MANUAL FOCUS · BASICS

WHAT IS MARKETING?

The whole job, from product-market fit to channels, PR and a SOSTAC plan. A minibook that follows a single product from the first question to the last measure.



JAMES VICKERS
MANUAL FOCUS · MANUAL-FOCUS.CO.UK
FIRST EDITION, OCTOBER 2026

BEFORE YOU START

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Ask a room of people what marketing is and most of them will describe advertising. Advertising is the visible end of marketing, and it should be the last thing you decide.

This minibook joins up the ideas in the Manual Focus Basics series into one answer. It starts with two formal definitions and a softer one, then follows a single product, a new road helmet, through the whole job. That means the market, the research and the product, what to say and how to say it, where and when to say it, the launch campaign and the press, and the plan that measures it all.

THE HELMET IS HYPOTHETICAL

The helmet, the brand behind it and its research findings are invented to show how the steps connect. They are not a real launch, and nothing in this book reports real sales, prices or survey results. Where the book cites a fact, it names the source, and the sources are listed at the back.

HOW TO USE IT

- **Read it straight through** to see how the steps depend on each other.
- **Use the worksheets** at the end of each chapter on a real product of your own.
- **Hand the AI prompts** in chapter 12 to whichever assistant your company uses.

CONTENTS

INSIDE

01 What marketing is

02 The common thread

03 Is there a market?

04 Market research

05 Product requirements

06 The communication hierarchy

07 The benefits ladder

08 Channels, where and when to be seen

09 Campaign, creative and PR

10 SOSTAC brings it together

11 Where AI fits

12 Get AI on this, three prompts

13 Where people go wrong

14 The helmet on one page, and yours

·· Glossary, sources and further reading

CHAPTER 01

WHAT MARKETING IS

There are two definitions most people are taught, and a softer one worth keeping beside them.

> **THE MANAGEMENT PROCESS RESPONSIBLE FOR IDENTIFYING, ANTICIPATING AND SATISFYING CUSTOMER REQUIREMENTS PROFITABLY.**
>
> CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF MARKETING

The Chartered Institute of Marketing, the professional body for marketers in the UK, uses this definition, and it is the one most UK courses teach. Every word in it does a job.

- **Identifying** means finding out what people need now.
- **Anticipating** means spotting what they will need next. Most teams react well to what customers said last year and leave little time to ask what will be different next year, which is usually where a competitor gets in.
- **Satisfying** means meeting the need, which is a product and service question as much as a communication one.
- **Profitably** is the word that gets forgotten in a launch, when everyone is excited about the product and nobody has checked the margin at the price the market will pay.

The institute goes on to spell out what marketing decides. It covers what a company will produce, what it will charge, how it will get the product or service to the customer, and how it will tell customers about it. It sums these up as the 7Ps.

THE 7PS	THE QUESTION IT ANSWERS
Product	What will we make or offer?
Price	What will we charge?
Place	How and where will customers get it?
Promotion	How will we tell customers about it?
People	Who delivers it, and how do they behave?
Process	How does the customer move through buying and using it?
Physical evidence	What can the customer see and touch that proves it?

Promotion is one of seven. Most people meet marketing from the promotion end, through adverts, posts and emails, which is why so many marketing plans begin with channels. A price change or a new stockist can do more for a business objective than another campaign, and a better advert will not fix a problem whose cause is price.

> **THE ACTIVITY, SET OF INSTITUTIONS, AND PROCESSES FOR CREATING, COMMUNICATING, DELIVERING, AND EXCHANGING OFFERINGS THAT HAVE VALUE FOR CUSTOMERS, CLIENTS, PARTNERS, AND SOCIETY AT LARGE.**
>
> AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION

The American Marketing Association's definition is broader, and it takes in partners and society as well as customers. Both formal definitions start with the customer and treat telling people about the product as one part of the job among several.

THE SOFTER ONE

Seth Godin's book *This Is Marketing*, published by Portfolio in November 2018, offers a different emphasis. He frames marketing as helping others become who they want to be, and argues that great marketers use marketing to solve other people's problems rather than their company's.

The formal definitions tell you what the job covers. Godin's tells you what it is for. Keep both in mind and the helmet in this book stops being about a helmet and starts being about the rider. That idea comes back in chapter 7, where the top rung of the benefits ladder describes the person the buyer wants to become.

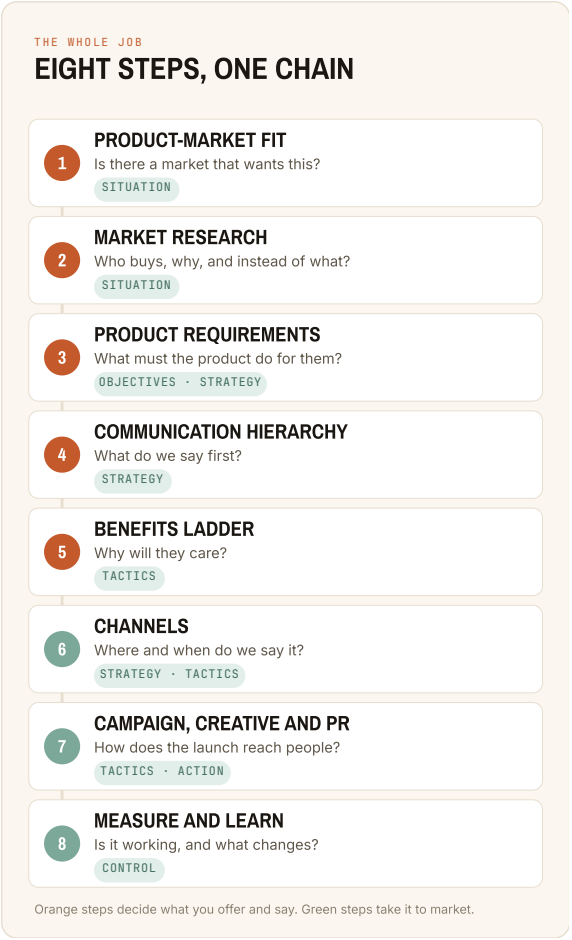
WHERE PROMOTION SITS

Promotion is the part of marketing most people see, and this book gives it two full chapters. It comes late in the chain on purpose. Once you know who you are talking to and what you are saying, choosing channels, a campaign and a story for the press gets much easier.

CHAPTER 02

THE COMMON THREAD

Marketing is one chain of decisions. Each step answers one question and hands its answer to the next.



The order matters. Skip a step and the gap shows up later, usually as a campaign that can't explain why anyone should care. A team that writes the message before the research ends up promoting what the factory can make rather than what buyers need. A team that writes requirements without findings builds features looking for a reason.

The first five steps decide what you offer and what you say. The last three take it to market and measure it. The chain also maps onto SOSTAC, the planning model chapter 10 uses to run it. The first two steps are the Situation, the middle steps make up the Objectives, Strategy and Tactics, and the launch and its measures are Action and Control.

THE HELMET BRIEF

A UK cycling brand wants to launch a new road helmet. It has a design team, a few retail stockists and an online shop. The leadership team has asked marketing for a go-to-market plan.

The rest of this book follows that brief from the first question to the last measure. Every name, finding and feature is invented for the example.

The tempting first move is to ask what the launch campaign should look like. This book gets there in chapter 9, and starts somewhere less glamorous.

IS THERE A MARKET?

The first question is whether there is a market for the product, and whether you can win it.

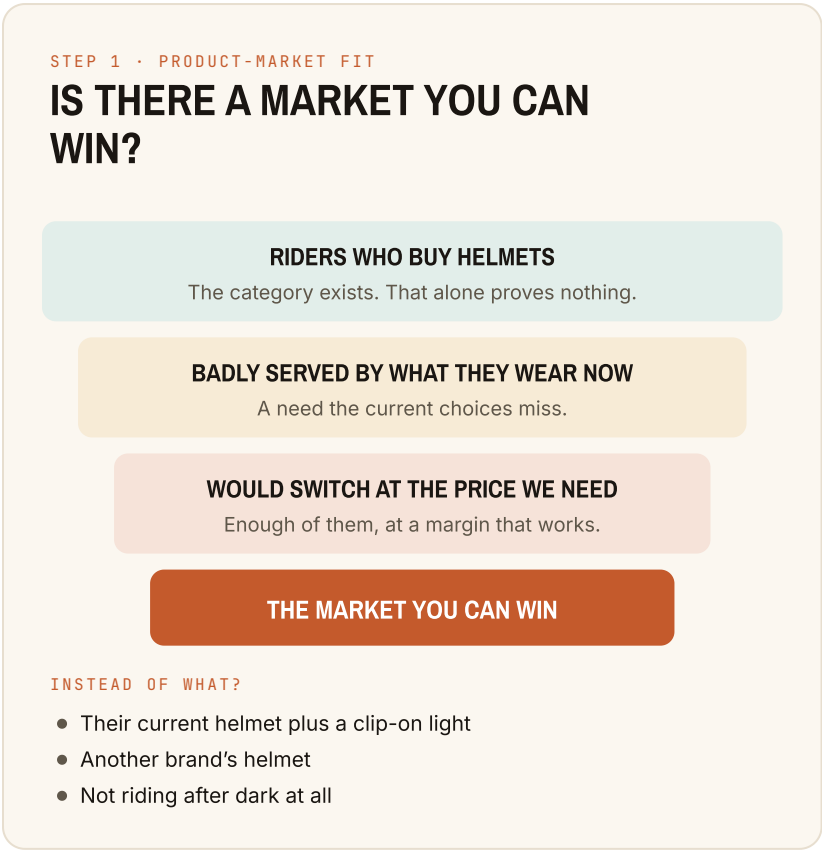
The term people use is product-market fit. The definition most people quote comes from Marc Andreessen, in an essay called "The only thing that matters", published on his blog on 25 June 2007.

> **PRODUCT/MARKET FIT MEANS BEING IN A GOOD MARKET WITH A PRODUCT THAT CAN SATISFY THAT MARKET.**
>
> MARC ANDREESSEN, 2007

He went further and wrote that the only thing that matters is getting to product/market fit. He was writing about start-ups, but the logic carries to any launch. If the market isn't there, nothing downstream fixes it.

WHY MARKETING BELONGS IN THIS CONVERSATION

In many companies the product decision is made first, and marketing is brought in at launch and asked to sell it. By then the expensive choices are locked. Marketing should be in the room for this question, because it is the function whose job, by the institute's definition, is identifying and anticipating what customers need.



A MARKET EXISTING IS NOT A MARKET FOR YOU

For a helmet, a market plainly exists, because riders already buy helmets. That is the trap. The useful question is much narrower, and it has three parts.

1. Which riders are badly served by what they wear now?
2. Roughly how many of them are there?
3. Would they switch at the price the brand needs to charge?

If the honest answer to the first is "nobody in particular", the launch should stop there. That is hard to say inside a company that has already designed the product, but it is the cheapest moment to say it, because every step after this costs more.

INSTEAD OF WHAT?

The most useful question in this chapter is what those riders are doing instead. The competition is not only other helmets. For a rider who wants to be seen on a dark evening, the alternative might be their current helmet with a cheap clip-on light. It might be another brand's helmet. Or it might be not riding after dark at all.

Those are very different competitors. If the real alternative is staying at home, the launch has to give people a reason to ride, not a reason to switch brands, and the person staying at home appears in nobody's market share figures.

A HYPOTHESIS, NOT A VERDICT

You rarely get a clean yes or no at this stage. You get a hypothesis, such as "we think year-round riders are badly served", and the next step exists to test it. So the output of step one is a go or no-go on whether it is worth finding out more.

THE HELMET, STEP 1

The brand's working hypothesis is that riders who keep cycling through the winter and through hot summers are badly served by helmets designed for mild weekend rides. It decides that is worth testing before anything else is designed or briefed.

WORKSHEET · IS THERE A MARKET?

Who is badly served by what they use now, and how do you know?

What do they do instead? List at least three alternatives, including doing nothing.

Would enough of them switch at the price you need? What would change your mind?

MARKET RESEARCH

Research is where "cyclists" stop being a category and start being people.

For the helmet, the research needs to find out a handful of things.

WHAT TO FIND OUT	WHY IT MATTERS FOR THE LAUNCH
Who rides, and where	Defines the audience and the conditions the product must handle
What they wear now, and why they chose it	Shows the real competition and the reasons it wins
What they complain about	Points to the gap a new product could fill
Where they buy	Decides place, and whether fitting help is part of the product
What triggers a purchase	Tells you when people are ready to listen

TRIGGERS, OR CATEGORY ENTRY POINTS

The triggers are the most useful part. The Manual Focus Lens has a playbook on category entry points, a framework from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for the moments and needs that bring someone into a category in the first place.

For a helmet you can guess at a few. A crash means the old one has to be replaced. A new bike prompts a new kit list. Someone starts commuting. The clocks go back and the evenings get dark. Each trigger brings a different person with a different worry, and a launch that knows which triggers it is going after will spend its money better.

The playbook pulls these triggers from four streams, which are search data, reviews, forum threads and a small set of interviews with eight to twelve recent buyers, about thirty minutes each. It takes about three working days, which is cheap compared with the cost of a launch aimed at the wrong person.

END IN FINDINGS, NOT CHARTS

The most common failure in research is a long deck of charts with no conclusions. Nobody can tell which facts matter, so the rest of the plan ignores them. Good research ends in three or four findings, each one a sentence, each with its evidence underneath.

THE HELMET, STEP 2

Say the hypothetical research produced three findings.

1. Year-round commuters want drivers to see them on dark evenings.
2. Road riders overheat on long climbs in summer.
3. People riding for several hours find most helmets uncomfortable by the end.

These three findings shape everything that follows.

CHOOSING BETWEEN PEOPLE

The commuter on a dark evening and the road rider on a summer climb are often not the same person. That is a real decision. You can build a helmet for one of them and do it brilliantly, or try to serve both and risk serving neither. In many launches this is where the team quietly avoids choosing.

For the example, the brand looks for the thread between the groups. Both want to keep riding when conditions are against them, dark in one case and heat in the other. If the research backs that up, the launch can be built around year-round riding. If it doesn't, the brand should pick one group and say no to the other, at least for the first season.

THE SMALLEST VIABLE AUDIENCE

Saying no feels like leaving money on the table. Seth Godin's *This Is Marketing* asks marketers to find their smallest viable audience, the smallest group they can serve so well that those people recommend them. On his blog he describes it as a stepping-stone, not a compromise. For the helmet, that might be commuters who already ride through the winter and dislike their current helmet in the dark. Win them properly and they tell the riders who are still nervous about the dark.

WRITE THE POSITIONING DOWN

The choice of audience is the positioning, and it fits in one sentence. Who it's for, what they want, what the product is and why it beats the alternatives.

THE HELMET'S POSITIONING

For riders who want to keep riding when the light and the weather turn, this is the helmet built for the whole year, because it was designed around being seen, staying cool and staying comfortable.

Every phrase in that sentence comes from the research. If you could swap in a competitor's name and it would still be true, it isn't positioning yet.

AI AND RESEARCH · WHO IS MISSING

AI is very good at summarising a pile of reviews or forum threads, but it can only summarise what is in the pile. Reviews come from people who bought something and felt strongly enough to write. You will hear a lot from existing buyers of other helmets and very little from people who don't ride in winter because they don't feel safe. Those people might be your best market, and they are not in the data. That is why the interviews matter, and why some of them should be with people who aren't buying yet.

PRODUCT REQUIREMENTS

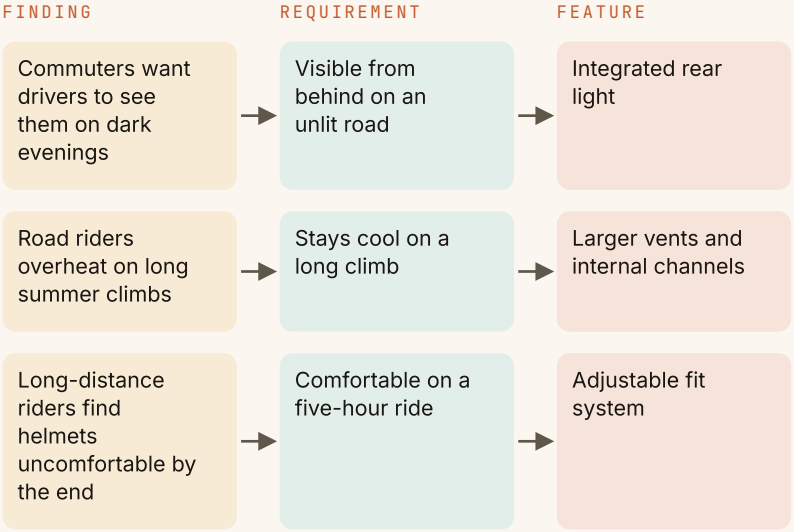
This is the step where marketing most often gets left out, which is odd, because product is the first of the 7Ps.

A requirements brief written by marketing describes what the product has to do for the buyer, in the buyer's words, and leaves engineering to decide how.

From the first finding, a requirement might be "visible from behind to drivers on an unlit road". An integrated rear light is one answer to it. A reflective shell or a light mount might be others. Choosing between them is engineering's job. The requirement is the problem, and the feature is one solution.

STEPS 2 AND 3 · RESEARCH TO REQUIREMENTS

EVERY FEATURE TRACES BACK



Marketing writes the first two columns in the buyer's words. Engineering chooses the third. A feature with no finding behind it is a feature looking for a reason.

EVERY REQUIREMENT TRACES BACK

Each requirement should trace to a research finding. Staying cool on a long climb traces to the second finding. Comfort on a five-hour ride traces to the third. Anything in the brief that traces to nothing is a feature looking for a reason.

That gives a useful test for any product meeting. When somebody wants to add a feature, ask which finding it is for. If nobody can answer, it probably shouldn't be there, or at least it shouldn't be in the launch story.

The test works in the other direction too. A finding with no requirement against it means the product is ignoring something the market told you, and that gap is often where the competitive advantage sits, in the thing everyone in the category knows riders complain about and nobody has fixed.

PRICE AND PLACE ARE REQUIREMENTS TOO

The brief should cover price and where the product is sold, because they come from the same findings. If research shows most riders buy their helmet in a bike shop where someone helps with the fit, then being stocked and fitted in shops is a requirement, and it changes the margin the brand needs. If they buy online, the fit system has to work without help. Product, price and place are one decision made from one picture of the buyer.

SHOPS OR DIRECT?

For a helmet brand, selling through bike shops or selling direct is one of the biggest decisions in the plan. Shops bring the fitting, the advice and the trust of the person behind the counter, and they take margin and the direct relationship with the rider. Selling direct keeps both, but then the website has to do the shop's job. Most brands do both, and the research decides which one leads.

Price follows. It has to leave room for the shop's margin, and it has to make sense next to what the rider pays now. For the commuter, that might be a cheap helmet and a clip-on light, which is the real comparison in the buyer's head.

WORKSHEET · REQUIREMENTS BRIEF

FINDING	REQUIREMENT, IN THE BUYER'S WORDS	POSSIBLE FEATURES

Which features in the current design trace to no finding?

THE COMMUNICATION HIERARCHY

A communication hierarchy ranks what you say. One message comes first, and everything else supports it.

The structure has three levels.

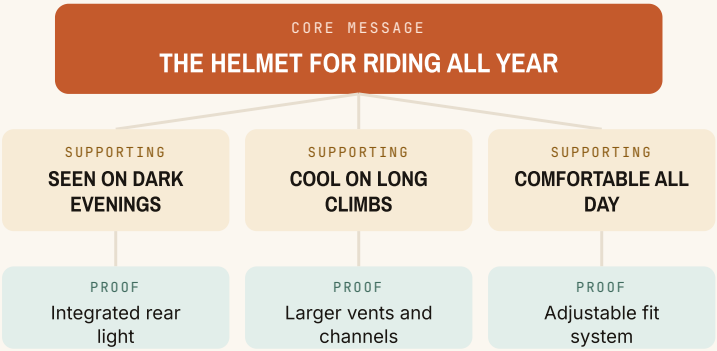
- **One core message**, the single thing you want a buyer to remember if they remember nothing else.
- **Three or four supporting messages** beneath it, each one a reason to believe the core message.
- **Proof** under each supporting message, the facts that make it true.

WHY THE RANKING MATTERS

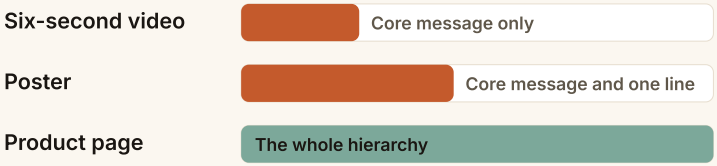
Every channel has a different amount of room. A six-second video can carry one thing. A poster can carry one thing and perhaps a line beneath it. A product page can carry the whole hierarchy. So each channel leads with the top and goes as far down as it has room for. Without a ranking, every channel picks its own favourite message, and the launch says six different things.

STEP 4 · COMMUNICATION HIERARCHY

ONE MESSAGE FIRST, THEN THE REST



HOW FAR DOWN EACH CHANNEL GOES



THE HELMET, STEP 4

Working from the findings, the core message is "the helmet for riding all year". The supporting messages follow the research, seen on dark evenings, cool on long climbs and comfortable all day. The proof under each is the specification, the light, the vents and the fit system.

The core message is a choice. It says the helmet is for people who ride in the dark and the cold, and by implication not for someone who rides twice a summer.

WHO OWNS IT

In most teams the hierarchy sits with whoever owns positioning, usually brand or product marketing. What matters is that one person signs it off and everyone else works from it. The agency writing the ads, the person writing the emails and the retail team briefing shops should all have the same page. It belongs at the top of every brief, because a brief that doesn't say which message it carries will get back whatever the writer found most interesting.

WHERE IT GOES WRONG

- **A core message that is really a list.** "Light, cool, comfortable and great value" is four messages joined with commas.
- **A core message nobody could disagree with.** "Quality you can trust" is true of every helmet brand's view of itself, so it tells the buyer nothing.

A useful check is the portability test. If a sentence would still be true about a different company, cut it or make it specific.

IN THE LENS · MESSAGE HOUSE GENERATOR

The Manual Focus message house playbook builds this structure from a positioning brief. It produces one narrative sentence at the top, three or four pillars, three to five proof points under each pillar and lines for each channel. It adds a rebuttal sheet, eight to twelve of the hardest questions a sceptic will ask, each answered from the proof. For a helmet, the obvious one is "why should I pay more than I do now?". If the hierarchy can't answer that, it isn't ready.

THE BENEFITS LADDER

The hierarchy decides what you say. The benefits ladder decides how you say each part of it.

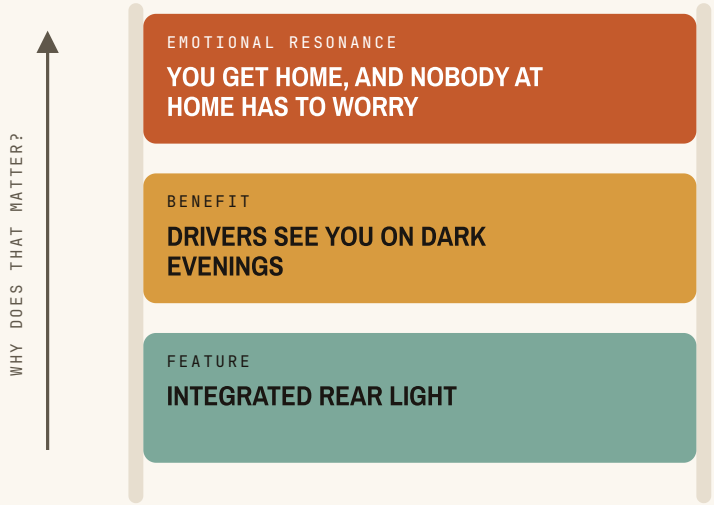
Most launch copy reads like a specification sheet. The benefits ladder fixes that. It has three rungs.

- **Feature**, at the bottom. What the product has.
- **Benefit**, in the middle. What the feature does for you.
- **Emotional resonance**, at the top. Why that benefit matters to you as a person.

You take each supporting message and climb it.

STEP 5 · BENEFITS LADDER

CLIMB FROM FEATURE TO FEELING



Research climbs the ladder by asking why that matters to you. Copy leads with the top rung, and the feature at the bottom proves it.

FEATURE	BENEFIT	EMOTIONAL RESONANCE
Integrated rear light	Drivers see you on dark evenings	You get home, and nobody at home has to worry
Larger vents and internal channels	Cooler on long climbs	You ride further and feel strong doing it
Adjustable fit system	Comfortable on a five-hour ride	You forget you're wearing it and enjoy the ride

WHERE THE LADDER COMES FROM

The ladder draws on laddering, an interview method that Thomas Reynolds and Jonathan Gutman set out in the Journal of Advertising Research in 1988. Researchers still describe it as an in-depth, one-on-one interviewing technique for understanding how consumers translate the attributes of products into meaningful associations with respect to self. It sits within what researchers call the means-end chain.

In an interview, the researcher keeps asking "why does that matter to you?", and the answers climb from the product to the person. So research climbs the ladder by asking why, and copy uses the answers. The emotional rung should come from what people said in the interviews, not from a meeting. If riders said they worry about being seen in the dark, the copy can talk about getting home, because they told you so.

The top rung is also where Godin's definition from chapter 1 shows up in practice. It describes the rider the buyer wants to become.

THE LADDER WORKS IN BOTH DIRECTIONS

Copy that stops at the bottom rung reads like a spec sheet. The opposite failure is a launch film that is all feeling, with no clue about what the product does, which people enjoy and can't connect to anything. The ladder guards against both, because every emotional line has to stand on a benefit and a feature. If you can't climb down from a line to the thing that proves it, the line doesn't belong in the launch.

A CAUTION FOR SAFETY PRODUCTS

The emotional rung can't promise more than the product does. Helping drivers see you is a fair claim for a rear light. Implying that a helmet keeps you safe from anything is not. The proof at the bottom has to hold up the promise at the top.

HOW THE LADDER AND THE HIERARCHY FIT TOGETHER

The core message often lives near the top of the ladder, because it is about the rider, not the helmet. The supporting messages sit at the benefit rung. The proof points are the features at the bottom. A short ad leads with the emotional line, and a product page can climb all the way down to the specification.

WORKSHEET · BUILD A LADDER

FEATURE	BENEFIT	EMOTIONAL RESONANCE	WHAT A CUSTOMER SAID

CHANNELS

Now the part most people think marketing is. Where, and when, do we say it?

There are two common ways to sort channels, and a plan should be clear on both. The first sorts them by who controls them. The second sorts them by how widely they reach and what job they do.

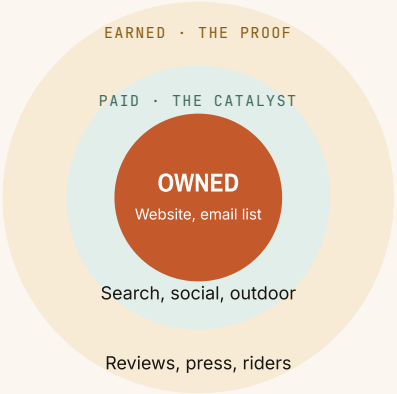
OWNED, PAID AND EARNED

	OWNED	PAID	EARNED
What it is	Channels the brand controls	Attention the brand buys	What others choose to say
Examples	Website, email list, app	Search, social and display ads, outdoor, sponsorship	Press, reviews, word of mouth, mentions in AI answers
Strength	Lasts, cheap to reuse	Reach on demand	Credibility you can't buy
Weakness	Slow to build	Stops when the money stops	Can't be controlled

The terms became standard with a Forrester report by Sean Corcoran in December 2009, *No Media Should Stand Alone*. It argued that all three can play specific roles in meeting marketers' objectives, and advised shifting short-term paid media into the role of catalyst while building a solar system of long-term owned touchpoints.

STEP 6 · CHANNELS

WHERE AND WHEN TO BE SEEN



THE TRIGGER SETS THE TIMING

TRIGGER	WHERE	WHEN
A crash	Search	Any time
A new bike	Bike shop fitting	Spring
Clocks go back	Outdoor, video, email	Late October

THE HELMET, STEP 6

The website and the email list sit at the centre, because every rider who signs up can be reached again without paying. Paid media sends the right riders there. Reviews, press and riders people trust make them believe it.

The research triggers set the timing. A crash replacement starts with a search, so search is always on. A new bike happens in a shop, so stockists and fitting matter in spring. The clocks going back is a date, so the dark-evenings push lands in late October.

ABOVE AND BELOW THE LINE

Above the line is mass media aimed at a broad audience, such as television, radio, press, outdoor and broad online video. Its main job is memory, so that when someone thinks about the category, your brand comes to mind. Below the line is direct and targeted, such as email, events, sampling and point of sale in the shop, aimed at people close to buying. Through the line runs both under one idea, which is how most launches should be planned.

The risk is that everything drifts below the line, because it is easy to measure. Les Binet and Peter Field's report for the IPA, *The Long and the Short of It*, warns that relying on very short-term online metrics as the main measures has dangerous implications for long-term success. For the helmet, the real competitor may be a rider who stays at home in winter. That rider isn't searching for anything yet, so search ads alone will never reach them. Something broader has to make them think about riding in the dark at all.

WHY OWNED SITS IN THE MIDDLE

Owned media is the only part you keep. Every rider who joins the email list can be reached again without paying a platform. Seth Godin's idea of permission marketing explains why that list matters. He describes it as the privilege, not the right, of delivering anticipated, personal and relevant messages to people who actually want to get them. A list of riders who asked to hear about the helmet is worth far more than a big list of people who never did.

Social media sits awkwardly. A brand controls its posts, but the platform controls who sees them, so many marketers call a brand's social profiles rented rather than owned. They are useful, and if the platform changes its rules the audience goes with it, which is one more reason to build the email list.

HOW THE CHANNEL PLAN COMES TOGETHER

By this point the channel plan mostly writes itself. The communication hierarchy says what each channel carries. The triggers say when. The objectives say how much each channel is worth. Judge every paid and earned activity partly by how much owned audience it leaves behind.

WORKSHEET · CHANNEL PLAN

TRIGGER	CHANNEL	OWNED, PAID OR EARNED	WHEN

What is building memory with people who aren't buying yet?

CAMPAIGN, CREATIVE AND PR

The launch is where the strategy meets the world. Four words get mixed up here, and separating them saves arguments.



LAYER	WHAT IT IS	HOW TO JUDGE IT
Strategy	Who you serve, what change you want and why they should choose you	Did the business results move?
Campaign	A time-bound push with its own objective, budget and dates, carrying part of the strategy	Did it hit its own objective?
Creative	The idea people see and hear	Was it noticed, understood and talked about?
Execution	The delivery, the assets, media, owners and checks	On time, on brief, without errors?

THE CAMPAIGN

For the helmet, the strategy is the year-round rider and the helmet for riding all year. The launch campaign is one push that carries it, with its own objective, such as a number of new customers by the end of winter. The brief should name the part of the strategy it serves. If it can't, either the campaign shouldn't run or the strategy has a gap.

THE CREATIVE

The creative idea usually comes from the top rung of the benefits ladder, because that is what people remember. The helmet's launch idea is about getting home on dark evenings or riding further, not about the vents. Seth Godin's *Purple Cow* gives the test. A brown cow in a field goes unseen, a purple one gets talked about. Will the audience notice this, and will they mention it to someone? Judge creative against the strategy, not taste.

PR AND REVIEWS

PR mostly works through earned media, where a journalist, creator or reviewer decides whether to cover you. You give up control and gain credibility. Most PR problems are product or story problems, and a press release won't make a dull helmet remarkable.

Relevance decides almost everything. Send the story only to people who cover commuting and road riding, say why it matters to their readers in the opening lines, and have the spokesperson, data and pictures ready before anything goes out. For a helmet, reviews may matter as much as the press, so getting helmets to the reviewers and riders people trust, early, belongs in the launch plan rather than after it.

EXECUTION

Execution is the photography, the media, the shop displays and the emails, each on time and on brief. Measure it on its own terms. If you only measure results, a strong idea delivered late looks like a weak idea, and the team learns the wrong lesson. When a result disappoints, check from the bottom up. Execution is the cheapest to fix, then the creative, then the campaign, and question the strategy last.

AFTER THE SALE

Many launch plans stop at the sale, but the rider who has just bought the helmet is now the best source of proof, reviews and the next sale. The triggers come round again. A crash means a replacement, a friend starts riding, a second bike needs a second helmet. If the brand has kept the relationship, it is the obvious choice at each of those moments. If not, the rider is back in a search comparing everyone.

Keeping it is mostly owned media. A follow-up after a few weeks asking how the fit is working, an invitation to review once they have ridden in the dark with it, and a reminder of when a helmet needs replacing. Real riders

saying it kept them visible on a dark road is better proof than anything the brand says about itself, and it feeds straight back into the paid and earned work.

WORKSHEET · LAUNCH BRIEF

Which line of the strategy does this campaign serve, and what is its own objective?

What is the creative idea, and which rung of the ladder does it come from?

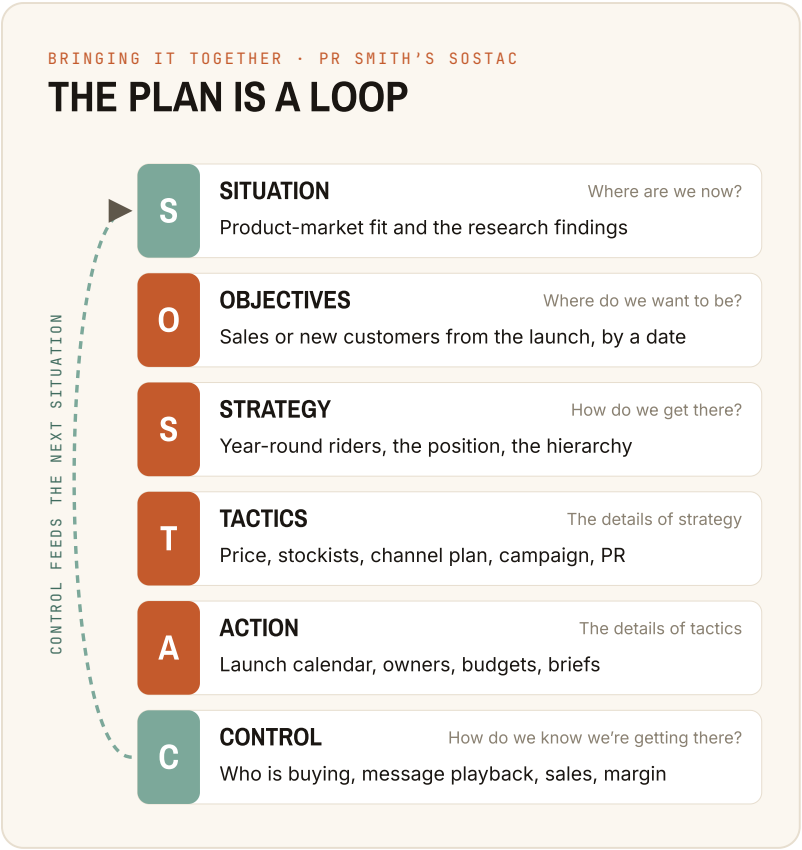
Who would cover this story, and why would their readers care?

SOSTAC BRINGS IT TOGETHER

SOSTAC turns the chain into a plan that a team can run, review and change.

SOSTAC is the planning model created by the British marketer PR Smith in the 1990s. The letters stand for Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action and Control. PR Smith gives the stages plain questions. Where are we now? Where do we want to be? How do we get there? Tactics are the details of strategy, and actions are the details of tactics. And finally, how do we know we are getting there?

Much of the plan is already written by this point. Product-market fit and the research are the Situation.



OBJECTIVES

The objectives say what the launch must achieve, and by when. Sales, new customers or a share of a particular group of riders, each with a date. Tie them to business results rather than activity. "Launch the helmet with a big splash" is not an objective, because nobody can say whether it was met. Keep the business objective, such as revenue, separate from the marketing objectives that serve it, such as new customers or repeat purchase.

STRATEGY

Strategy is who you target, how you position the product against the alternatives, and which channels and partners carry it. For the helmet, the audience is the year-round rider, the position is the helmet for riding all year, and the communication hierarchy is the heart of the strategy, because it is the decision about what the brand stands for.

TACTICS

Tactics are the marketing mix in detail. The price, where it is stocked, and everything in chapters 8 and 9, the channel plan, the launch campaign, the creative written from the ladder and the PR.

ACTION

Action is who does what, by when and with what budget. For a product with a season, the Manual Focus Lens has a gear launch sequence playbook built as a twelve-month calendar. It runs from pre-launch foundation work, through the hero shoot, a quieter phase before the reveal and the public reveal, then proof from riders and races, and finally a long stretch of sustained sell-through.

The playbook itself says the full calendar is overkill for a product with no athlete proof and no retail channel, and a small brand would run a much leaner version. The principle holds either way. Every piece of work has a name next to it and a date.

CONTROL

Control is the measures you review against each objective, on a rhythm. A short monthly look and a proper quarterly review, where the team is allowed to change the tactics, suit most teams. For a launch, Control should reach right back to the start of the chain.

STEP	WHAT TO MEASURE
Product-market fit	Whether the group you aimed at is the group buying, from a short survey at purchase
Research	Whether the triggers you planned around show up in why people say they bought
Message	Whether people can play back the core message when asked what the product is for
Channels	Whether paid and earned activity is growing the owned audience, the email list and returning customers
Business	Sales against the objective, and the margin

If the people buying are a different group from the one you planned for, the situation analysis was wrong, and you want to know that early. Control feeds the next Situation, which is what makes SOSTAC a loop rather than a document. The message playback check is cheap to run and tells you whether the hierarchy survived contact with the real channels, which most launches never check.

CHAPTER 11

WHERE AI FITS

There is work for AI at every step of the chain. The decisions don't move.

STEP	WHAT AI CAN DO	WHAT STAYS WITH A PERSON
Product-market fit	Gather what is known about the category and its alternatives	The go or no-go
Market research	Summarise reviews, forum threads and interview transcripts, with the quotes behind each theme	Which findings matter, and who is missing from the data
Requirements	Check that every line in the brief traces to a finding	Trade-offs between requirements, price and margin
Hierarchy	Check every ad and email against the core message	What the core message is
Benefits ladder	Draft ladders for every feature, tied to what customers said	Which lines to back, and what the product can honestly claim
Channels	Model the split between memory and response, and build the weekly channel report	The budget split
Campaign and PR	Match the story to journalists who cover the beat, and draft variants of the creative	The creative idea, and what goes out to the press
SOSTAC	Build timelines, briefs and recurring reports	Objectives, strategy and accountability

THREE LAYERS OF AI

The Basics guide to the three layers of AI sorts these jobs further. Chat with a language model helps you draft the ladders. An agent, which takes a whole request and delivers a finished result, can run the research synthesis or check every piece of launch copy against the hierarchy. Orchestration is when several of those steps run together as one system.

A FIRST DRAFT ONLY

PR Smith wrote about SOSTAC and AI for the Chartered Institute of Marketing in September 2025. He named situation analysis, strategy, tactics and actions as the stages where AI is especially relevant, and advised treating any AI-generated plan as a first draft only, checked against all six sections. He also argued that marketers need to become agile scientists, or at least experimentalists, testing and improving all the time.

Our view at Manual Focus is that AI makes this whole chain cheaper to run properly. The steps teams used to skip for lack of time, the research at the start and the measurement at the end, are exactly the ones AI makes affordable, so they deserve more attention now, not less. The order of the chain stays the same. You still start by asking whether there is a market.

CHAPTER 12

GET AI ON THIS

Three jobs from the chain that you can hand to AI. Each prompt works in any capable assistant.

Replace the bracketed parts with your own brand, product and market, attach what each prompt asks for, and read the output as a first draft. Each prompt tells the model to say what it couldn't check rather than guess.

1. TURN YOUR RESEARCH INTO FINDINGS

Attach your review exports, a set of forum threads and your customer interview transcripts.

```
You are helping the marketing team at [brand], which sells [product
category] in [market], prepare for the launch of [new product].

I've attached customer reviews, forum threads and interview tran-
scripts. Read all of them and find:
1. The purchase triggers, the moments or needs that lead someone to buy
in this category.
2. The complaints people have about what they use now.

Return a table with the columns: Trigger or complaint | How many
sources mention it | Two verbatim quotes | Source file. Rank by how of-
ten it comes up.

Then write three or four findings, one sentence each, with the evidence
from the table under each one.

Finally, list the groups of people the material doesn't cover (for ex-
ample, people who don't buy in the category yet) and say what you
couldn't check. Don't invent quotes or counts. If something appears
only once, say so.
```

2. DRAFT A BENEFITS LADDER FOR EVERY FEATURE

Attach the product specification, your research findings and the interview transcripts.

```
You are helping the marketing team at [brand] write launch messaging
for [new product].

I've attached the product specification, our research findings and cus-
tomer interview transcripts.

For each feature in the specification, build a benefits ladder:
- Feature: the feature as specified.
- Benefit: what it does for the buyer, in plain words.
- Emotional resonance: two or three options for why that benefit mat-
ters to the buyer as a person.

Every emotional line must be tied to something a customer actually said
in the transcripts. Quote the line it's based on. If no customer said
anything that supports an emotional rung for a feature, say so rather
than writing one.

Return a table with the columns: Feature | Benefit | Emotional options
| Supporting quote | Research finding it traces to.

Flag any line that promises more than the feature can prove, and any
feature that traces to no research finding.
```

3. CHECK LAUNCH COPY AGAINST THE HIERARCHY

Run it before each launch phase goes live. Attach the hierarchy and every piece of copy.

```
You are checking launch copy for [brand]'s [new product] against its
communication hierarchy.

Attached are:
1. The communication hierarchy: one core message, three or four sup-
porting messages and the proof points under each.
2. Every piece of launch copy: ads, emails, social posts, the product
page.
```

```
For each piece of copy, return a row with the columns: Piece | Channel
| Message it leads with | Which hierarchy level that is | Supporting
messages it includes | Anything it says that isn't in the hierarchy.

Then list:
- Pieces that lead with something other than the core message, where
the channel has room for only one message.
- Supporting messages that never appear in any piece.
- Claims in the copy that no proof point supports.

If you can't tell which message a piece leads with, say so rather than
guessing.
```

CHAPTER 13

WHERE PEOPLE GO WRONG

Most broken launches fail at one of these links. The most expensive mistake is treating the chain as a one-off, when Control should send you back up it.

MISTAKE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	THE FIX
Starting at the end	Channels and content chosen before anyone checked there's a market	Answer the step 1 questions first
Research as a report	Charts with no conclusions, so no decision changes	Three or four findings with evidence
Nobody chooses	A product for two groups that serves neither	Find the thread between them, or pick one
A brief written in features	Nobody can say which problem each feature solves	Requirements in the buyer's words, traced to findings
A core message that is a list	Four ideas joined with commas, a different one in every channel	One core message, signed off by one person
A bottom-rung ladder	Spec-sheet copy	Climb each feature to the benefit and the feeling
A top-rung ladder	An emotional line no customer said, with nothing to prove it	Tie every emotional line to a quote and a feature
All below the line	Search and retargeting only, because they are easy to measure	Give some budget to building memory
A press release instead of a story	Mass pitching something nobody would repeat	Find the remarkable part first, then pitch the right people
No Control	The plan is filed after launch	Monthly and quarterly reviews that feed the next Situation

CHAPTER 14

THE HELMET ON ONE PAGE

The whole chain for the helmet, step by step. The next page is a blank version for your own product.

STEP	THE HELMET
Is there a market?	Riders who keep riding through winter and summer heat, badly served by helmets made for mild weekends. The alternative is often a cheap helmet and a clip-on light, or not riding after dark.
What did we learn?	Commuters want to be seen on dark evenings. Road riders overheat on long climbs. Long-distance riders find helmets uncomfortable by the end. The thread is riding on when conditions are against you.
What must it do?	Be visible from behind on an unlit road, stay cool on a long climb and comfortable for five hours, at a price that makes sense next to a helmet and a light, sold where these riders buy.
What do we say first?	The helmet for riding all year.
Why does it matter?	You get home, and nobody at home has to worry.
Where and when?	Website and email list at the centre. Search always on for crash replacements, shops and fitting for new bikes in spring, a broad push when the clocks go back, and reviewers and trusted riders wearing it before launch.
The launch	A winter campaign with its own new-customer objective, creative from the top rung of the ladder, and a story pitched only to people who cover commuting and road riding.
How will we know?	Who is buying, whether they can say what it's for, whether the email list is growing, and sales and margin against the objective. Reviewed monthly, properly every quarter, and fed into next year's Situation.

YOUR ONE-PAGE PLAN

For a small brand or a single campaign, every step can be a paragraph. If any answer is blank, you are not ready to brief.

1. Is there a market, and who in it is badly served? What do they do instead?

---

2. What did we learn? Write three or four findings, each with its evidence.

---

3. What must the product do for them, in their words?

---

4. What is the one thing we say first?

---

5. Why does it matter to the buyer? Write the top rung of the ladder.

---

6. Where and when will people meet it? Owned, paid and earned.

---

7. What is the launch campaign, its idea and its story for the press?

---

8. Who does what by when, and how will we know it's working?

REFERENCE

GLOSSARY

TERM	MEANING IN THIS BOOK
Marketing	The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably (Chartered Institute of Marketing)
The 7Ps	Product, price, place, promotion, people, process and physical evidence, the CIM's summary of what marketing decides
Product-market fit	Being in a good market with a product that can satisfy that market (Marc Andreessen)
Category entry point	A moment or need that brings someone into a category, a framework from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute
Finding	One sentence from research, with its evidence, that changes a decision
Requirement	What the product must do for the buyer, in the buyer's words
Communication hierarchy	A ranking of what you say, one core message, supporting messages and proof
Message house	A four-tier version of the hierarchy used in the Manual Focus Lens, with a narrative, pillars, proof points and channel lines
Benefits ladder	Feature, benefit and emotional resonance, climbed for each message
Laddering	An interview method set out by Reynolds and Gutman in 1988 that keeps asking why something matters
SOSTAC	Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action and Control, PR Smith's planning model

Owned, paid and earned	Channels you control, attention you buy, and what others choose to say about you
Above, below and through the line	Mass media for memory, targeted activity for people near buying, and both under one idea
Campaign	A time-bound push with its own objective, budget and dates, carrying part of the strategy
Creative	The idea and the work the audience meets
Portability test	If a sentence would still be true about another company, cut it or make it specific

REFERENCE

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

SOURCES

- Chartered Institute of Marketing, What is marketing? (March 2023)
- American Marketing Association, Definitions of Marketing
- Seth Godin, This Is Marketing (Portfolio, 2018)
- Seth Godin, Purple Cow (Penguin, 2005 edition)
- Seth Godin, The smallest viable audience (22 May 2022) and Permission marketing (31 January 2008)
- Marc Andreessen, The only thing that matters (25 June 2007)
- Thomas Reynolds and Jonathan Gutman, "Laddering Theory, Method, Analysis, and Interpretation", Journal of Advertising Research (1988), as discussed in Veludo-de-Oliveira, Ikeda and Campomar, Discussing Laddering Application by the Means-End Chain Theory, The Qualitative Report (2006)
- Sean Corcoran, Forrester, No Media Should Stand Alone (16 December 2009)
- Les Binet and Peter Field, IPA, The Long and the Short of It
- PR Smith, What is PR Smith's SOSTAC Planning?
- PR Smith, SOSTAC plans in the AI age, Chartered Institute of Marketing (September 2025)

FROM MANUAL FOCUS

- What is marketing, the web guide and podcast episode
- SOSTAC explained
- Strategy vs campaign vs creative vs execution
- Owned, paid and earned media
- Above the line vs below the line
- PR 101
- The three layers of AI

MANUAL FOCUS

RUN THE CHAIN ON YOUR OWN LAUNCH

Manual Focus is a marketing agency led by James Vickers, for teams that want AI doing real work for their brand, demand and growth. If you are working out what AI should be doing in your marketing, start from your market, not the tools.

Book a free working session and we'll go through the chain with you, from whether there's a market to how you'll know it's working.

BOOK A FREE WORKING SESSION

manual-focus.co.uk/enquire

The companion episode of the Manual Focus podcast, in which James and Hannah talk the whole chain through, is on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and wherever you listen.