



2025-2027 ISBM Research Priorities

This ISBM Whitepaper presents the ISBM Research Priorities for the coming three years, 2025 – 2027, based on data collected via a trend study in 2024. The trend study included an elaborate qualitative phase followed by a quantitative survey and focused on the challenges, skills and capabilities, and knowledge gaps considered critical for the next 3-5 years (i.e., for 2025-2029).

To help B2B marketing scholars and B2B marketing educators adapt their research priorities and educational offerings, the ISBM runs trend studies every three years. Formulating clear priorities for the coming years contributes to fulfilling the ISBM’s mission of *playing a leadership role in advancing the theory and practice of business-to-business (industrial) marketing and advancing business marketing as a specialized field within the broader marketing discipline.*

It is important to recognize that a trend study is essentially exploratory. Qualitative and quantitative research methods are used to explore what practitioners and academics find important, and to derive a corresponding set of key research priorities. The set of research priorities is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather, to give a clear snapshot of what the B2B marketing field today considers critical for the coming 3-5 years.

This ISBM Whitepaper first describes the trend study design, then reviews the main findings, and then concludes with a formulation of 2025-2027 ISBM Research Priorities. For more information or details on the methodology, feel free to reach out to one of the authors¹.

¹ This ISBM Whitepaper is written by Stefan Wuyts, ISBM Director, Professor of Marketing, and Calvin E. and Pamela T. Zimmerman University Endowed Fellow. The trend study was conducted in collaboration with Sotires Pagiavlas and Luciano Lapa, both Assistant Professors of Marketing at the Smeal College of Business, Penn State. Numerous executives, industry experts, B2B marketing graduate students, and faculty contributed by sharing their inputs for the trend study and their importance ratings of the 60 challenges, skills and capabilities, and knowledge gaps that made it into the quantitative survey.

1. Study Design

The 2025-2027 ISBM Research Priorities are based on the most recent ISBM Trend Study that was conducted throughout the course of 2024. The trend study consisted of two phases: a qualitative and a quantitative phase.

1.1 Qualitative Phase

The goal of the qualitative research phase was to compile a list of critical challenges, skills and capabilities, and knowledge gaps in B2B marketing practice for the coming 3-5 years, i.e., 2025-2029. We adopted a multi-pronged approach to collect qualitative data. A total of 75 B2B marketing experts were involved in the creation of a list of “items.”

First, we reached out to 25 B2B marketing thought leaders from academia and practice in an open question format. We also held a discussion on the challenges of B2B Marketing at one of the ISBM Marketing Excellence Roundtables which included about 20 B2B marketing practitioners.

Second, we mobilized 30 students and scholars of B2B marketing to conduct thorough desk research. The students were Smeal graduate students who selected a B2B marketing elective in the Smeal MBA program or registered for the [Graduate Certificate Program in B2B Marketing](#), a new offering of the Smeal College of Business, Penn State. The desk research involved online search for industry reports on the future of B2B Marketing and the use of Artificial Intelligence techniques.

These combined efforts resulted in a total of 172 items representing the critical challenges faced by B2B marketing managers, critical skills and capabilities, and critical knowledge gaps that need to be bridged in the coming years. Given the high overlap between several of these items, two B2B Marketing academics then combined overlapping items and eliminated redundant ones to reduce the 172 items to 60 items. A third coder verified that no items were overlooked in the process. Once agreement was reached, we developed a quantitative survey in Qualtrics using the final 60 items.

1.2 Quantitative Phase

We reached out to our ISBM academic and practitioner communities to trigger responses to the survey, which included all 60 items (along with few background questions, mostly related to the respondent’s background and years of professional experience). The survey was closed in the fall of 2024. All 60 items were rated on 1-7 importance scales. We used strong scale anchors (1 = extremely unimportant, 7 = extremely important) to avoid extreme response bias.

80 B2B marketing experts provided complete responses. We subjected these to a factor analysis to understand the dimensionality of the respondents’ cognitive space. This analysis revealed which items’ importance scores covaried (e.g., “working with value chain partners to develop new value propositions” and “harnessing value from collaborative ecosystems and networks”). Insight into the data structure helped us identify *distinct* research priorities. Further details on factor analyses are available on request.

2. Findings

2.1 Differences with the 2021 ISBM Trend Study

It may be interesting to compare, at a high level, the insights from the new trend study with the insights from the trend study conducted three years ago. Interestingly, some of the themes that we identified as critical in the 2021 ISBM Trend Study persist in the 2024 ISBM Trend Study, while new themes have emerged as old themes faded.

Among the **themes that persisted** were challenges related to customer value propositions and the use of marketing analytics for decision-making. Importantly, however, the emphasis on specific facets within these themes has changed. For example, one of today's challenges with customer value propositions is how to account for the fact that value is created in a collaborative fashion (e.g., via marketing ecosystems and networks). For marketing analytics, the focus has shifted from managing large volumes of data for decision making to turning data effectively into business insights.

One of the **themes that emerged** was Artificial Intelligence (AI). No surprise! Upon closer examination, B2B marketing experts find it challenging to identify new AI opportunities and are concerned about protecting proprietary information. Another emerging theme is the digitization of the buying process. More on these emerging themes later in this whitepaper.

Finally, there were some **themes that faded**, in that they were top priorities back in 2021 – but are no longer today. Remember that the 2021 ISBM Trend Study was conducted in the middle of a worldwide pandemic. Challenges that have faded are related to conducting remote business, using scenario planning, and preparing for black swan events. Apparently, the impact of COVID-19 has diminished, and with it, emphasis on certain key themes.

2.2 Importance ratings

Now, let us first look at the average importance ratings of the list of 60 items (see Table 1). Recall that 7 indicated “extremely important.” Based on average importance ratings and insights obtained from factor analyses (which inform us of the dimensionality of the cognitive space of challenges, skills and capabilities, and knowledge gaps, based on the degree to which pairs of items covary), we identify an initial set of five research priorities for B2B Marketing in the coming years:

- **Marketing Analytics:** the number one challenge concerns the translation of data into actionable business insights. This single item stood out as an isolated yet critical concern. Calculating the return on marketing activities also belongs to this research domain.
- **Artificial Intelligence:** various items reflect one underlying dimension of how to use AI effectively, with an emphasis on whether, when and how to use AI and integrating AI with human insights to foster effective customer interactions. Another important AI item was identified as a separate dimension: how to protect proprietary information used in AI models and applications.
- **Digitized Exchange:** various items reflect a digitization dimension in the data. Increased digitization in the B2B purchasing process stood out as the most important facet of this research domain, but also customer preferences for digital buying interactions, the use of

digital media in communications to buyers, and process automation were considered important digitization challenges.

- **Value Creation:** both the quantification of value in Customer Value Propositions and the collaborative nature of value creation (with value chain partners, collaborative ecosystems, and networks) are considered important challenges for the coming years. Interestingly, the criticality of market learning and experimentation also loaded on the same value dimension.
- **Growth:** perhaps not new as a challenge, but critical nevertheless, is how to drive profitable organic growth. Both the need for innovative new product development projects and strategic roadmaps for new market growth opportunities are part of this growth challenge. This research domains underscores the need for Marketing Strategy.

In addition to these prominent research domains, a range of other issues arose, not necessarily as dominating dimensions but as additional areas of interest. Thus, we include an “Other” category, to invite research across a broader range of topics:

- **Other:** Marketing/HR interface, international tensions and supply chains, regulation (e.g., privacy), customer journey mapping, and the role of marketing in tech-driven firms.

These “other” areas of interest include, but are not limited to:

- *The Marketing-Human Resources (HR) interface:* this is an interface that marketing scholars tend to overlook, yet the importance of HR is clear from items such as training the workforce and recruiting B2B marketers with the right skill sets. This insight may inspire not just B2B marketing research, but also B2B marketing education, which often focuses on functional interfaces (e.g., Marketing-Sales, Marketing-R&D, Marketing-Finance).
- *The Institutional Environment:* other important items relate to international tensions, supply chains, and regulation, all of which describe the institutional environment in which B2B exchange takes place. Given the importance of the external environment in any serious effort at marketing strategy formation, this is another area that deserves more attention.
- *The Role of Marketing:* positioning marketing as a strategic function in the C-suite of technology-driven firms remains challenging, as is demonstrating marketing’s impact to internal stakeholders. Factor analysis reveals that these challenges are closely intertwined with marketing’s ability to map customer journeys and design personalized, omnichannel experiences. Both the specification of the role of marketing, and defending this role internally remain very important challenges for the coming years.

2.3 Variances

Finally, researchers tend to focus on averages. Yet, averages can mask great variation! For (marketing) researchers, variation is often more interesting, as it suggests heterogeneity in experiences, sources of tension, or simply opposing views about how important a particular challenge really is. We ranked all 60 items based on the *variance in responses*. Table 2 displays the five survey items with the highest variances in importance ratings. The entire table that includes all 60 items is available upon request. Here we focus on the single, surprising insight that we derived

from this exercise: three items stand out as having the greatest variance in importance ratings, and they load on one underlying dimension. These items are: 1) “Coping with the threats posed by climate change,” 2) “Coping with pressures to reduce use of fossil fuels,” and 3) “Incorporating sustainability as driver of growth in B2B marketing practice.” While these items would be overlooked when only considering averages, the great variance suggests a possibility for debate, a study of heterogeneity (e.g., between industries, regions, applications), and opportunities to explain and perhaps reconcile opposing viewpoints.

We further explored this variance based on the limited respondent information that we have access to. The item with the greatest variance among all 60 items, was “Coping with the threats posed by climate change.” Statistical tests reveal that more junior B2B marketing experts (i.e., with fewer than 15 years of professional experience) rated this challenge as significantly more important (>5.5) than more seasoned experts (i.e., with more than 15 years of professional experience) (<4.5). This suggests that this challenge promises to become only more important over time when the new generation of B2B marketers takes the lead. Non-US based experts also rated the item as significantly more important (>5.4) than US-based experts (4.35). For junior non-US based experts, coping with the threats posed by climate change became one of the most important challenges among all 60!

Human-induced climate change is one of the largest challenges that societies face today, affecting economies and livelihoods, and “fueling” new technological trajectories across the globe with profound impact on various industries. We include it as a final key priority for ISBM:

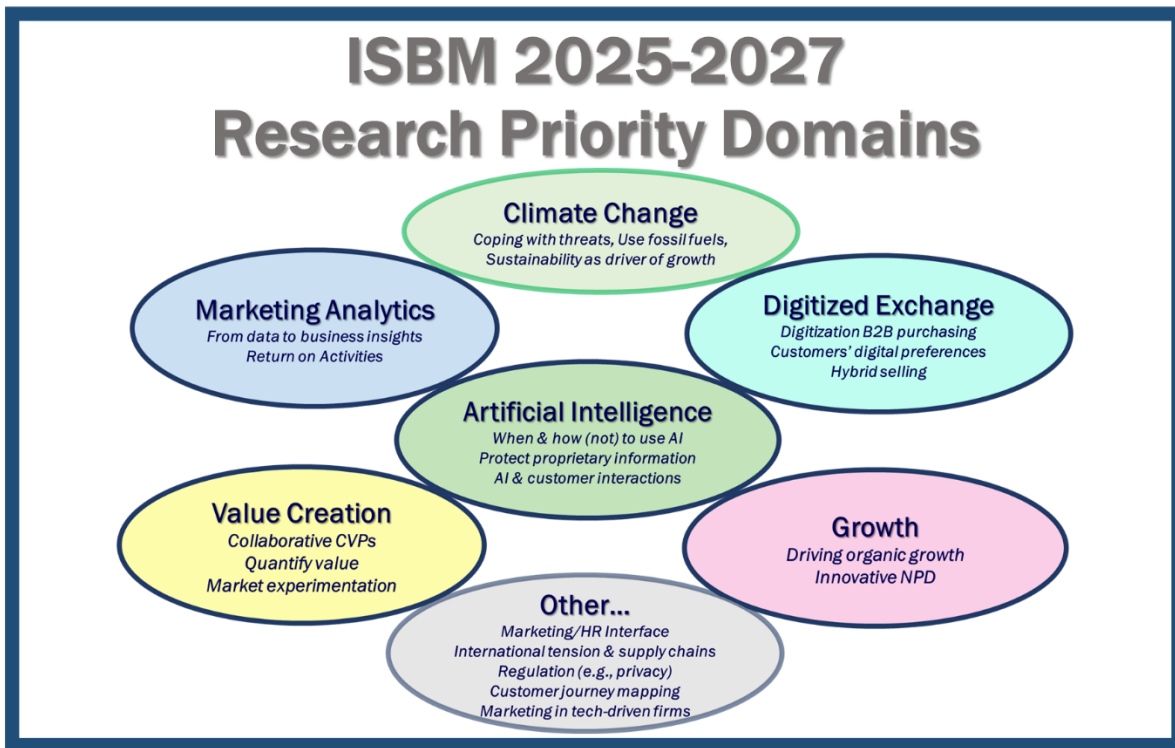
- **Climate change:** threats of climate change, pressures to reduce fossil fuels, and sustainability as driver of growth.

3. ISBM Research Priorities for 2025-2027

To conclude this ISBM Whitepaper, Figure 1 summarizes the ISBM Research Priorities for B2B Marketing in 2025-2027. Table 1 displays the exact wording of all 60 challenges, skills and capabilities, and knowledge gaps that were included in the quantitative survey.

These priorities will guide future ISBM activities, inform ISBM educational offerings, and, hopefully, inspire B2B Marketing students, scholars, and educators.

Figure 1 – ISBM 2025-2027 Research Priority Domains based on the 2024 ISBM Trend Study



Note: CVP = Customer Value Proposition; HR = Human Resources; NPD = New Product Development; AI = Artificial Intelligence.

We end by thanking all who have contributed to the realization of this study. Looking ahead, ISBM cannot wait to work with you and address these critical challenges. Let us move the field of B2B marketing forward, in terms of new theory formation and cutting edge B2B marketing practice.

Table 1 – Average Importance Ratings of 60 Challenges, Skills and Capabilities, and Knowledge Gaps for the coming 3-5 years.

Rank	Item	Average Importance Rating (1-7 scale)
1	Using marketing analytics to translate data into actionable business insights	6.16
2	Understanding where (not) to use AI in business processes	6.15
3	Adapting to increased digitization in the B2B purchasing process	6.05
4	Understanding how to quantify and demonstrate value in customer value propositions	6.03
5	Integrating AI with human insights to foster effective customer interactions	6.00
6	Understanding how to protect proprietary information from AI	5.92
7	Identifying strategic areas to drive profitable organic growth	5.91
8	Building general skills to keep up with fast-changing technologies	5.89
9	Staying vigilant and flexible through market learning and experimentation	5.86
10	Leading innovative new product development projects in response to market trends	5.85
11	Accommodating customers' preferences for digital buying interactions	5.84
12	Adapting to the impact of international tensions on the supply chain	5.81
13	Serving customers using real-time data and cloud technology	5.80
14	Understanding fundamental marketing processes (e.g., needs-based segmentation, targeting, and branding)	5.78
15	Demonstrating marketing's impact on value creation to internal stakeholders	5.78
16	Balancing virtual and face-to-face touchpoints in developing differentiating customer experiences	5.77
17	Adapting to increased regulation on data privacy	5.76
18	Using AI to improve the new product development process	5.75
19	Preparing a strategic roadmap for new market growth opportunities	5.74
20	Mapping customer journeys to design personalized omnichannel experiences	5.74
21	Understanding customer preferences for human versus digital salespeople	5.74
22	Working with value chain partners to develop new value propositions	5.73
23	Understanding how to build customer-centric organizational structures	5.71
24	Repositioning marketing as a strategic function in the C-suite of technology-driven firms	5.70
25	Mastering digital platforms (e.g., exchange and recommendation platforms)	5.69
26	Using digital media to communicate effectively with B2B buyers	5.66
27	Training the workforce to work with AI agents	5.66
28	Harnessing value from collaborative ecosystems and networks	5.64
29	Fostering collaboration and team cohesion when working (partly) remotely	5.63
30	Automating parts of the B2B buying process	5.62
31	Understanding how to incorporate AI for content marketing	5.60
32	Using digital tools to improve target segment identification	5.59
33	Recruiting new B2B Marketers with the right marketing skill sets	5.55
34	Understanding how to improve collaboration between digital marketing and IT within the organization	5.55
35	Finding opportunities for sustained growth in markets with limited growth opportunities	5.54
36	Using marketing analytics to allocate resources across different channels	5.53
37	Nurturing and retaining marketing employees in a complex and rapidly changing business environment	5.50
38	Understanding local buyer preferences to grow and lead in international markets	5.45
39	Understanding the impact of demographic shifts (e.g., aging population, intergenerational changes) on marketing strategy	5.42
40	Aligning value propositions with alternative business models (e.g., renting versus selling)	5.39
41	Using Internet-of-Things technology in new products	5.38

42	Understanding how to use Key Account Management to execute account-specific campaigns	5.37
43	Adapting to increased protectionism-related regulation	5.32
44	Mobilizing the right mix of internal and external marketing resources during challenging times	5.32
45	Developing signposts to alert the firm when business discontinuities threaten to impact business	5.31
46	Understanding how to use AI in Voice of the Customer applications	5.29
47	Understanding how to develop dashboards to measure return on business activities	5.27
48	Developing unified pricing capabilities and strategies across functions	5.27
49	Incorporating sustainability as driver of growth in B2B marketing practice	5.25
50	Understanding how to engage in logic-driven decision making	5.22
51	Stimulating upselling and cross-selling when customers buy online	5.21
52	Managing customers and other stakeholders in line with the purpose of the firm	5.21
53	Maintaining competitive advantage amid increased competition from lower wage countries	5.19
54	Building resilience to black swan events (e.g.,the Covid-19 pandemic)	5.13
55	Incorporating scenario planning to address environmental uncertainty	5.09
56	Developing proficiency with augmented and virtual reality	5.04
57	Fighting unauthorized distributors on third-party platforms	4.92
58	Coping with the threats posed by climate change	4.89
59	Coping with pressures to reduce use of fossil fuels	4.72
60	Using social media influencers	4.51

Table 2 – Five Items with the Highest Variances in Importance Ratings across all 60 Challenges, Skills and Capabilities, and Knowledge Gaps for the coming 3-5 years.

Rank	Item	Variance in Importance Ratings (1-7 scale)
1	Coping with the threats posed by climate change	3.03
2	Coping with pressures to reduce use of fossil fuels	2.69
3	Incorporating sustainability as driver of growth in B2B marketing practice	2.25
4	Using Internet-of-Things technology in new products	1.88
5	Incorporating scenario planning to address environmental uncertainty	1.87



About the ISBM

The Institute for the Study of Business Markets (ISBM) is a non-profit research institute situated at the Smeal College of Business at the Pennsylvania State University. The mission of the ISBM is to play a leadership role in advancing the theory and practice of business-to-business (industrial) marketing, and to advance business marketing as a specialized field within the broader marketing discipline.

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