

One Little Word.  
One Big Difference.



*The Impact of You-phrasing  
on Customer Conversations*



**Tim Riesterer**

*Chief Strategy & Research Officer,  
Corporate Visions*



## Overview

Can a single word choice materially change the way your customers react to your sales and marketing messages? Specifically, should you use the word “we” or “you” to underpin your customer conversations?

That’s what we set out to discover in our latest research project, conducted in partnership with the digital selling firm Vengreso and Professor Nick Lee of the Warwick Business School. And the findings highlight both an interesting evolution and a surprising contradiction in our respondents’ approach to customer-centric language. While most agree you-phrasing—describing challenges and solutions in the second person, from the customer’s perspective—is the most impactful approach to customer messaging, the majority still we-phrase their most critical conversations.

What’s more, they do so deliberately, using the word “we” to establish a sense of shared purpose that predisposes the customer to buy.

But does it?

Not according to our research. In fact, the inclusive “we” underperforms “you” across every important sales category, delivering sub-par results in both making a convincing case to purchase and supporting a buyer’s likely intention to purchase. And the results are no better on the demand gen side, where the we-phrased messages were consistently considered less thought provoking and less engaging than the you-phrased messages.

So why do so many sellers and marketers still adopt “we” phrasing as their preferred approach? How might they be sabotaging themselves as a result? And, most importantly, what can they do to correct it?

That’s where things get interesting. And that’s what you’ll learn more about in this report.



## Right Intentions, Wrong Approach

It seems well intentioned and inherently logical: Show your customers you understand their world by positioning yourself as a member of their tribe. And since you can't physically move into their workspace, why not move in rhetorically by we-phrasing your customer conversations?

To be clear, we're not talking about the self-referential, self-centered form of "we": **We** have locations all over the world... **We've** been in business for more than 50 years... **We've** developed these great products... Customer-centric marketers and sellers abandoned that egotistical sort of we-phrasing decades ago.

But over time, either unconsciously or otherwise, they've adopted a different, seemingly more benign, form of we-phrasing: The inclusive "we," in which they speak to customer needs as mutual needs: *As business owners, we face many challenges... We're working harder than ever... We care about our customers...*

Fans of this form of we-phrasing say they are trying to establish a collaborative experience in which the word "we" implies the supplier and the buyer are "in it together." After all, what vendor doesn't want to be viewed as a trusted, valuable partner? And what buyer doesn't want to work with a vendor who appears to be part of their world and is committed to their collective success?

But is that really how customers hear the word "we" in these types of conversations? Is that how they actually react to it? Will you create more opportunities or increase the possibility of a sale by we-phrasing?

Or is there a better way?

*Instead of we-phrasing these conversations, should you be you-phrasing them?*



**Leslie Talbot**

*VP, Customer and Commercial Excellence,  
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## Clarity or Confusion?

Every content creator strives for clarity above all else. And the simplest way to bring clarity to your content is to start with a clearly identified hero—the individual who overcomes fearsome odds to achieve his or her desired outcomes.

In Corporate Visions training, you learn that the customer is the hero of every story. The vendor plays a supporting role—that of the mentor. When these roles blur, it becomes difficult to tell where the collective "we" ends and the self-centered "we" begins. Customers grow confused, then frustrated. And the message ultimately fails.

I experienced this firsthand during a recent vendor pitch. The presenters were so eager to let us know how deeply they understood our world they we-phrased their way through the entire presentation. In very short order, I found it impossible to follow the narrative. Who was who? Were they talking about us, or were they talking about themselves? By the time they got to their solution description, they had lapsed back into vendor-as-hero messaging. Not only did they fail to establish the partnership vibe they'd been aiming for, they'd annoyed the audience and put the deal at risk.

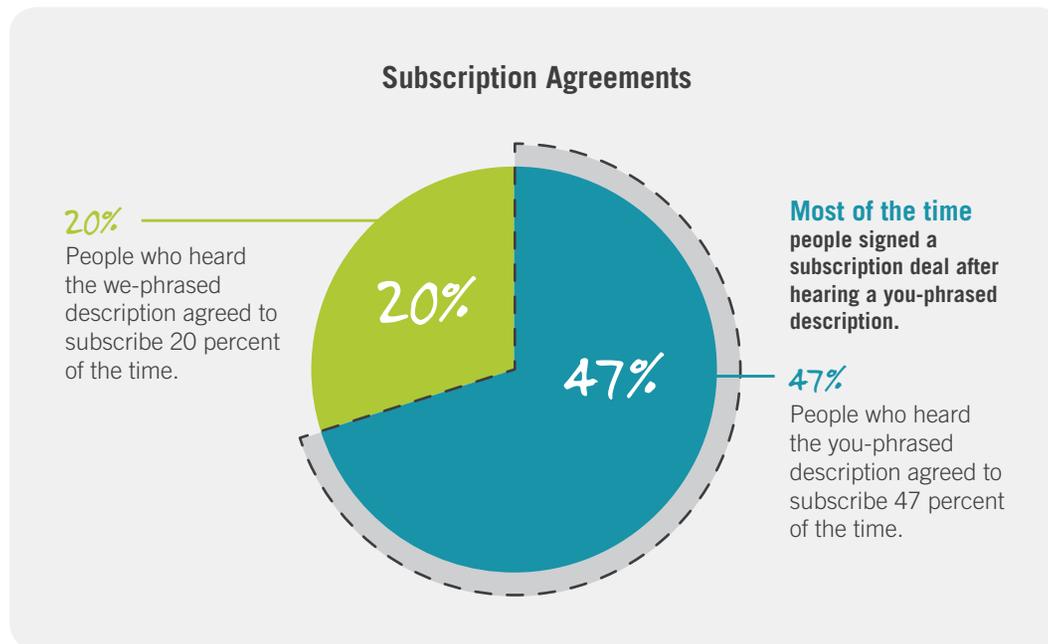
As someone who's been a you-phraser to a fault for more than a decade, that's why I value the approach. With you phrasing, you'll never lose the thread. And you'll never forget who the hero of the story is.



## A Little History

The concept of you-phrasing as a substitute for we-phrasing, while slightly obscure, has been studied for decades by social psychologists and behavioral economists. The premise is that you-phrasing does a better job of unconsciously grabbing attention and transferring ownership to your listener by getting them to “try” on the concepts you are sharing—both the problem and the solution.

The two scientific concepts underlying this premise are often referred to as “self-relevance” and “invoking imagination.” Self-relevance is the tendency for people to recall information at a much higher rate when it’s related to themselves. After all, who doesn’t want to be the hero of their own story?



But just being able to better remember something doesn’t assure greater interest or purchase intent. And no self-relevance studies have provided such proof.

Perhaps the best-known study of you-phrasing and invoking imagination was conducted by the “Father of Persuasion,” Robert Cialdini, back in 1982, when cable television was a new thing. Researchers went door to door testing people’s attitudes about this newfangled technology.

In one script, the prospect was told what the new service would do using a traditional feature/benefit approach. In the second script, researchers inserted the word “you,” as participants were asked to imagine what it would be like to use the service. For example, “When *you* use it properly, *you* will be able to plan which of the events offered *you* wish to enjoy.”

The result: People who heard the you-phrased description agreed to subscribe 47 percent of the time, whereas the traditional group agreed only 20 percent of the time. **The simple use of one small word, “you,” had more than doubled the number of sales in this experiment.**

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# A Paradox Emerges

Thirty-five years later, the science hasn't changed. Nor has the belief among marketers and sellers that you-phrasing is a more effective way to message than we-phrasing. And yet, most of these same marketers and sellers choose we-phrasing when crafting their customer conversations.

According to a survey by Corporate Visions and our partner Vengreso, the majority of respondents chose you-phrasing over we-phrasing when asked, "Regardless of which approach you currently use, which do you think would be most impactful in terms of generating interest, response, or buying intent?"

But when we asked them what they actually *do*, we unearthed a paradox.

Although more than half had agreed that you-phrasing—characterized here as "encouraging prospects to take ownership of their decisions and solutions"—would generate better results, only 40 percent said they practice it.

Nearly half, or 47 percent, admitted to using we-phrasing, while seven percent said they didn't know or didn't give any special consideration to using specific pronouns.

The logical question, then, is "why?" Why would they adopt an approach they've acknowledged is less effective?

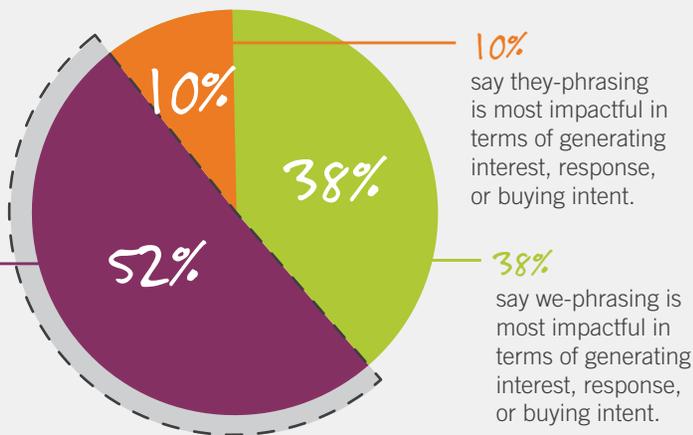
One clue lies in the survey questions themselves. Turns out, marketers and sellers we-phrase to deliberately "position themselves as a trusted partner who brings expertise and insights to customers." In other words, despite their supposed embrace of the "you" pronoun, they still believe the vendor partnership approach is more effective than the customer ownership approach. So are they right?

This kind of paradox cries out for more rigorous study—one that uses would-be buyer responses versus the studied opinions of sellers and marketers.

**Which approach is most impactful?**

**The highest percentage says you-phrasing is most impactful when attempting to generate interest, response, or buying intent.**

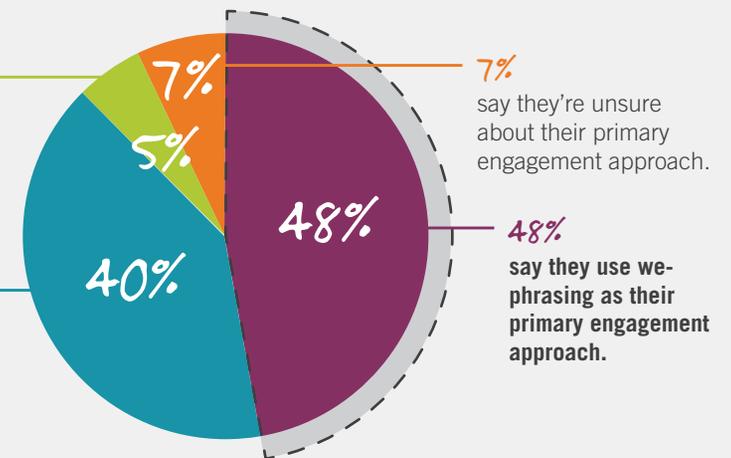
**52%** say you-phrasing is most impactful in terms of generating interest, response, or buying intent.



**Which engagement approach do you primarily take?**

**5%** say they use they-phrasing as their primary engagement approach.

**40%** say they use you-phrasing as their primary engagement approach.





**Bernie Borges**

*Chief Marketing Officer, Vengreso*



## Speaking Directly to Your Buyer Through Your LinkedIn Profile

There's nothing you-centric about using "Account Executive" as a profile heading. A you-centric headline uses action words and insights to transfer ownership of the challenge and solution to the buyer—the same way the you-phrased emails did in this story.

Here's a better approach—one that makes the buyer the hero of the story.

### **Bridging Your Lead Follow Up Gap with Conversational AI for B2B Marketing Teams | Account Executive | CompanyName.com**

The buyer (you) understands that working with this individual will help solve her lead follow up problem.

The buyer (you) learns she can use conversational AI to solve this problem.

The buyer (you) understands other B2B marketing leaders work with this individual to solve similar problems.

The buyer (you) understands the role of this individual—Account Executive.

Finally, after satisfying the you-centric criteria in the headline, the buyer (you) learns the name of the company she can work with to solve her business problem.

Writing a LinkedIn headline through the lens of the buyer appeals to the same emotion as you-centric phrasing because it clearly communicates how the buyer can become the hero of her own story.

## The Studies

Working with Professor Nick Lee of the Warwick Business School, we created two different studies to examine the impact of changing pronouns ("we" versus "you") in two marketing and sales environments. Each study was run with 400 people (approximately 100 in each condition). In both scenarios, the topic was a business coaching and consulting service called Business Impact, which offers participants a formal training event, ongoing consulting calls, and a virtual library to help them better manage their small business.

- **STUDY 1:** A "cold" email was sent to an unsuspecting prospect who had no knowledge or notion they needed the products or services from the company sending the email. The goal was to measure the interest level and urgency to solve the problem being presented.
- **STUDY 2:** A "warm" communication was provided to a prospect who had expressed interest in a particular solution and now wanted to learn more and make a decision. The goal here was to measure interest and buying intent.

### Study 1: Cold Prospecting Email

Four messaging approaches were created and tested with 400 participants, who were divided into groups of approximately 100 and randomly assigned to one of the four following conditions:

- 1. You-You Phrasing:** In this email, the problem setup and solution were presented in you-phrased messaging
- 2. We-We Phrasing:** In this email, the problem setup and solution were presented as we-phrased messaging
- 3. You-We Phrasing:** This email split the problem setup (you-phrased) and solution presentation (we-phrased)
- 4. We-You Phrasing:** This email split the problem setup (we-phrased) and the solution presentation (you-phrased)

Here are the sample emails for the You-You and the We-We conditions. The two hybrid emails simply cut and pasted the respective sections.

## YOU-YOU-PHRASED EMAIL

Like many business owners, you could be working harder than ever to get to your desired destination. *(Framing buyer's status quo as belonging to them)*

But, what made you a winner when you first began your business can lead to failure as you attempt to grow. For example, you may have had a solid initial vision, but not necessarily the skills to help your business thrive long term. Sheer willpower and work ethic to push forward isn't enough. You can end up overworked and in an endless professional and personal spin cycle. *(Buyer as primary owner of their challenges)*

Working with the Business Impact Program, you'll take your business to the next level by breaking through the chokeholds and limitations that are holding you back today. Starting with a business assessment, you'll understand your key strengths and weaknesses, so you can apply them for your benefit, or shore them up as needed to avoid pitfalls and mistakes. *(Buyer as solution owner/hero)*

The Business Impact promise is that you will receive at least double your investment back in benefit to your business in the first 90 days or your money back. And, you'll be able to put best practices in place that allow you to personally leave your business for an extended period and come back to find growth instead of chaos. *(Buyer as owner of results)*

## WE-WE-PHRASED EMAIL

As business owners, we could be working harder than ever to get to our desired destination. *(Framing buyer's status quo as a shared challenge)*

But, what made us winners when we first began our business can lead to failure as we attempt to grow. For example, we may have had a solid initial vision, but not necessarily the skills to help our business thrive long term. Sheer willpower and work ethic to push forward aren't enough. We can end up overworked and in an endless professional and personal spin cycle. *(Buyer and seller jointly own challenges)*

The Business Impact Program takes businesses to the next level by breaking through the chokeholds and limitations that are holding them back. Starting with a business assessment, we show companies their key strengths and weaknesses and how to apply them for the greatest benefit or shore them up as needed to avoid pitfalls and mistakes. *(Seller as solution provider/hero)*

And, we promise the Business Impact Program will provide at least double the investment back in benefits to your business or we give the money back. And, we will show how to put best practices in place that allow leaders to personally leave the business for an extended period and come back to find growth instead of chaos. *(Seller as deliverer of results).*



## Study 1 Findings

You-phrasing was considerably more effective than we-phrasing in the majority of responses, particularly those linked to interest and intent.

For example, participants felt 21 percent more responsible for solving the identified problem in the you-phrased condition than in the we-phrased condition. This is crucial, because you want your prospect to take ownership of the issue and be willing to champion the opportunity.

The personal responsibility angle also appeared to feed a sense of urgency among respondents: Those who received the you-phrased message felt much more strongly (13 percent) that they “must take action” than those who received the we-phrased message. And, while creating a slightly lower effect size, you-phrasing beat we-phrasing in several more areas important to demand generation communications.



**"You-phrasing outperformed we-phrasing in every major category measured—particularly those related to action and personal ownership."**

**Dr. Nick Lee**

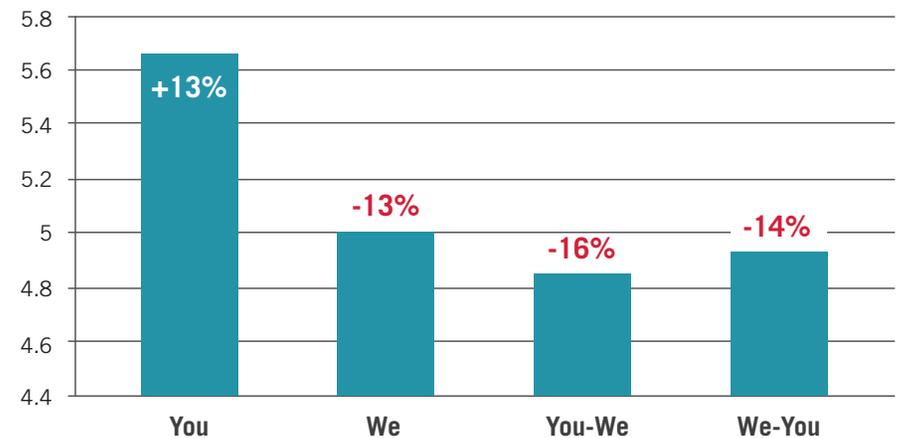
*Professor of Marketing, Warwick Business School,  
and Corporate Visions Research Partner*



### Personally Responsible to Solve Problem

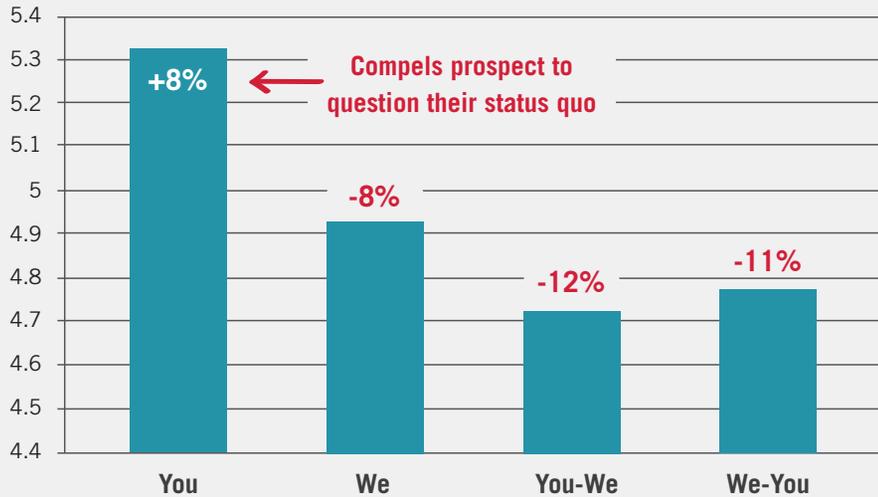


### Strongly Feel Must Take Action

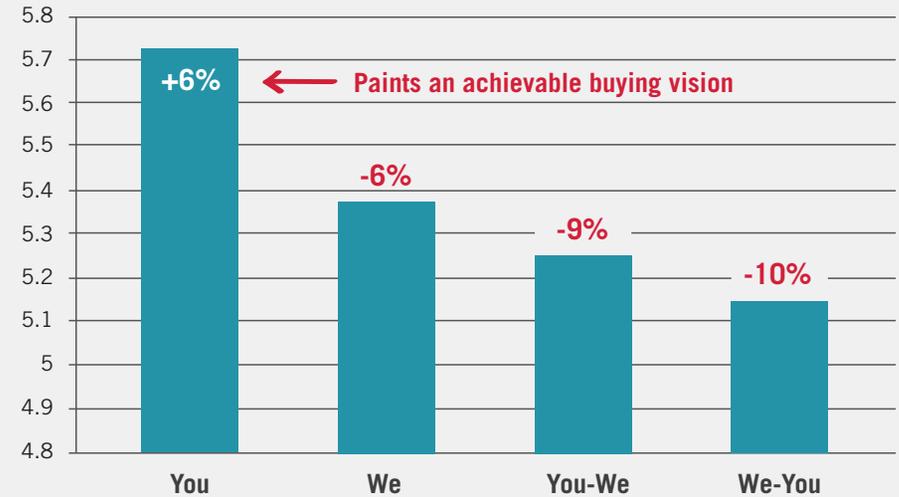


## Study 1 Findings (Cont'd)

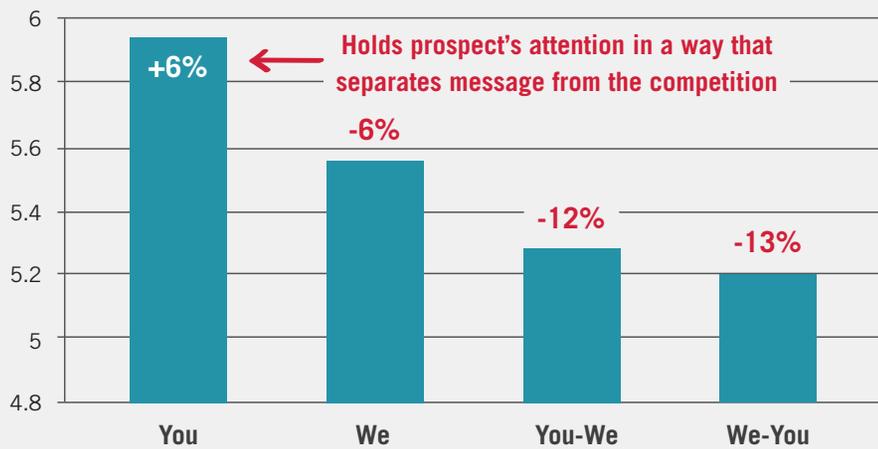
### Think More Deeply About Problem



### Confident to Take Steps to Solve Problem



### Engaging Message



### Important to Future Success



## Study 2: Warm Solution Story

The test conditions for the second study covered the same topic—the Business Impact coaching and consulting service—and expanded on the email message. This time, they included additional information about the problem and the solution, and were similar in length to a website landing page or a standard two-page promotional flyer.

[READ THE FULL MESSAGE](#)

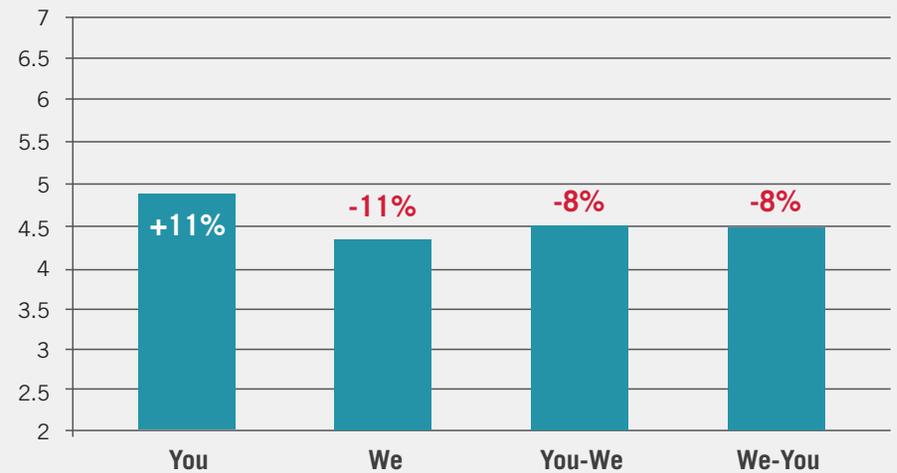
Once again, the four messaging approaches were tested with more than 400 different participants from the previous study, randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (approximately 100 participants for each).

- 1. You-You Phrasing:** In this email, the problem setup and solution were presented in you-phrased messaging
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## Study 2 Findings

Again, you-phrasing was considerably more powerful than we-phrasing in two of the most important outcomes of a solution presentation: “Convincing Case to Purchase” (+11 percent) and “Likely Intention to Purchase” (+10 percent).

### Convincing Case to Purchase



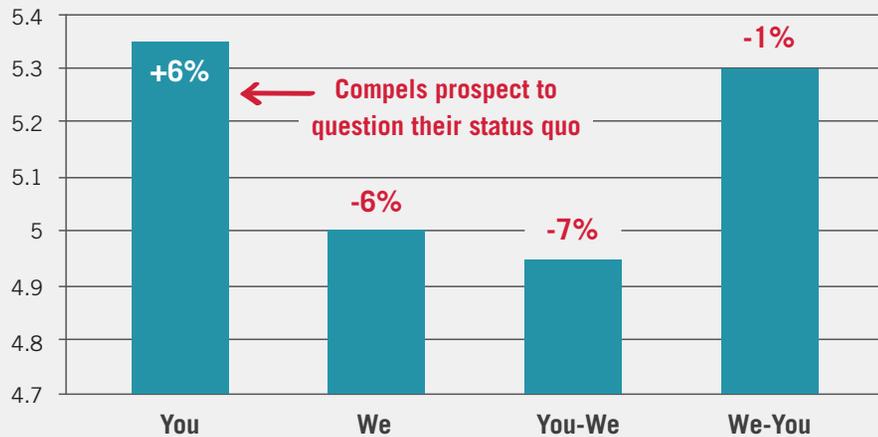
### Likely to Purchase



## Study 2 Findings (Cont'd)

In other words, if you we-phrase your solution stories, you'll present an 11 percent less convincing case and your buyer will be 10 percent less likely to purchase your solution. In addition, you-phrasing beat we-phrasing in several additional questions directly related to the respondent's purchase decision:

### Think Deeply About Problem



### Compelling Message



### Important to Future Success



### Credible Message



## Conclusion: The Search For An Edge

Often, winning is about finding even the smallest incremental advantage to break through a prospect's status quo bias. Given how hard it is to create pipeline and close deals, every marketer and every salesperson should be looking for any potential edge.



**“Based on this research, it’s clear that a simple pronoun adjustment can have a material impact on both a prospect’s interest and propensity to purchase.”**

**Dr. Nick Lee**

*Professor of Marketing, Warwick Business School,  
and Corporate Visions Research Partner*



One improvement you can confidently and easily make tomorrow is to replace all of your we-phrasing with you-phrasing.

It's a small word. And a small change. But it makes a big difference.



**Bernie Borges**

*Chief Marketing Officer, Vengreso*



## You-phrasing to Communicate Value

“I love attending sales training,” said no salesperson ever. One way to get a sales leader to embrace an investment in digital sales training is to you-phrase the value as a way to overcome specific business challenges.

Here are some examples:

**CHALLENGE:** Sales reps don't understand why or how to use social media to sell our solutions.

**YOU-CENTRIC RESPONSE:** More than 75% of B2B buyers use social media to research products and services like yours. You miss the chance to be included in their research process if your sales team is absent from social media.

**CHALLENGE:** Salespeople don't have time to use social media in their selling activities. They need to be making phone calls and sending emails to set up appointments.

**YOU-CENTRIC RESPONSE:** Emails and phone calls only yield on average a 10% response rate. Training your reps to become digital sellers will increase your contact rates with some of the other 90% who do respond to LinkedIn connections and personalized, value-based messaging sent through video.

There are many reasons for sales leaders to invest in digital sales training for their teams. You-phrasing these reasons is a more effective way to communicate them.

## About Corporate Visions

**Corporate Visions** is a leading marketing and sales messaging, content, and skills training company. Global B2B companies come to us when they want to:

- **Create Value:** Break the status quo and differentiate your solutions from competitors
- **Elevate Value:** Build a more effective business case to justify executive decisions
- **Capture Value:** Maximize the profitability of each deal
- **Expand Value:** Renew and expand existing customer revenue

[corporatevisions.com](http://corporatevisions.com)



## About Vengreso

**Vengreso** helps B2B sales professionals reach more qualified buyers by empowering them to leverage digital selling strategies. Vengreso enables salespeople to reach and engage the modern buyer the way the buyer requires engagement for effective modern selling. Companies engage Vengreso to develop the content strategy their sales team needs to engage their buyers, make over their LinkedIn profile through the lens of the buyer, and deliver digital sales training through live instruction and on-demand blended learning to maximize results and behavior change. Vengreso reaches 98 million people through social media, inspiring them to become the modern seller that the modern buyer demands. Progressive brands such as CenturyLink, Intelligize, Trinet, WorkFront, Woodruff Sawyer, and others depend on Vengreso to empower their sales teams to create more sales conversations with qualified buyers.

## Authors and Researchers



Tim Riesterer  

**Tim Riesterer is Chief Strategy & Research Officer at Corporate Visions.** In that role, he sets the direction and develops products for the company. His books, **Conversations That Win the Complex Sale** and **The Three Value Conversations**, focus on improving market-ready messages, content, and skills that marketers and salespeople can use to win more deals.



Dr. Nick Lee  

**Nick Lee is a professor of marketing at the Warwick Business School** in Coventry, UK. He has spent nearly 20 years drawing from social psychology, cognitive neuroscience, economics, and philosophy to develop insights into salespeople and selling.



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**Bernie Borges** is co-founder and CMO at Vengreso. His popular **Social Business Engine podcast** showcases modern marketing and sales leaders moving the needle through digital strategies. Borges is often listed in “top 50” listings of content marketing experts. He is a frequent speaker at conferences and private client events, presenting seminars and workshops. He delivers the Content Marketing Module at the USF Digital Marketing Certification Program.