

# Stop Making Sense:

The Powerful Role of Emotion  
in B2B Decision Making

## **Fear, Hope, Goldfish and the Lizard Brain:** The Tangible Realities of Emotion in B2B Marketing

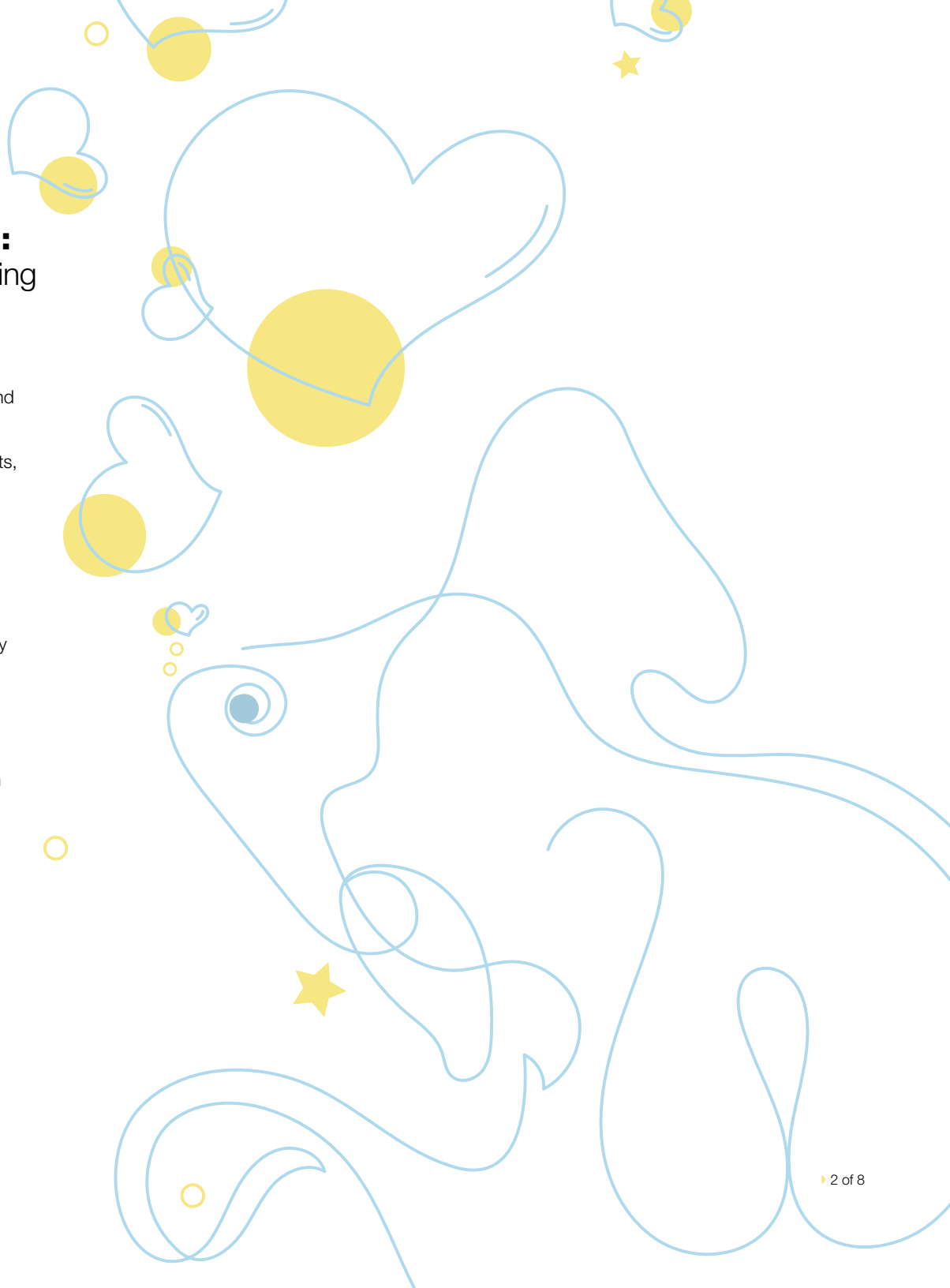
I only have six seconds to deliver a single, vital fact about the role of emotion in business-to-business (B2B) decision making, so please pay attention.

[A goldfish has a nine-second attention span.](#) Your customer has only a six-second attention span.

That means everything you've said about your product — its features and benefits, those three key bullet points under each of them, the table of specifications, that stirring statement about your mission, values and vision — none of that matters if you didn't grab a customer's imagination and attention in the first six seconds. When the time comes for them to decide, you'd better hope you made an impression with six seconds worth of something unforgettable.

Better yet, you've tapped into a customer's emotions. Because in business-to-business industries, an emotional response is often the only reason one company gets an order over an equally qualified vendor.

As marketers, we're not in the room when the buying decision is made, so we don't know what factor ultimately made the difference. But given the vast array of sometimes baffling studies into business decision making, we almost certainly prompted an emotional response that was then interpreted as a rational decision ([Internal Journal of Research in Marketing](#)).



## The Conference Table of Fear

Imagine for a moment that you are a customer who has a seat at the decision-making table. You're sitting there with your committee, sourcing HVAC system providers for the company's new headquarters, manufacturing plant and distribution center. Sitting around the table is every stakeholder in the multi-million dollar contract: the steely eyed chief operations officer; rational division managers; no-nonsense facilities engineers; and the pragmatic heads of finance and procurement.

There are literally heaps of facts, figures, features, benefits and product brochures on the table. Once you've reviewed it all, you come to the collective realization that all the offerings are basically identical. Yet one of you needs to step up and recommend an HVAC system to serve the company for decades, which ultimately means approving an enormous capital investment.

Many people are unwilling to go out on a limb and make a recommendation based on a product's merits. That's a huge risk. Because: what if you're wrong? A collaborative study by CEB and Google, [From Promotion to Emotion](#), demonstrates that people feel personal, emotional risk when making a major decision. You can lose credibility, trust — even your job — if you make the wrong decision, so people go out of their way to avoid making decisions due to that fear.

Conventional wisdom tells us that there's always a way out of having to make a recommendation, which is to follow the first law of B2B decision making: In parity markets, decisions are made on the basis of price.

Or so we think.

## Actually, It's Not Rocket Science; It's Brain Science

Despite the risk, you have a gut feeling that one of the products is better than the others, so you decide to make that recommendation. Why would you do that?

Neuroscientist Paul MacLean, PhD, developed a relatively simple model of how the brain works — [the triune brain theory](#) — which proffers a theory about how business decisions are made and why they're always based on emotion.

The process of making decisions begins in the neocortex. This is the thinking, rational part of the brain that [objectively gathers and analyzes information](#). That's why marketers provide so many cubic meters of technical content for decision makers to review; they're hoping that reviewers will see the benefits of our secret technical sauce. Right?

Nope! The neocortex is smarter than that. Rationally, it knows the HVAC systems laid out on the table for evaluation are mostly the same.

Then there's the limbic part of the brain, which [makes the unconscious associations that cause you to feel more positively about one system than the others](#). This part isn't influenced by endless facts, but instead by words and images which evoke emotion. These "feelings" rejigger the neocortex, prompting it to dig through the facts again to find those that justify emotional connections.

Finally, the primitive "lizard brain" — the prefrontal cortex [responsible for our "fight or flight" instincts](#) — takes over and lets us know it's safe to make a recommendation. This is "the gut feeling" that gains consensus at the table, thereby making the recommendation feel safer for everybody. And, in most cases, it's going to be a good one, at that.



## Emotional Justifications for Seemingly Rational Decisions

As Simon Hayward, a Gartner Fellow, said years ago, [“Most products now are good enough to serve the majority of users most of the time.”](#) With all things being equal, it’s the emotional connection that makes one system stand out from the others. This is why the emotional quotient can be more powerful than price or technical comparisons — and why that gut feeling nudges you into making a seemingly rational decision. By the way, this lizard brain only needs six seconds to react.

This explains why the most successful B2B marketers work overtime to prompt emotional justifications for seemingly rational decisions and make human connections to our target customers’ self-interests, needs and aspirations. Like their consumer advertising counterparts, they’ve learned that successful marketing must be emotional.

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Customers can always find the facts they need online or by speaking to sales reps, but only marketers have the opportunities to establish emotional connections.  
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Despite this, many industrial marketers grimly hold onto the idea that decision making is strictly rational. They cite field-tested statistics and technical specifications highlighting design features and benefits.

However, they’re relegated to a fate of sameness. Their competitors have similar stats and shared points of differentiation. And as customers are likely to discover, most meet required specifications and will fit reasonably into their budget. After all, those are the table stakes of this ultra-competitive game.

### Case in Point

Let’s continue our HVAC system evaluation scenario as a real-life example. We recently analyzed the written and visual messaging in HVAC industry journals over a six-month span. It didn’t take long to discover that most ads (roughly 75 percent) relied primarily on product feature messaging and glamour-shot product photography.

In a random selection of four ads, here is a list of messages found:	Now let’s look at their use of visual imagery:
» Maximum efficiency	» Condenser
» Redesigned accessibility	» Air inlet valve
» Innovative options	» Motor and fan
» Healthiest air	» Woman lounging in office on warm sand at sunset in a gentle breeze
<b><i>Which one of these messages “feels” different from the others?</i></b>	<b><i>Do any of these visuals catch your eye?</i></b>

If a visual doesn’t connect, it’s essentially invisible — just like the handful of words and the URL in the ad’s call to action. Remember, as B2B marketers, we only have a few words to work with, because our audience only has six seconds of attention.

## Be a Tiger

Emotional B2B advertising makes products stand out in the sea of sameness and can have an explosive impact on a company's success. For example, Accenture is a business consulting firm that once led with a sensible tagline: "Think straight. Talk straight." Exciting, right? In 2003, they hired a young golfer to tell customers, "Go ahead. Be a Tiger." as the face of a brand seeing a [350 percent increase in their inquiry rate and 96 percent growth in awareness](#). Eldrick "Tiger" Woods knew nothing about spreadsheets, but Accenture did, investing more than \$300 million on ads featuring him (back when he led the men's golfing pack).

This illustrates how finding an emotional cue does marketing wonders, overcoming the perception (and reality) of parity and commoditization of products that are the rule in business-to-business industries. Emotion creates brand awareness, sells product and can justify premium pricing.

## Emotion Over Economics

"Emotion trumps lower prices." That is the hardest argument to make to a business-to-business marketer, yet consumer marketers bank on it. [Strong emotional connections to a brand can command at least 20 percent higher margins on B2B products](#), and typically customers don't blink.

Yet, many B2B marketers stubbornly hold onto cost consciousness. Even at our own, rather emotional B2B agency, we often fit "cost savings," "lower total cost of ownership" and "energy efficiency and savings" into many a value proposition and paragraph of content.

A 2018 study published by Eric Almquist, Jamie Cleghorn and Lori Sherer in the [Harvard Business Review](#) might convince us to tone down our obsession with cash. The study surveyed 1,065 corporate decision makers to compare the importance of emotional connections versus of cost savings. The study presented participants with a list of 36 "value" words and asked them to rank which elements mattered most in their infrastructure decisions, excluding table stakes. Respondents chose "Product Quality" as their number one value. "Cost Savings" limped in at 27<sup>th</sup> place.

"Hope," a word evoking pure emotion, was ranked the fourth most important value. You can't quantify hope. But you can sure feel it. This means corporate decision makers have to have hope that you and your company will have the right answers; or perhaps they're holding out hope for an outcome they're hoping you can help them achieve.

Other terms that respondents mentioned in Harvard's list of key values included: "Trust," "Expertise," "Responsiveness," "Vision," "Cultural Fit," "Simple," "Social Responsibility" and "Safe." These powerful, emotional words often outranked the more conventional value propositions B2B marketers hang their hats on: Integration, Risk Reduction, Time Savings, Flexibility and Configurability. These value propositions are likely found within product specifications. The emotional — and more powerful — value propositions grow from a customer's encounter with your brand.

## People Use Life-changing Products

So how do you infuse emotion into B2B marketing? Most likely, whatever the competition is doing, do the opposite. Look through a stack of trade magazines (B2B is one of the few segments that still makes good use of print), visit websites or even watch television.

Up to 80 percent of the ads we reviewed were product-focused, photographed from every angle, standing alone or on the job. These product images send a powerful message to potential customers: you make products. Too often, differentiation comes down to the infusion of tried-and-true value clichés, such as: “world-class,” “global leader” and “innovative solution.”

Sometimes, ads depict the products joined by a person who is very happy with their performance. While this is a step in the right direction, as people are naturally attracted to photographs of people, the message focuses on the fact that “People use our product.”

The emotional impact of showing people when marketing products comes from their relatability: How do customers relate to the product in the real world? If it changes their lives for the better, making them smarter, better, faster, happier, busier ... then show us exactly how.

Business-to-business advertising giants rarely focus on product features. You will, however, see people interacting with hopes and dreams about a better future, in very conceptual marketing that communicates strong emotional connections among a brand, an idea and their lives.



## Make the Most of Those Six Seconds

Remember, you have six seconds to make an impression, so get to the point. Your headline and copy must extract an emotion about your product and your company, directly tied to visuals, in fewer words than we've used in this sentence (i.e., 27). Writers know to their chagrin that almost no one reads the full body copy or article; most readers skim. They spend their time exploring the handful of emotional words that explain why what you do matters.

Often, all you need is one sentence to put everything into context — wherever you use it. In online or social media platforms, it's all you have room for. In a print and online world of dense, fact-filled product advertising, your marketing will stand out in simple, dramatic contrast. The internet has given you a great gift: a repository for all the content, data, charts, animations and information customers need to rationalize their decision. All it takes is one powerful, emotional sentence or arresting visual to draw them in (and a URL to take them the rest of the way).

Just remember: it's likely no one in the history of B2B marketing has purchased a product directly from an ad. But they may have purchased based on a gut feeling — which they may have started to feel after seeing your marketing.

So, stop being totally level-headed when it comes to your B2B marketing approach. An emotional approach is far more rational.





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