A marketing strategy framework that starts with direction, not channels

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A marketing strategy framework should start with direction: what the business needs marketing to change, for whom, and by when. I use five questions, answered in order. Channels come fourth, once the earlier answers are agreed, because a channel can only be judged against a purpose.

Direction problems wearing a channel costume

In my experience, many marketing problems arrive labelled as channel problems: the website needs a refresh, LinkedIn is not working, the newsletter has stalled. Sometimes they are. More often, nobody has agreed what the website is meant to change, or who LinkedIn is meant to reach.

That does not necessarily mean the channel is fine. It means you cannot tell yet, and adding effort before answering the earlier questions tends to produce more activity with the same uncertainty.

The five questions

Answer them in this order. This is a working sequence, not a branded model.

1. **What does the business need marketing to change, and by when?** A commercial answer: more of a certain kind of enquiry, a shorter route to a first conversation, a segment to enter.
2. **Who is it for, in which situations, and what do they do instead of buying?** The alternative is often doing nothing, or using an existing supplier. List up to three segments to consider, then choose one as this quarter's priority.
3. **What do you offer, and why does it matter to them?** That is the proposition, stated in the buyer's terms.
4. **Which few plays will you run this quarter?** Three is usually enough. See the 90-day plan template.
5. **What rhythm, ownership and measures make those plays happen?** Who owns each one, and what decision the measure informs.

Questions one to three are what I call Direction. Question five is the operating system: named people, a review routine and a handover where work changes hands. Question four sits between them.

A good answer is short and specific enough to disagree with. "Grow" is not an answer to question one. "Fill the calendar with first conversations from mid-sized clients by March" is. The same test applies to question two: if you could swap in any business and the answer would still read fine, it needs another pass.

Question three is where I look hardest for weakness. If a buyer cannot repeat your proposition back in their own words after a first conversation, the problem is usually upstream of any channel, and more posting will not change that.

Marketing strategy for a small business rarely needs more than a page. It needs fewer answers, agreed by the people who will act on them.

If this is what you see, start here

What you see	Where the symptom shows up
Lots of activity, no agreed goal	1: what should marketing change?
Enquiries arrive but are the wrong kind	2: who is it for?
Prospects say "interesting" and go quiet	3: what do you offer and why does it matter?
Good ideas, nothing finishes	5: ownership and rhythm
Everything is a priority	4: choose the few plays

Check the question above a symptom is settled before fixing it; a symptom at question 4 or 5 is often an unresolved 1 or 2.

Diagnose from anywhere; repair from question one. You can spot the symptom at question five, but if question one is unresolved, fixing ownership only organises work nobody has agreed.

How this fits the way I work

The sequence mirrors my method: understand the position, identify the constraint, decide what to keep, fix, stop or build, make ownership clear, then deliver and learn. The questions are the first half of that. The second half is doing it, and reviewing whether it worked. For the operating side, see what a marketing operating rhythm is.

You will also come across SOSTAC and RACE. They are fine, but they start from channels and stages; this starts from the decision.

What this will not do

A canvas is not a strategy. It records answers; it does not produce them. The hard part is agreeing the answers, particularly questions one and two, which is where disagreement between partners or directors usually hides. If that is the situation, the canvas will document the disagreement neatly. Better to surface it early and decide.

Free downloads, no sign-up: the direction canvas (PDF), an editable version (Word) and this guide as a PDF.

Where to start

Try answering questions one to three in a single sitting, and note where you hesitate. That hesitation often points to the constraint. If it would help to talk it through, offer and positioning is where I would begin, and I'd be glad to compare notes.

Frequently asked questions

What is a marketing strategy framework?

It is an ordered set of questions that turns a business goal into a small number of marketing plays. Mine has five: what the business needs changed, who it is for, what you offer, which plays you will run, and how they will be owned and measured.

Why start with direction rather than channels?

Because a channel can only be judged against a purpose. Without agreed direction, a website refresh or a newsletter has no test of success, and it is hard to decide whether to keep, fix or stop it.

Can a small business use this framework?

Yes. The five questions scale down well because they are about decisions, not headcount. A small business may answer them in a single conversation. The discipline is writing the answers down and agreeing them with whoever will act on them.

What is the difference between a marketing strategy and a marketing plan?

Strategy is the direction and the choices: what marketing must change, for whom, and what you will and will not do. A plan is who does what, by when, with which budget and measures. A plan without a strategy is just a schedule.

This is a copy of the guide at chapmansconsulting.co.uk/insights/marketing-strategy-framework-direction-first/. The web version is kept up to date; this copy is as at 29 September 2026. Free to share; please credit Chapman's Consulting.