where you're using account-focused strategies to shift from demand programmes (concentrated on lead generation) to account targeting against a set of defined accounts - enabled by digital technologies and martech to enable these more sophisticated go-to-market approaches.

From discrete strategies right through to scale

For some, ABM is a strategic lever that fundamentally attracts, engages and aids conversion of key accounts using distinct and carefully crafted strategies.

For others, ABM is a set of tactics that simply target a defined set of accounts, often at scale. What we see is a mix of approaches, adaptations and methodologies that sometimes work, but mostly don't.

This guide shares those insights, pitfalls and challenges - so you don't fall into the same trap.

We'll outline some fundamental, tried and tested principles on how to pilot, scale and embed ABM.

When you take all these approaches into consideration, ABM is as wide as it is deep, with different sets of strategies and tactics that need to be applied for different approaches.

There isn't a one-size fits all, but there are common approaches that enable success.

Key themes to success

When ABM goes well, it's a resounding success. From working with over 100 organisations, we see areas that are fundamental to success.

These are often significant shifts within the business and need to be considered when adopting ABM within your business.

ABM is a business strategy

Organisations that adopt a holistic ABM strategy have greater success in terms of adoption and performance.
It doesn't matter whether that's a one-to-one ABM strategy or a scaled one-to-many approach - when the business is behind it, it makes a significant difference to success.

It doesn't matter what it's called

Some organisations call ABM Strategic Account Marketing, others call it Account Based Engagement. It doesn't really matter. What does matter is that it's driven with a holistic strategy - how you dress it up needs to work for your strategy and your organisation.

Shifting to ABM is a change strategy

Most organisations don't start off with a wholesale shift to ABM. They pilot it first. This de-risks the approach which is important as those leaders recognise that if successful, there's a significant shift for the business and as such, a change strategy needs to be considered.

Recognising that old demand models don't work
for ABM

ABM focuses on accounts. This is fundamentally different from demand which focuses on people (leads). Organisations buy software; groups of people make the decision.

An opportunity in the CRM is at the organisational level (account), not at a contact level.

Therefore reporting on ABM needs to focus on accounts - and when you take that down to activity reporting, it's challenging to know the number of accounts engaged as systems (ad platforms, website analytics and activation partners) often work on an individual level.

This leaves reporting disjointed and it's challenging to know if the programme is actually working.

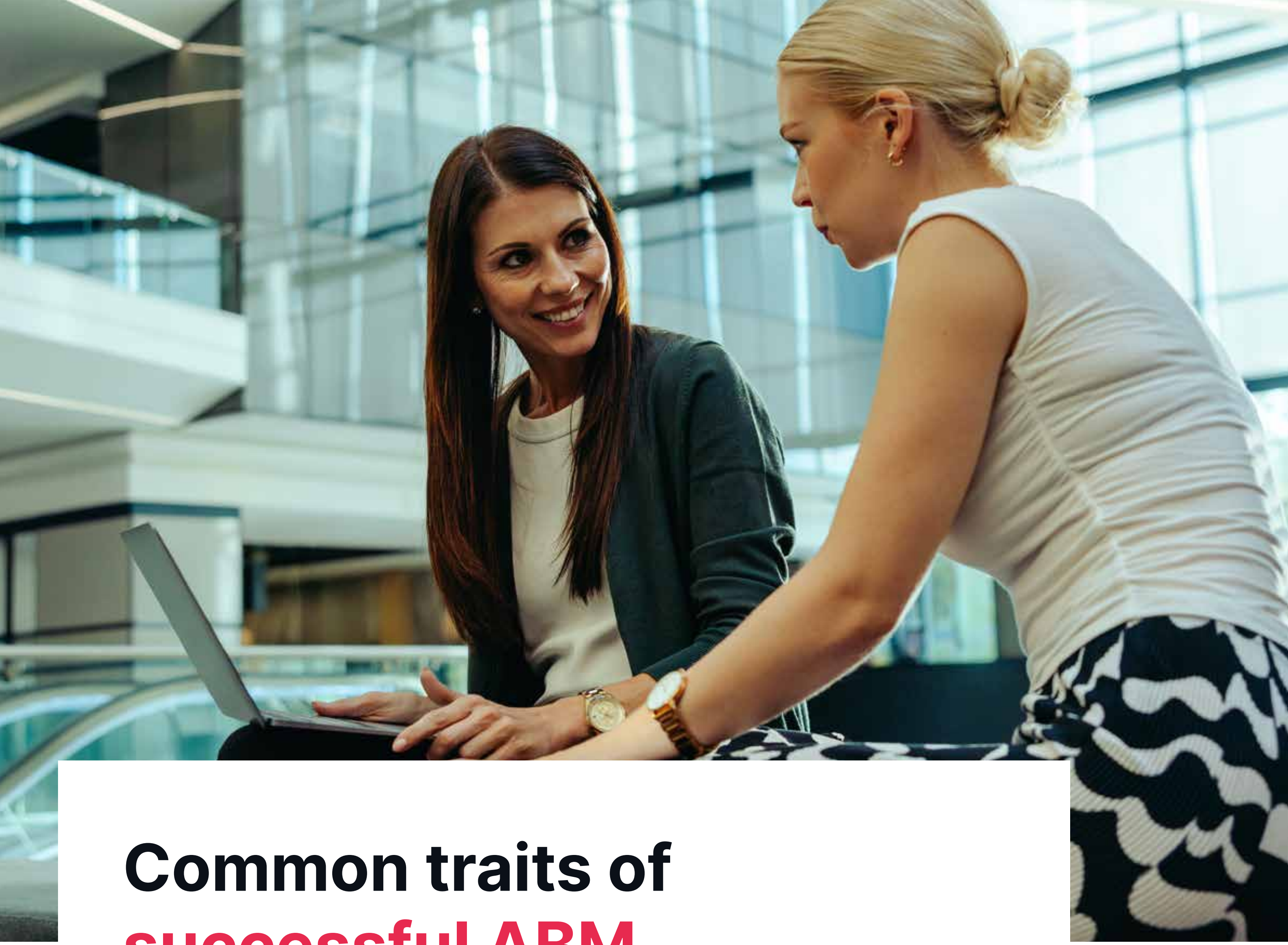
New measures of success

Revenue is the defining factor, but with long buying cycles, you need to look at engagement.

Levels of engagement across multiple contacts at an organisation start to show intent and likely propensity to purchase. These are fundamentally different to the contact level metrics typically associated with traditional demand approaches.

For those running cross-sell, expansion or other types of customer programmes, the measures of success are different again - depending on the objectives. This means that a narrow set of ABM success metrics might not be suitable for all approaches. This needs figuring out and applying appropriately in your organisation.

So what makes the difference? Why do some organisations really win with ABM and others fail to get out of the blocks?



Common traits of successful ABM programmes

Where we've seen ABM be successful, we've seen common patterns. Likewise, we've seen similar reasons why they've not been successful which we cover further in this guide.

Success is often specific to each organisation and team, but overall, we see these common traits.

ABM is a strategic approach with executive sponsorship.

When a new approach is created in an organisation, working from the bottom up doesn't work. It's hard to get traction and buy-in, particularly with key senior stakeholders.

When the senior stakeholders are part of the strategy formulation, or if the executive leadership team drives the approach, then there is often overwhelming success as ABM is perceived as a business strategy and not as a set of tactics to be tested as part of a campaign programme.

ABM is a whole organisation approach with a unified strategy

Linked to executive sponsorship, ABM needs to be carried through multiple teams, not just marketing.

Sales, customer service, account management and product marketing all need to be involved in the strategy development and effective delivery of the ABM programme.

When there's a unified strategy for the whole organisation, where ABM is central to delivering the business KPIs, there's greater buy-in and engagement.

Harmonised sales and marketing teams working together

Typically, sales and marketing teams often have KPIs that don't work together. Marketing focuses on leads and sales focuses on accounts. With ABM, the focus becomes purely about accounts, so sales and marketing are united around the same end goal.

Whilst the metrics might differ slightly, both are focused on securing accounts. When you track this back to early stage planning around ABM, alignment comes on account selection, intent levels and then filters through in agreed focus areas.

By partnering with established ABM experts and training providers, successful organisations ensure their staff develop skills consistently, follow proven methodologies, and achieve recognised competency standards

Global centralised teams as a centre of excellence

In global organisations there's usually a level of autonomy at the local level which can potentially open the door for rogue approaches and tactical campaigns not aligned to ABM.

Whilst levels of autonomy are important due to cultural and local nuances, frameworks around approach, measurement and alignment with the overarching strategy are required.

> In larger organisations, this needs to be managed and coordinated by a central team often deemed the centre of excellence.

This also ensures alignment with digital activity such as the digital demand, brand and content teams as well coordination around any centralised technology such as the ABM platform being used.

Continual personal development and certification

Organisations that succeed are often aligned with key professional services solutions that ensure aligned approaches, defined levels of understanding and certifications to demonstrate level of competency. Where personal development is seen as valuable and organisations invest, this supports a unified approach across the team, especially in larger organisations.

For example, the ABM tech vendors all provide certifications around their technologies but this is limited to their specific approach to ABM.

Analyst houses provide the more theoretical and strategic approaches to ABM. Both are valuable and provide consistent levels of understanding across the team.

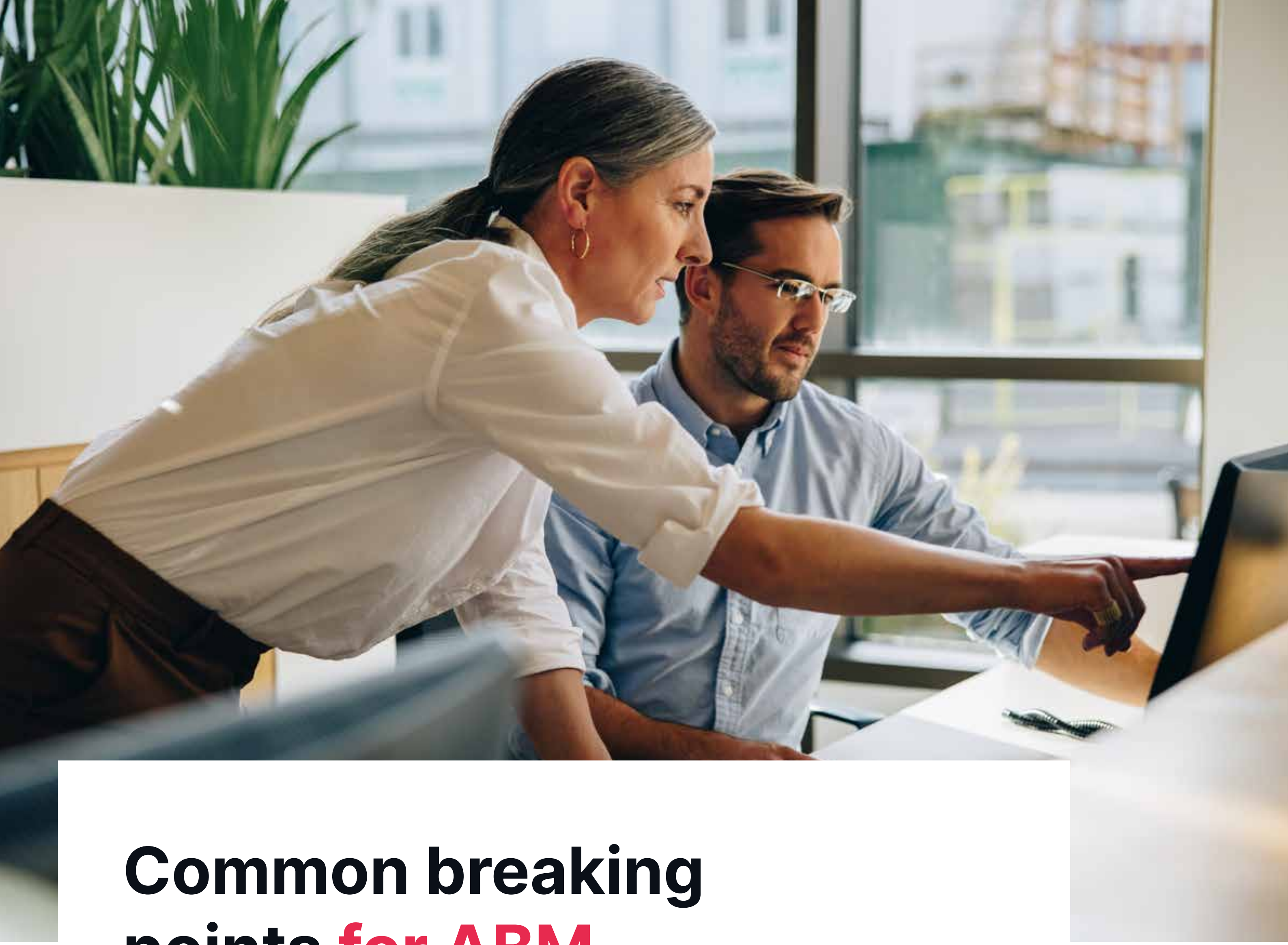
ABM extends beyond sales and marketing teams

Where we've seen ABM be successful, it's not limited to just the sales and ABM teams. The digital demand programmes, brand advertising, events and PR all need to play into the programme.

ABM isn't seen as a silo, it's planned as part of the planning cadence, and in well established organisations, it's front and centre as the core strategy.

Outside of the marketing team, such as customer success and account management, these teams can contribute and feed into the insight and planning process.

They have valuable insights and can identify expansion opportunities, red flags and new contact opportunities.



Common breaking points for ABM

We've seen what works, but there are also areas where we see repeated mistakes. These cause frustration, teams disengage and ABM fails to get off the ground successfully.

It's not that organisations and teams set off without enthusiasm or desire for success, but it's easy to get thrown and not really focus on the things that really make ABM work.

Failing to define what ABM is in your organisation

When you fail to define ABM, you lose buy-in, metrics get lost and success is hard to prove. When ABM isn't defined, it's easy to get stuck. Spend the time getting buy-in, clearly defining it and what it means to your teams, and setting appropriate success criteria.

When you fail to define ABM, you lose buy-in, metrics get lost and success is hard to prove.

Relying on ABM tech vendors' definition of ABM

We've seen many teams rely on a technology product to define the ABM strategy. Whilst the technology vendors are great at providing certification around the concept of ABM, it's ABM defined to suit their technology. It doesn't consider the higher level thought around buy-in, change and complex organisations. It's always worth remembering that technology should be an enabler for your strategy, not the definition of your strategy.

Marketing driving the ABM strategy alone

We've seen organisations use ABM for their marketing approach and not link it to sales. In essence, it's simply a targeting approach for go-to-market campaigns or demand programmes. Time and again, we've seen this fail as it's only one side of the coin, and without the alignment and buy-in from sales, any ABM programme will fail.

Under-estimating time to value

Often organisations take an ABM approach starting with small campaigns - with ABM applied at the campaign level. This often fails as it takes time to identify, engage and activate an account. Typically this takes months, so when the results don't materialise for sales in the first 6 or 9 months, the programme is hailed as unsuccessful.

In reality, getting a programme working, delivering insight and engaging accounts to the point they're sales-ready is longer in enterprise organisations - with success and return being delivered closer to the 18 month mark, depending on the typical sales cycle.

This has huge implications for KPI setting and managing expectations from the exec sponsors right through to the campaign managers.

(Un)healthy doses of scepticism

We've often found that when ABM teams are supported by demand marketers for the digital element of programmes, there's a healthy scepticism around the third party intent data. The demand teams simply don't trust the intent data, even when the ABM platform is showing that the account is all over the intent keywords. In short, they struggle to connect account insights with the 'lead' based approach often applied with digital demand.

There's no centre of excellence

When pilot ABM programmes have been trialled, especially in large organisations with decentralised teams, it's really hard to scale and expand them to other verticals or regions. We often see disparate teams running programmes in different ways not necessarily knowing that other teams are trialling similar approaches or technology. This is where a coordinated approach is essential to centralise information and create scalable frameworks where knowledge and success is shared.

This is best done through a centre of excellence that can manage and coordinate global programmes and support field teams.

ABM lacks a digital engagement programme

Sometimes we see rich, high-touch ABM programmes that are extremely well thought out, including engaging customised PR, customer success programmes and events.

The programmes are well designed and coordinated brilliantly, but they lack a supporting digital engagement thread…

The programmes are well designed and coordinated brilliantly, but they lack a supporting digital engagement thread including personalisation tailored to the audience.

This is sometimes due to the disconnect to the digital demand team, or due to access to supporting technology, or simply lack of digital experience of the ABMer in charge of the programme.

We typically see this in organisations that have a long standing enterprise approach focused around high-value, high-touch, one-to-one or one-to-few ABM programmes.

ABM has limited channels

In some instances, we see programmes limited to one or two channels. Like the programme described above where there is a high-touch engagement plan with key accounts and little digital engagement, the opposite is also true. Finding the balance for your programme is essential and that needs to work with your organisation's resources and capability.

Managing cannibalisation

In large organisations with complex product sets that target the same buyer groups as other parts of the organisation, there's a high risk of cannibalisation. For example, a large IT services provider may have a cloud offering and a digital transformation offering within different divisions, but they both target the same buyer group. At any one time, both divisions could have campaigns running to the same audience.

When ABM programmes are at play, there's opportunity to consider account selection to prevent this and appropriate campaign cadence timing to prevent mixed messages and budget wastage.

The measurement challenge

Whether you're measuring relationships, reputation or revenue, most organisations ultimately want to see pipeline and revenue attributed to the programme.

Pipeline takes time and unless you manage expectations, it's a common misconception that an ABM programme will deliver revenue quickly. In addition, the interim stages before pipeline such as MQL and SQL and the array of other metrics often don't align with ABM technology.

This makes demonstrating success very difficult and is often a huge breakage point. To overcome this, it's back to expectation setting from the get-go, and managing a clear, and agreed, reporting framework.

The content doesn't fit

Content creation is an expensive business, but key to engaging prospects and customers alike. We often see that centrally created content is leveraged in ABM programmes but doesn't have the nuance and relevance required to engage key ABM accounts.

Where the content schedule is fixed, it leaves little room for appropriate content adaptation or development without significant investment.

In addition, it slows the ability to get into market with campaigns as the approval processes hamper delivery and launch. Thinking through how to navigate existing processes to work with the ABM model is critical to success.

To summarise the key success traits, they fall into broad categories:

» Training

» Communication

» Planning

» Team coordination

» Technology

It's for this reason that ABM needs to be anchored on a strategic approach.

Three steps to success

We talk to organisations at many different stages of their ABM journey - and it's not the same for everyone.

For those starting out:

1. Pilot

Begin with a focused pilot programme targeting a small number of strategic accounts in one division or vertical.

This controlled experiment allows you to demonstrate value without risking major resources. Ensure your pilot has executive sponsorship and clear success metrics tied to business objectives.

2. People first

Secure buy-in from key stakeholders across sales, marketing, and leadership.

Having the right champions, especially sales advocates who can testify to early wins, creates momentum and breaks down traditional silos. Invest in team education and skills development to build capabilities systematically.

3. Agile mindset

Embrace a test-and-learn approach, avoiding the temptation to over-engineer your initial programmes.

Document learnings, adapt quickly, and resist the pressure for immediate results, recognising that ABM value builds over time.

For established programmes needing a rethink:

1. Get a third party view

Undertake an objective assessment of your current ABM programme to identify blind spots and opportunities that internal teams may have missed. External perspectives often reveal critical insights that can significantly enhance your approach and results.

2. Look at how you embed and scale

Formalise your successful frameworks and establish a Centre of Excellence to maintain governance and best practices.

Develop training programmes that build capabilities across teams and consider how your organisational structure needs to evolve to support account-based approaches at scale.

3. Think about time-to-value and get proof points

Establish KPIs that align with your sales cycle length and demonstrate progression from engagement to pipeline to revenue.

Develop compelling proof points that show tangible business impact, not just marketing activity, to secure continued executive support and investment.

Not sure on the next steps on how to build maturity for your programme?

Get in touch to take our ABM assessment to establish where you are now and build out a roadmap for development.

Get in touch

About the author

Nicola Ray is the CEO of Modern, a top 10 ABM consultancy in the UK as listed by B2B Marketing. Nicola has over 25 years experience across B2B and B2C, and has seen what works and what doesn't.

Having worked with some of the world's largest brands including Broadcom, Software AG, Hexagon, Kyndryl, Trustpilot and Bupa, Nicola has seen where ABM has been successful, where organisations struggle and where ABM has failed.

About Modern

We help forward thinking CMOs and senior marketing leaders translate their vision of a modern, sophisticated marketing function - embracing the latest ideas, methodologies and technologies - into a high performing reality.

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