

THE CASE OF THE Missing Customer



An Ex-Homicide Detective's Guide
to Understanding Marketing
and Finding Customers

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THE CASE OF THE MISSING CUSTOMER

The Marketing Cooke Book Series

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How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be practical, clear, and easy to apply — whether you’re starting a business, growing one, or trying to make sense of why your marketing isn’t working the way you hoped.

Here’s how to get the most value from it:

1. Read it in order — the sequence matters

Each chapter builds on the one before it. Marketing works best when the thinking happens in the right order, and this book follows that same structure. Start at the beginning and move forward step by step.

2. Treat it like an investigation, not a checklist

You won’t find complicated formulas or jargon here. Instead, you’ll learn how to think like a detective — gathering evidence, questioning assumptions, and making clearer decisions. Use the ideas to guide your thinking, not restrict it.

3. Apply the concepts to your own business as you go

Pause after each chapter and ask: *“How does this apply to my customers? My market? My decisions?”* The more you personalise the ideas, the more powerful they become.

4. Don’t rush to advertising

It’s tempting to skip ahead to the parts that feel urgent. Resist that urge. The early chapters lay the foundations that make advertising effective later.

5. Revisit the questions in Chapter 9 regularly

Think of Chapter 9 as your ongoing diagnostic tool. Return to it whenever you’re planning a campaign, launching a new product, or trying to understand why something isn’t working.

6. Keep learning

Marketing isn’t something you do once. It’s a continuous process of understanding customers, refining your message, and improving your decisions. Use this book as your starting point — not your finish line.

If you’d like to continue building your marketing capability step by step, keep an eye out for future titles in **The Marketing Cooke Book Series**. Each book will take a deeper dive into one of the core ideas introduced here — from customer research, to positioning, to branding, to practical advertising strategy. Think of this book as your foundation. The next books will help you sharpen each skill with even more clarity, structure, and detective-style thinking.

Introduction

Why This Book Exists

Years ago, when I worked as a detective, one lesson was drilled into us relentlessly: **never assume you know the answer before you understand the evidence.** A good detective starts by gathering facts, identifying suspects, examining motives, and following the clues. Jumping straight to a conclusion almost always sends you in the wrong direction.

Business is much the same.

Many business owners jump straight into advertising without first understanding their market, their customers, their competitors, or what makes their business different.

They focus on the solution before properly defining the problem.

After forty-plus years in business, I've lost count of how many times I've heard business owners refer to their advertising as "marketing."

That would be fine — **if** the advertising were built on a solid marketing foundation.

Usually, it isn't.

And that's where the trouble — and the wasted money — begin.

Most small business owners don't actually have an advertising problem. **They have a marketing problem that eventually shows up in their advertising.**

More specifically, they're spending money on advertising before they fully understand:

- what they're really trying to say
- who they should be saying it to
- why anyone should care
- and what outcome the customer actually wants

So when the advertising underperforms — as it usually does — the conclusion is predictable.

They say:

- the platform is wrong
- the advertisement needs tweaking
- we just need to spend more
- or marketing itself simply "doesn't work"

So they try again.

Different ad.

Different platform.

Different tactic.

Different agency.

Different “guru.”

Same disappointing result. Money goes out. Little comes back.

Over time, frustration sets in.

Confidence drops.

Marketing starts feeling like an expensive gamble rather than a structured business activity.

But here’s the uncomfortable truth most business owners never hear:

In many cases, the advertising was never given a fair chance to work — because the thinking that should have come before it never happened.

The market wasn’t properly understood.

The customer wasn’t clearly defined.

Was the customer a busy parent?

A cost-conscious retiree?

A stressed business owner?

No one had checked.

The real problem the customer cared about wasn’t identified.

And the message was built around what the business wanted to say, rather than what the customer needed to hear.

That’s the distinction this book is designed to uncover.

Because **advertising and marketing are not the same thing.**

Advertising is only one part of marketing. An important part, certainly — but still just one part.

Marketing is the thinking.

Advertising is the communication that follows.

And when you reverse that order, advertising stops being strategic and starts becoming guesswork — and that guesswork becomes very expensive.

It's like building the roof before the foundations.

Marketing Is Not Advertising

Marketing is not social media posts, Google Ads, brochures, email campaigns, or anything else in the broadcast media.

Those are tools.

Marketing is the thinking that decides:

- what problem you solve
- who you solve it for
- why they should choose you
- and how you compete

Advertising simply communicates those decisions.

When that thinking is missing, advertising becomes guesswork.

Over the years, I've seen the same pattern repeat. Business owners jump straight into promotion because it feels like progress.

It's visible.

It's active.

It feels like something's happening.

But without a clear understanding of the market, the customer, and the competition, it's like turning up the volume on a message that hasn't been properly thought through.

You don't get better results. You just get louder mistakes.

Marketing as Investigation

Think of marketing as an investigation.

I can speak from experience — I served as a Detective Sergeant in the New South Wales Police Force before moving into business.

Before good detectives make an arrest, they gather evidence. They look for patterns. They test assumptions. They narrow their focus.

They don't chase the first suspect who looks guilty.

They don't guess.

They build a case.

Marketing works the same way.

Done properly, marketing replaces assumptions with evidence and uncertainty with clarity.

It gives you a reason for every decision you make — from what you offer, to how you price it, to how you promote it, and to whom.

And when that groundwork is done properly, advertising stops being a gamble. It becomes a tool.

What This Book Is Really About

This book is not about turning you into a marketing expert.

It's about giving you the thinking skills many business owners never learn. It's about helping you avoid a very expensive mistake:

Spending money on advertising before you understand marketing.

If you get this right, everything that follows becomes easier, more focused, and far more effective.

If you don't, no amount of advertising will fix it. It will just drain your budget faster.

Let's start with the distinction that quietly determines whether your marketing succeeds or fails.

Chapter 1

What Marketing Really Is (And Why Advertising Isn't It)

If marketing had a crime scene, the first clue would be this: **many business owners confuse advertising with marketing.**

They think the two words mean the same thing.

They don't.

And confusing them is one of the most common — and costly — mistakes business owners make, often without realising it.



No — They're Not the Same

Advertising is communication.

It's the act of promoting a product, service, or idea to a specific audience.

A café promoting a new menu.

A plumber running Google Ads.

A tradie boosting a Facebook post.

Advertising is how you get attention, deliver a message, and encourage action.

It can take many forms:

- Online ads
- Social media campaigns
- Websites and landing pages
- Email marketing
- Sponsorships
- Local community ads
- Print, radio, signage, and more

Think of advertising as a megaphone. It amplifies your message.

But it doesn't decide what the message should be.

That's the role of marketing.

Marketing Is the Thinking Behind the Message

Marketing is broader — and far more strategic.

It's the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value.

In simple terms, marketing is the thinking that shapes every decision *before* you speak to the customer.

In practical terms, marketing answers the questions advertising can't:

- Who are we trying to reach?
- What problem do they actually care about?
- What outcome is the customer really buying?
- What are they comparing us to?
- Why would they choose us instead of someone else?
- What should we say that they will actually feel and respond to?

Marketing shapes the decisions. Advertising communicates them.

And once you understand this distinction, something important becomes clear:

Advertising is not where marketing starts.

It's where marketing finishes.

This is why so many ads fail — not because they're bad ads, but because they're built on unclear thinking.



Why This Matters More Than You Think

When business owners skip marketing and jump straight into advertising, a predictable set of problems follow.

They try to target everyone — and connect with no one.

They talk about what they sell — instead of what customers care about.

A landscaper talks about equipment instead of the homeowner's desire for a low-maintenance yard.

They choose channels based on familiarity — not relevance.

They advertise where *they* feel comfortable, not where customers actually are.

They measure success using clicks, likes, or impressions — instead of outcomes. Vanity metrics replace meaningful metrics.

And when results disappoint, they change the advertisement instead of fixing the thinking behind it.

This is how businesses end up spending money without seeing a return — and often without understanding why.

Not because advertising doesn't work. But because it was never given a fair chance to work in the first place.

Marketing as Investigation

A more useful way to think about marketing is as investigative work.

Before you say anything to the market, you need to understand it. That means gathering clues:

- What do customers actually want?
- What problems matter most to them?
- How do they make decisions?
- What emotions drive those decisions?
- What alternatives are they considering?

It also means eliminating assumptions.

In an investigation, you don't treat everyone as a suspect.

You narrow the field.

You rule things out.

You focus your attention where it matters.

Marketing works the same way.

The better your investigation, the clearer your decisions become.

Skip this step, and you're guessing — and guessing is expensive.

Do it properly, and every decision that follows is grounded in evidence.

If you remember nothing else from this chapter, remember this:

Advertising works best when it's the last step, not the first.

PUTTING IT SIMPLY

Marketing builds the foundation.

Advertising broadcasts it.

One decides what to say.

The other delivers the message.

One discovers the truth.

The other communicates it.

Advertising isn't marketing. It never has been. And confusing the two is one of the most expensive mistakes a business can make.

In the next chapter, we'll look at why so many businesses get this wrong — and how that mistake quietly undermines everything that follows.

Chapter 2

Why Most Businesses Get Marketing Wrong

If marketing is so important, why do so many businesses get it wrong?

It's not because business owners are careless. And it's not because they lack effort.

Most are working harder than they should have to.

Many are trying different tactics.

Some are spending significant amounts on advertising.

Yet the results don't match the effort.

That gap usually comes down to one thing:

They're doing things in the wrong order.

Just like a rookie detective who accuses innocent suspects before examining the evidence.

The Illusion of Progress

When you start or run a business, there's constant pressure to *do something*. The pressure is loud, constant, and often coming from every direction.

Launch a website.

Run ads.

Hire a branding agency.

Post on social media.

"Get your name out there."

These actions feel productive. They're visible. They create a sense of momentum.

But activity isn't the same as progress.

Without clear direction, these actions are just movement — not meaningful progress.

It's like setting off on a journey without knowing the destination. You can travel a long way, burn a lot of fuel, and still end up nowhere useful.

Worse, you may not realise you're off track until time and money have already been wasted.

Starting at the Wrong End

The most common mistake is simple:

Businesses start with promotion instead of understanding.

They jump to the loud part before they've done the thinking part.

They ask:

- “Where should we advertise?”
- “What should the ad say?”
- “How much should we spend?”
- “What platform should we use?”

Before they've established:

- “Who exactly are we trying to reach?”
- “What problem matters most to them?”
- “Why would they choose us?”

When those answers are unclear, every advertising decision becomes a guess.

And when you guess often enough, costs add up quickly — not just in money, but in missed opportunities.

The customers who *would* have responded never hear the message that would have resonated.

The “Everyone Is My Customer” Trap

Another common issue is trying to appeal to everyone.

In investigations, treating everyone as a suspect slows the case.

In marketing, treating everyone as a customer kills the message.

On the surface, it sounds logical. More potential customers should mean more opportunities.

In reality, the opposite happens.

It feels safe — but it's actually the riskiest approach.

When businesses fail to clearly define and target a specific audience, their marketing loses focus.

And when focus disappears, several problems follow:

- The message becomes vague because it tries to address too many needs at once
- The offer becomes generic because it's designed to avoid excluding anyone
- Relevance disappears because customers no longer feel the message speaks directly to them

This is where segmentation and targeting become critical.

Different groups of customers care about different things. They have different problems, motivations, budgets, and decision-making processes.

A message that strongly appeals to one group may do very little for another.

That's perfectly normal.

In fact, effective marketing becomes stronger when it deliberately excludes people who are not the right fit.

Customers don't respond to broad, general messages.

They respond to messages that feel like they were written for *them* — and only them.

They want to feel understood. They want to feel that the business understands:

- their problem
- their priorities
- the outcome they care about most

Clarity beats coverage.

A smaller, well-defined audience will almost always outperform a large, undefined one because the message becomes sharper, more relevant, and more persuasive.

When people feel like you're speaking directly to them, they pay attention.

When they don't, they scroll past.

The Quarter-Inch Drill Mistake

There's a well-known insight from Professor Theodore Levitt:

“People don't want a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole.”

In reality, it goes deeper. They don't really want the hole either.

They want to hang a picture, install a shelf, or complete a project that improves their home.

The same principle applies to almost every product or service.

A mother shopping for a family car doesn't care about horsepower or fuel injection systems.

She cares about safety, reliability, and peace of mind.

The car is the tool. The outcome is what matters.

Unfortunately, most businesses focus on what they sell.

The drill.

The features.

The specifications.

The process.

But customers are focused on something else entirely.

They're focused on the outcome, the relief, the transformation.

The job they need done.

The problem they want solved.

The result they care about.



When businesses build their marketing around the “drill,” they talk about:

- What the product is
- How it works
- What the features are
- Why it's better

When customers are thinking about:

- What this will *do for them*
 - How it solves their problem
 - Whether it's worth it
-

Features vs Benefits

Most business owners know the idea of “features and benefits.” But it’s often misunderstood.

A feature is factual.

A benefit is what that feature *means* to the customer.

And that meaning changes depending on who the customer is.

A power drill might be described as:

- lightweight
- high torque
- cordless

Those are features.

But the benefit depends on the customer:

- A tradie values speed, reliability, and reduced fatigue
- A DIY homeowner values simplicity and convenience
- A budget-conscious buyer values durability and price

Same product.

Same features.

Different priorities.

A famous example came from Steve Jobs when he introduced the iPod. He didn’t talk about storage capacity or processing capability.

He said:

“A thousand songs in your pocket.”

That statement translated technology into a meaningful outcome.

And that is often the difference between marketing that gets attention and marketing that gets ignored..

Logic vs Emotion

Some buying decisions are driven mainly by logic:

- Will this save me time?
- Is it reliable?
- Is it good value?
- Will it reduce risk?

Others are driven more by emotion:

- Will this make my life easier?
- Will I feel more confident?
- Will this reflect well on me?
- Will this help me avoid stress or regret?

Most decisions involve both — but one usually carries more weight.

Different customer segments are motivated by different things.

One segment may prioritise practicality and savings.

Another may value confidence, convenience, or peace of mind.

That's why effective marketing isn't about saying everything to everyone.

It's about understanding which outcomes matter most to the audience you're targeting — and communicating those outcomes clearly.

If your marketing speaks to the wrong motivation, the message loses impact — even if the product is a good fit.

Relevance matters more than completeness.

You don't need to communicate every possible benefit.

You need to communicate the benefits that matter most to *this* customer.

Customers don't buy products. **They buy outcomes.**

They buy:

- convenience
- certainty
- status
- savings
- comfort

- results

When your marketing connects those outcomes clearly to the right audience, the message becomes easier to understand, easier to trust, and easier to act on.

When it doesn't, customers move on — not because a competitor has a better product, but because the competitor communicated its value more effectively.

Guesswork Disguised as Strategy

In the absence of proper marketing, business decisions tend to be driven by:

- personal preference
- what competitors appear to be doing
- advice taken out of context
- well-meaning friends
- trial and error without learning

This creates a pattern that *feels* like strategy, but isn't.

One month it's social media.

Next month it's Google Ads.

Then a new website.

Then a rebrand.

Each decision may seem reasonable on its own. But without a clear foundation, they don't connect.

They become **random acts of marketing**.

Individually, they may produce occasional results.

Collectively, they lack direction — and without direction, results become impossible to repeat.

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

When marketing is misunderstood or skipped, the consequences are rarely immediate — but they are consistent:

- advertising spend increases without a clear return
- pricing decisions are based on internal costs, not customer value
- customer acquisition becomes unpredictable

- sales become harder than they should be
- competitors appear stronger than they actually are
- confidence in marketing declines

Over time, this creates a slow drain on the business.

More effort is required for the same result.

Margins come under pressure.

Growth stalls.

Decisions become more reactive, not less.

Why This Pattern Repeats

If the results are poor, why do businesses keep doing the same thing?

Because the alternative feels unclear — and unclear feels uncomfortable.

Marketing is often presented as complex, technical, or expensive.

That perception alone pushes business owners toward what feels simpler:
promotion.

Advertising is easier to access.

It offers immediate action.

It creates the illusion of progress.

But without the thinking behind it, it rarely delivers consistent results.

And when it fails, the response is usually to change the tactic — not question the approach.

A Better Way to Think About It

Instead of asking:

“Where should we advertise?”

A better starting point is:

“What do we actually know about the people we’re trying to reach?”

- Do we understand their problem?
- Do we know what they care about most?
- Do we know what outcome they’re really buying?

- Do we know what alternatives they're considering?
- Do we know why they would choose one option over another?
- Do we know what emotion drives their decision?

If those answers are unclear, advertising won't fix the problem.

It will just expose it — loudly — and make it more expensive.

From Activity to Direction

Good marketing doesn't begin with action. It begins with clarity.

Clarity about:

- the market
- the customer
- the problem
- the outcome they care about
- the competition

Once that clarity exists, decisions become easier.

Advertising becomes more effective.

Messages become sharper.

Results become more predictable.

PUTTING IT SIMPLY

Most businesses don't fail at marketing because they don't try.

They fail because they skip the thinking and move straight to the doing.

They focus on the drill instead of the hole.

They start with advertising instead of understanding.

And when the results fall short, they adjust the tactics instead of fixing the foundation.

In the next chapter, we'll step away from guesswork and look at how marketing actually works when it's done properly — not as a series of disconnected activities, but as a structured investigation designed to replace assumptions with evidence.

Thank you for reading the first two chapters of my book.

Continue the Investigation — What You'll Uncover in the Full Book

You've now seen the opening clues — the difference between marketing and advertising, and why most businesses get the order wrong. The real investigation begins in the chapters ahead.

Here's what you'll discover when you unlock the full book for \$9.99 AUD.

Chapter 3 — Marketing as Investigation

Learn the detective's discipline that turns guesswork into clarity — and why “Assume nothing. Believe nothing. Question everything.” is the most profitable mindset in business. *“A good investigator doesn't begin with assumptions... They gather evidence.”*

Chapter 4 — Who Is Your Business Really For?

Stop trying to appeal to everyone. Discover how narrowing your audience *increases* sales — and why relevance beats reach every time. *“When a message is designed for everyone, it rarely feels relevant to anyone.”*

Chapter 5 — Positioning: The Battle for the Customer's Mind

Learn how to occupy a clear place in your customer's mind — and why “better” is a weak strategy compared to being meaningfully different. *“Customers are constantly comparing businesses — often quickly, subconsciously...”*

Chapter 6 — Value Propositions: Why Customers Choose One Business Over Another

Understand what customers are *really* buying — and how to communicate value so clearly that price stops being the deciding factor. *“Customers care more about outcomes than products.”*

Chapter 7 — Branding: What People Remember About Your Business

Discover why your brand is not your logo — it's the experience customers remember. Learn how small businesses build powerful brands without big budgets. *“Your brand is not what you say... It's what customers come to believe.”*

Chapter 8 — Advertising: The Most Visible Part of Marketing

Learn why advertising fails — and how to make it work by fixing the thinking underneath it. *“Advertising simply amplifies what already exists.”*

Chapter 9 — Before You Spend Another Dollar on Advertising

A detective-style diagnostic that reveals whether your marketing foundations are strong enough to support advertising — or whether you’re about to waste money. *“Advertising built on assumptions is expensive guesswork.”*



Ready to Continue the Case?

Unlock the full investigation and learn how to build marketing that works — consistently, confidently, and without guesswork.

Get the full book for just \$9.99 AUD (reduced from \$24.99)

[**CLICK HERE & BUY NOW**](#)

Stop Wasting Money on Advertising. Start Thinking About Marketing.

*Understand your customers,
Strengthen your business.
Make advertising work.*

In this concise, practical guide, former detective and business mentor John Cooke explains the fundamentals of marketing in clear, practical language.

You'll learn how to identify your ideal customers, define what makes your business valuable, build a respected brand, and communicate with purpose.

Inside, you'll discover:

- 
- what customers really buy
 - how to position your business clearly
 - how to build a consistent brand experience
 - why advertising often fails
 - how to make clearer, more confident marketing decisions
-

A practical guide for business owners
who want clarity, confidence, and results.

A Marketing Cooke Book