



Insights report:

What actually works
when marketing to
HR audiences



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Executive summary

What makes HR leaders pay attention? To answer that question, we analysed conversations with people on both sides of the HR buying journey. From marketers trying to reach HR audiences, and HR leaders deciding which brands to trust, the insights provided by the discussions have helped us to summarise what is really important when it comes to engaging HR audiences.

The discussions revealed a clear pattern: HR audiences engage with brands that demonstrate relevance, credibility and genuine understanding of the challenges they face.

Six key themes emerged:

- 1** Trust is earned through understanding rather than selling.
- 2** Generic, AI-assisted outreach is damaging credibility.
- 3** Relevant proof points outperform impressive logos.
- 4** Brand visibility and expertise are increasingly important in an AI search environment.
- 5** Practical guidance beats hype and buzzwords.
- 6** Data provides credibility while stories create action.

For marketers targeting HR leaders, the message is to focus less on promotion and more on understanding, helping and educating. The common thread in all of this is relevance.

HR leaders respond to brands that understand their pressures, respect their time and offer something genuinely useful. They switch off when messages feel generic, overhyped or disconnected from reality.



Trust is earned through understanding

Trust remains key for HR leaders when evaluating suppliers, which is understandable given their role. According to Edelman's 2026 Trust Barometer: Brand Growth in an Insular World, trust plus relevance is the new equation for brand growth. By combining trust and relevance together they become a force multiplier for sustainable growth. As they put it, "Relevance creates fit. Trust creates confidence." This is something our conversations reinforced.

Stephen Cloves, former Group HR Director and founder of LinkedHR, summed it up

simply when he said that building trust starts with being relevant. The strongest relationships didn't begin with a sales pitch, they started with a genuine interest in the individual behind the job title.

Steph Fosh, Managing Director of Pure HR, echoed the same point. She wants to work with brands she can align with and trust. Brands that help solve problems rather than immediately sell.

For HR audiences, trust is earned long before a buying conversation starts.

Stephen Cloves gave an example of the two polar opposite approaches to sales that he has experienced.



I met with two recruitment agency reps on the same day: one spent the meeting telling me my current supplier was rubbish and how much better they were; the next opened with "I'm sure you've got a strategy for recruitment. How can I help?" I still use that second person's services today.

What this means for brands

Build relationships before you ask for anything and be useful to HR leaders. Think about sharing or creating useful content that helps HR leaders solve a problem before they are ready to buy. This could include benchmark reports, guides to common challenges such as employee retention, succession planning and salary insights or practical implementation guides.

Several of our contributors highlighted the importance of spending time where HR leaders already share challenges. That means following industry conversations on LinkedIn, attending HR events, listening to panel discussions and speaking directly to practitioners. The goal is to understand the problems HR teams are trying to solve rather than simply promoting products.

The brands that earn trust are often those that can demonstrate the problem they solve and not the product that is being offered.

AI outreach is damaging credibility

Generic and automated outreach is frustrating and clogging up inboxes. Personalisation at scale (particularly when no human insight is applied) is reducing trust in brands and it has a financial impact. A [Gartner survey](#) of 1,464 B2B buyers and consumers found that 53% experience negative outcomes from traditional personalisation and those customers are 3.2 times more likely to regret their purchase. Personalisation done poorly is now measurably worse than no personalisation at all.

Our conversations echoed the findings of this survey. Several interviewees highlighted AI-generated LinkedIn messages that claim personal knowledge or admiration but clearly lack any real understanding of the recipient, the challenges they are facing or the solution they are currently looking for. Using AI to generate personalised outreach can have the opposite effect to the one desired – often

turning off the recipient and making your company seem like it doesn't understand the market.

The problem isn't AI itself. Every contributor recognised the value of AI in marketing workflows. The issue is using it to imitate expertise or personalise at scale without adding any human judgement. HR leaders can spot the difference immediately and will judge you for it.

There was also a strong reaction against negative, fear-based messaging. Fear-based marketing often assumes a prospect has a problem before understanding whether that problem actually exists. HR leaders are increasingly sceptical of messages that open with assumptions about poor retention, engagement or compliance risks. Rather than demonstrating expertise, these messages often signal a lack of research and can immediately undermine trust.

What this means for brands

Use AI to improve efficiency, not to manufacture relevance. Personalisation should come from your understanding of the audience and not simply inserting their name into an automated email template. Use AI to support research into your target companies and the individuals within it, developing content ideas and optimising campaigns but ensuring that your human expertise is always at the fore.

A good example of this would be using AI to identify common themes and creating segmented outreach based on the specific challenges that each segment is facing. A Head of Talent may be facing significantly different challenges to a Chief People Officer and your communication needs to demonstrate your understanding of this.

3 Be relevant with proof points

Get real and get in the detail. HR buyers don't often see the relevance of what HR focused brands are selling to them. HR buyers need brands to demonstrate how they answer often very specific challenges a business is facing. Yes, the big brand name looks great on the website, but often the problem solved isn't relevant to the prospect.

Stephen Cloves explained that examples from global enterprises often feel disconnected from the realities of the smaller businesses he advises. What matters most is evidence that a supplier understands organisations like theirs. The lesson goes beyond case studies.

Several conversations highlighted how parts of the HR technology market for example, focus heavily on enterprise organisations while overlooking smaller employers with equally complex people challenges.

Relevance is often what separates a compelling proof point from one that gets ignored. HR buyers are usually looking for evidence that a supplier understands the specific environment they operate in. The challenges facing a growing 200-person organisation can be very different from those of a multinational employer, even if the broad HR objectives appear similar.

The most effective proof points help prospects see themselves in the story. When the audience recognises their own challenges, priorities and constraints, they are far more likely to engage with the solution being presented.

What this means for brands

Consider building customer stories around audience segments rather than prestige. Find the examples that will directly relate to the different businesses that you are targeting. For example, a HR Director in a 250-person business is more likely to relate to a case study from a similar sized organisation than a global enterprise that employees 50,000 people.

Creating separate proof points for SMEs, mid-market organisations and enterprise businesses can significantly increase relevance and engagement which can result in faster and more meaningful conversations from the outset.

4 Brand visibility in an AI era

One of the most interesting insights focused on how people discover information. As AI-powered search becomes commonplace, brands need to think beyond rankings and clicks. The goal is to become a trusted source that AI systems recognise and reference.

Organisations should think about how often they publish original viewpoints, contribute expert commentary and generate proprietary research. AI search tools increasingly favour brands that consistently demonstrate expertise across multiple channels rather than those relying solely on paid promotion.

That requires the same ingredients great PR has always relied on:

- Consistent publishing
- Credible expertise
- Original insight
- Strong reputation signals

The brands earning attention today are often those that have invested in valuable content for years, not weeks.

Clare Moore of BrightMind highlighted the impact of sustained effort over time.



Brands chasing immediate lead generation risk becoming invisible in AI-mediated discovery, because that discovery rewards sustained authority, not short-term campaigns.

What this means for brands

Treat thought leadership, research and expert commentary as long-term assets. They're no longer just supporting lead generation, they're essential for discoverability and credibility. And in a generation that is now being driven by the no-click search, AI discoverability should not be underestimated.

Thought leadership generated using prompts in AI isn't original, its commentary based on other people's points of view. Genuine thought leadership is based on expert insights. Consider interviewing your own experts to create thought-provoking angles and perspectives that your target audience will find interesting and useful. This will help with your discoverability and will also provide you with great content that can be used across different platforms.

Avoid the hype and buzzwords

Across every interview, there was a clear preference for practical advice over industry buzzwords.

HR professionals are focused on real challenges:

- Limited resources
- Growing workloads
- Succession planning
- Employee retention
- Getting leadership buy-in

Contributors repeatedly returned to operational realities rather than trending topics. They were all clear that HR professionals don't spend their time thinking about trending terms. Instead they think

about practical, unglamorous problems like succession planning or lean teams struggling under growing workloads.

Whether discussing retention, succession planning or workforce capability, the focus should remain on solving practical business problems. Marketing that centres on outcomes and implementation is therefore more compelling than marketing that centres on terminology.

Several contributors highlighted the fatigue caused by marketing that relies on exaggerated claims, scare tactics or fashionable terminology. The strongest messages acknowledge reality and provide useful guidance.

What this means for brands

Help first. Avoid manufactured urgency and trend-chasing unless you have discernible proof and examples to back it up. Show that you understand the pressures HR teams face – understand what they're ambitions and challenges are, and offer practical support that makes those easier to manage and achieve.

Keep your language plain and simple and use empathy to demonstrate your knowledge. Avoid overused words that actually don't add any value to the communication.

Words such as 'synergy', 'disrupt' and 'paradigm shift' are frequently seen in email communications but the real value is in being able to evidence your understanding of the emotions and values that your target audience care about. We heard from many of our interviewees that plain speaking with a deep understanding of the human need, hits harder than marketing buzzwords. In a world where we frequently try to overcomplicate the language, your ultimate differentiator is just being human.

Data provides credibility, stories create action

Anindo Chatterjee of iMocker named “showing the data and not telling the story”, as one of the most common failures he’s made and seen in HR marketing. While data is great for building credibility, it’s the stories and narrative behind the numbers that create understanding.

Several other contributors noted that organisations often present statistics without explaining why they matter. The result is information without context. Clare Moore (Brightmind) recalled her most successful campaigns have always followed a clear formula: proprietary data, interpreted into a practical narrative, delivered consistently.

The best campaigns pair evidence with a clear narrative. They show the challenge, explain the impact and demonstrate the outcome to bring a richness that data alone can’t supply.

Data gives audiences confidence, but stories give them understanding. A statistic can tell HR leaders that a problem exists; a story

helps them understand how that problem affects people, teams and business performance. The combination of both creates a far more persuasive message than either could achieve alone.

For example, reporting that employee turnover fell by 18% is valuable evidence. Explaining how a people team identified the causes of attrition, gained leadership support and implemented changes that improved retention turns that metric into a meaningful business story. The number provides credibility, while the narrative demonstrates practical application and impact.

This is particularly important when communicating with HR audiences because they operate at the intersection of people and business outcomes. They are expected to interpret workforce data, influence stakeholders and drive change. Content that combines robust evidence with real-world examples helps them connect insight to action and makes the message far more memorable.

What this means for brands

You need to use data to provide the evidence for the point you are making. But facts alone won’t create the engagement you are looking for. Neuroscientists and behavioural researchers note that a factual claim is up to 22 times more likely to be remembered if it is wrapped within a narrative structure. Case studies are the perfect narrative to provide examples that reinforce the data and help to prove the point you are making. Above all else you need to demonstrate value in what you are proposing as early as possible in your communication.

Quick checklist for brands marketing to HR

- Interview HR practitioners regularly.
- Follow HR conversations on LinkedIn and industry forums.
- Create content that addresses specific HR challenges.
- Segment messaging by organisation size and audience type.
- Use case studies relevant to the prospect's environment.
- Use AI to support expertise, not replace it.
- Publish original research and insights consistently.
- Lead with evidence, but explain why it matters.
- Turn statistics into stories with clear outcomes.
- Show practical value before discussing product features.
- Consider the wider buying committee who have influence, including finance and operations stakeholders.



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