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Marketing Consulting: An Empirical Framework Linking Value
Proposition to Revenue Model**



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Strategy VPR-Align Model For Positioning and Differentiation in Marketing Consulting: An Empirical Framework Linking Value Proposition to Revenue Model

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Abstract

Purpose: This article examines how value proposition orientation should be aligned with revenue model choice in marketing consulting.

Methodology: The study develops an evidence-coded analytical framework based on twenty sources covering positioning theory, professional-service contracting, fee research, and recent market studies. These sources are coded according to two analytical dimensions: value proposition orientation and revenue archetype. This coding structure is used to identify recurring alignment patterns between consulting promises and pricing logic.

Findings: The findings show that outcome-led and risk-reduction value propositions are most consistently aligned with retainer-based models and, where measurement conditions are sufficiently rigorous, with value-based pricing components. In contrast, capability-led propositions are better suited to fixed-fee or productized models, particularly when consulting methods are modular and standardized. The study also demonstrates that positioning becomes economically persuasive only when the consultancy's promise is supported by compatible proof structures, contractual logic, and delivery governance.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The article makes a practical and conceptual contribution by proposing the VPR-ALIGN Model (Value Proposition–Revenue Alignment). This model explains that differentiation in marketing consulting should be understood not merely as a layer of messaging, but as a structured alignment between the promise made to clients, the evidence used to support that promise, and the mechanism through which the consultancy captures value. For practice, the model offers an applied alignment map for offer architecture, proof building, contracting, and delivery governance. For theory, it advances the understanding of positioning as an economically grounded construct rather than a purely communicative one.

Keywords: *Marketing Consulting, Positioning, Differentiation, Value Proposition, Revenue Model, Professional Services, Pricing*

Introduction

Marketing consulting has always been a narrative business, but it is also an evidence business. Clients rarely buy "marketing" as a generic category; they buy a believable path from a constraint they feel today to an outcome they can defend tomorrow. When positioning is weak, buyers fall back on proxies such as referrals, brand familiarity, or a low hourly rate. In that mode, the consultant is treated as a flexible pair of hands, and the contract becomes a mechanism to control cost rather than a vehicle for shared value creation.

Value propositions and revenue models are often designed in different rooms. A consultant can write compelling language about differentiation, insight, or innovation, yet sell through time-and-materials contracts that quietly signal uncertainty about outputs. Conversely, some firms promote outcome-based pricing without the operational scaffolding needed to define outcomes, measure them, and handle inevitable environmental shifts. Professional services are co-produced; the client influences the result, and quality is difficult to verify before purchase. This makes the revenue model itself part of the meaning the buyer assigns to the offer (McLachlin, 2000; Perner & Skjølsvik, 2019).

This paper treats positioning as an interlocking design problem. The value proposition specifies the customer-facing promise, and the revenue model specifies how that promise is converted into cash flow while distributing scope, performance, and measurement risk between consultant and client. In consulting, risk allocation is not a legal afterthought; it is the core of credibility. A revenue model that contradicts the value proposition sends mixed signals and invites price pressure. A revenue model that aligns with the promise can act as proof, because it shows what the consultant is willing to stand behind.

The aim of the article is to build an empirical framework linking value proposition orientation to revenue model choice in marketing consulting. The empirical component is not original field research; it is a structured synthesis of existing empirical studies and reputable market evidence. Twenty sources are coded into comparable categories, then analyzed to identify cross-patterns between proposition types and revenue models. This produces a small, transparent dataset that can be inspected, debated, and extended, which is a practical form of empiricism when primary fieldwork is not available.

Three questions guide the analysis. Which value proposition orientations are most prominent in the literature and market evidence relevant to consulting? How are these orientations associated with revenue model archetypes used in marketing consulting? What design implications follow for differentiation strategies that seek premium pricing without overpromising or over-customizing? The closing sections translate findings into a framework and actionable implications for consultants who want their positioning, proposals, and delivery governance to tell the same story.

Theoretical Background and Related Evidence

Positioning research starts from the idea that strategy is a set of choices that create a distinctive fit. A durable advantage is not simply being "better"; it is being different in ways that matter to a target buyer and are hard to imitate at scale (Porter, 1996). In consulting, differentiation is commonly framed as specialization, distinctive methods, or relationship capital. Yet identical words can mask very different economics. A consultancy can claim specialization while still selling generic capacity; another can claim partnership while relying on standardized, product-like delivery. Without linking positioning to value capture logic, differentiation can remain rhetorical.

Value proposition research adds discipline by separating what a provider does from what a customer experiences as valuable. A value proposition is a configuration of promised benefits, required sacrifices, and proof that makes the promise believable in context. Importantly, value propositions are not finished when written. They must travel from strategy to implementation, which means proof assets, measurement rights, and governance routines become part of the proposition itself (Payne, Frow, Steinhoff, & Eggert, 2020). This is especially relevant in consulting because the buyer evaluates not only the "idea" but also the process that will make the idea safe to adopt.

Business model scholarship provides the bridge to revenue logic. A business model specifies how value is created, delivered, and captured; revenue models are one mechanism of capture, but they also shape delivery incentives and buyer expectations. Business models are systems that must cohere, or innovation and strategy become unstable (Teece, 2010). In professional services, coherence is visible in the match between what is promised and how the consultant gets paid. When the revenue model implies uncertainty, it can undermine a promise of certainty. When it implies commitment, it can strengthen a promise of ongoing value creation. A complementary angle is that value creation can stem from novelty, complementarities, lock-in, and efficiency; these drivers help explain why some consultancies can productize parts of their work while others remain bespoke (Amit & Zott, 2001).

From the buyer perspective, purchasing professional services involves screening for quality signals under uncertainty. Because service quality cannot be fully evaluated *ex ante*, buyers attend to cues such as credentials, references, clarity of approach, and fit between problem definition and proposed work (Pemer & Skjølsvik, 2019). These cues influence not only selection but also negotiation behavior. When cues are weak, buyers protect themselves with input-based billing and detailed scope control. When cues are strong and the offer feels measurable, buyers are more willing to accept retainers, fixed fees, or value-based components, because perceived risk is lower.

Contract design research makes the risk allocation logic explicit. Professional services contracts are shaped by uncertainty, measurability of effort and outcomes, and the availability of relational governance. Empirical evidence indicates that contract terms are chosen to balance control and flexibility, and that this balancing act is embedded in pricing format, reporting obligations, and

scope definitions (Homburg & Stebel, 2009). Purchasing research further shows that as stakes rise, buyers formalize procurement and documentation, which changes what consultants must provide as proof and process (Pemer, Werr, & Bianchi, 2014). For marketing consulting, this implies that a premium positioning must include the governance story, not only the strategic story.

Finally, studies of consulting firm marketing practices and contemporary market reports add current context. Evidence from management consulting firms indicates that marketing activity often relies on credibility building through content and relationships, but the integration between marketing, offer design, and pricing can be uneven (Gabbianelli & Pencarelli, 2024). Recent market evidence emphasizes increasing demand for measurable ROI, responsible AI adoption, and trustworthy data practices (Deloitte Digital, 2025; HubSpot, 2025; Salesforce, 2024). B2B benchmarking also highlights that buyers respond to credible signals and clear business linkage, especially when budgets are scrutinized (LinkedIn, 2024).

Across these streams, a gap emerges. The literature discusses positioning, value propositions, and business models, yet the explicit link between value proposition orientation and revenue model choice in marketing consulting is rarely stated in a comparable way across sources. The next sections address that gap through evidence coding and synthesis, producing a framework that is both research-grounded and operationally usable. Empirical evidence from service firms also suggests that positioning strategy choice is associated with performance outcomes, reinforcing the idea that differentiation decisions have measurable consequences (Blankson & Crawford, 2012).

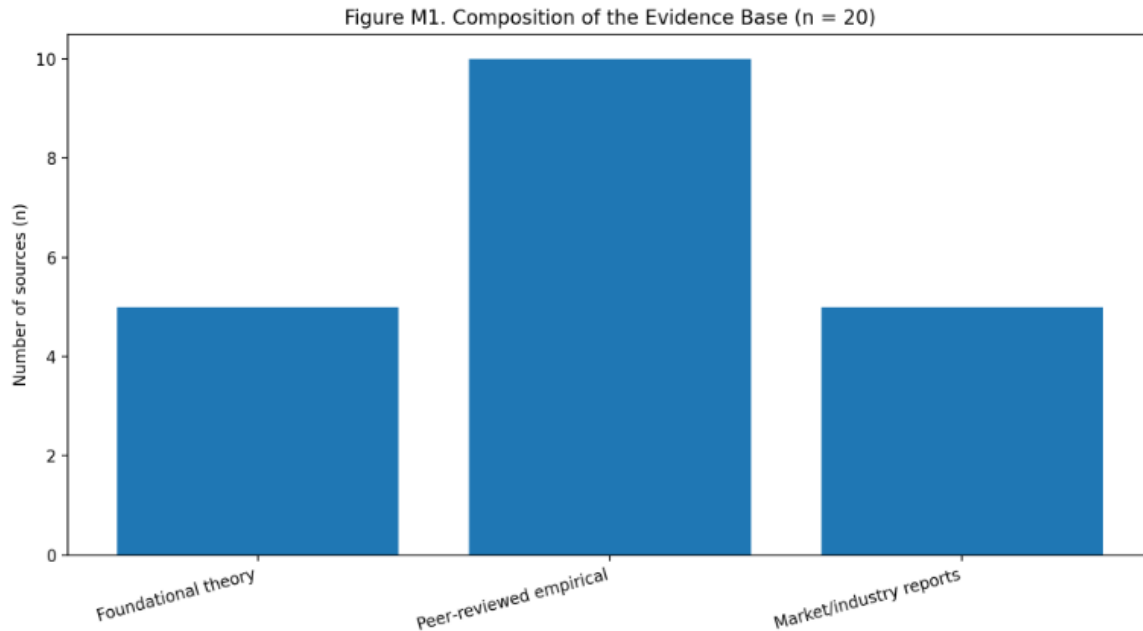
Methodology

This study uses a structured evidence-coding design that sits between a narrative review and a full systematic review. The objective is not exhaustive coverage; it is comparability. A curated set of twenty English-language sources was assembled to represent three evidence layers: foundational theory on positioning and business models; peer-reviewed empirical work on professional services contracting, service quality, buying cues, and consulting fees; and contemporary market studies relevant to marketing and professional services growth. Selection favored sources directly relevant to positioning, differentiation, value proposition design, revenue and pricing models, or professional services purchasing and contracting; peer-reviewed works needed empirical findings or empirically grounded models, while practitioner reports needed transparent methodology summaries from reputable organizations.

Table M1

Construct coded	Categories / scale	Operational definition (how)	Typical indicators in a source	Data extraction note
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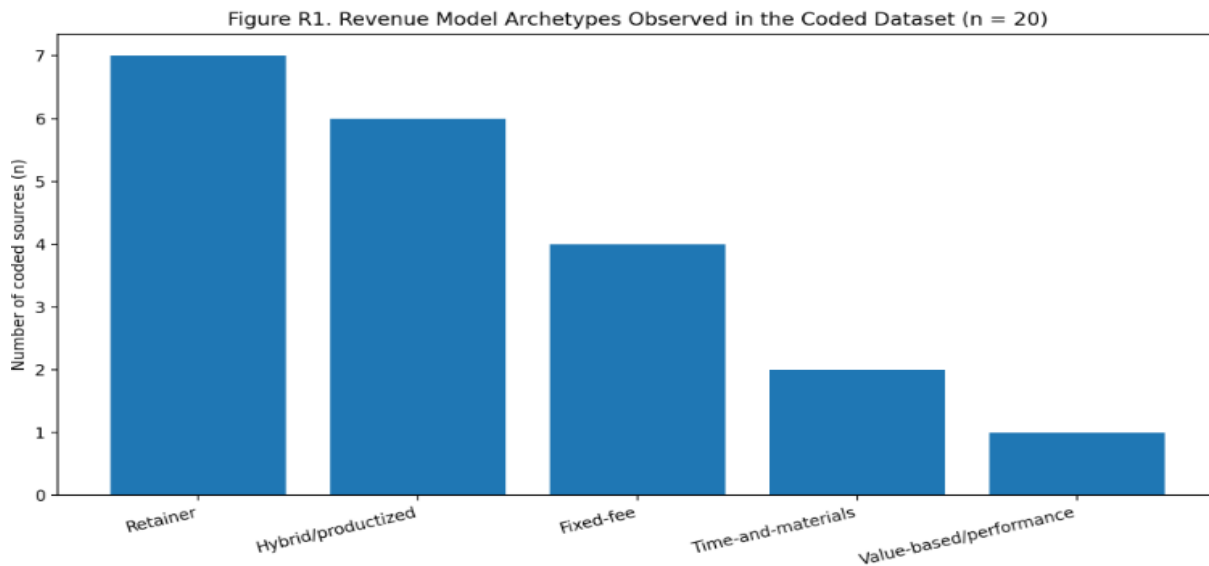
		it was interpreted)		
Value proposition orientation	Capability-led; Outcome-led; Risk-reduction; Relationship-led	Dominant promise implied by the offer logic described in the source	Capability: expertise/activities/method skill; Outcome: measurable business impact; Risk: governance/variance reduction/avoid loss; Relationship: partnership/continuity/adaptation	One dominant orientation assigned per source to ensure comparability
Revenue model archetype	Time-and-materials; Fixed-fee; Retainer; Value-based/performance; Hybrid/productized	The monetization structure implied as credible given the proposition logic	Time: hourly/day-rate; Fixed: scoped project; Retainer: ongoing cadence; Value/performance: variable linked to outcomes; Hybrid: packaged modules + recurring delivery	One dominant archetype assigned per source, with notes if hybrids were explicit
Strength of proof cues (supporting credibility)	Low; Medium; High	Degree to which the source implies evidence assets that make promises believable under uncertainty	Low: generic claims; Medium: process clarity + some proof; High: baselines, measurement rights, benchmarking, case evidence, governance routines	Used as a validity check when interpreting proposition–revenue fit
Risk allocation lens	Scope risk; Performance risk; Attribution risk	Which party is implicitly carrying which uncertainty under the proposed offer and pricing logic	Scope: work expands; Performance: impact not realized; Attribution: impact cannot be credibly attributed	Used to interpret why certain pairings recur (not a separate statistical variable)
Outcome emphasis (for interpretation)	Descriptive tag (not a primary code)	Whether outcomes are framed as direct financial uplift vs intermediate metrics vs learning cadence	Revenue/profit; CAC/LTV; pipeline; conversion; experiment velocity; reporting reliability	Helps distinguish outcome-led propositions that are measurable vs aspirational



Each source was coded on two primary dimensions. The first was value proposition orientation, defined as the dominant promise implied by the source: capability-led (emphasizing expertise and activities), outcome-led (emphasizing measurable business results), risk-reduction (emphasizing certainty, governance, or avoidance of loss), or relationship-led (emphasizing trust, collaboration, and continuity). The second was revenue model archetype: time-and-materials, fixed-fee, retainer, value-based/performance, or hybrid/productized. Coding focused on what the source implied as a credible monetization structure, not necessarily on a single recommended pricing tactic.

The analytic procedure had three steps. First, codes were assigned based on close reading of the source. Second, codes were normalized into a single dataset, enabling descriptive frequency analysis and cross-tabulation. Third, cross-patterns were interpreted through a risk allocation lens: which party bears scope risk, performance risk, and attribution risk under each proposition and revenue model pairing. Because the sample is curated and the coding is interpretive, the findings are presented as exploratory patterns designed to support decision-making and further testing, not as definitive population estimates.

Results



The coded evidence set provides a compact view of how the consulting literature and contemporary practice evidence distribute across proposition and monetization choices. In the sample of twenty sources, outcome-led propositions were the most frequent category (8 of 20). Capability-led and risk-reduction propositions each appeared in 5 and 5 sources respectively, while relationship-led propositions appeared in 2 sources. This distribution is consistent with market narratives that emphasize demonstrable impact and accountability, while also recognizing the continued importance of governance and trust as differentiators (Deloitte Digital, 2025; Hinge Research Institute, 2024).

Table R1

Value proposition orientation (row totals)	Time-and-materials	Fixed-fee	Retainer	Value-based/performance	Hybrid/productized	Total
Capability-led	0	1	0	0	4	5
Outcome-led	0	1	4	1	2	8
Risk-reduction	0	2	3	0	0	5
Relationship-led	2	0	0	0	0	2
Column totals	2	4	7	1	6	20

Revenue model archetypes in the coded set concentrated around ongoing and modular structures. Retainer models were the most frequent archetype (7 of 20), followed by hybrid/productized models (6 of 20) and fixed-fee, scope-based models (4 of 20). Time-and-materials appeared in 2 sources, and explicit value-based or performance pricing appeared in 1 source. Although the sample is not exhaustive, the pattern aligns with the broader business model claim that coherent value capture requires repeatability and governance, especially when the buyer faces uncertainty about quality and outcomes (Teece, 2010; Perner & Skjøelsvik, 2019).

Cross-patterns reveal how value proposition orientation constrains credible revenue models. Relationship-led propositions were paired exclusively with input-based billing in the coded set. This pairing is consistent with the logic that when the promise is primarily adaptive partnership and relational support, it is difficult to pre-commit to specific deliverables without undermining the very flexibility the client expects. In empirical work on engagement success and satisfaction, perceived value is shaped heavily by interaction quality and expectation alignment, which naturally expands scope and makes input-based billing more contractible (McLachlin, 2000; Haverila et al., 2011).

Risk-reduction propositions were paired mainly with commitment-based retainers and scope-based fixed-fee structures. This makes sense because the promise is often about lowering variance, ensuring compliance-like discipline, or preventing costly mistakes, which is best delivered through ongoing governance or tightly specified controls. Contract research shows that when uncertainty and verification problems are present, pricing and contract terms are used to balance control with flexibility (Homburg & Stebel, 2009), and purchasing formalization increases when stakes rise (Perner et al., 2014). A risk-reduction position therefore gains credibility when paired with a revenue model that funds continuous monitoring, reporting, and corrective action rather than episodic advice.

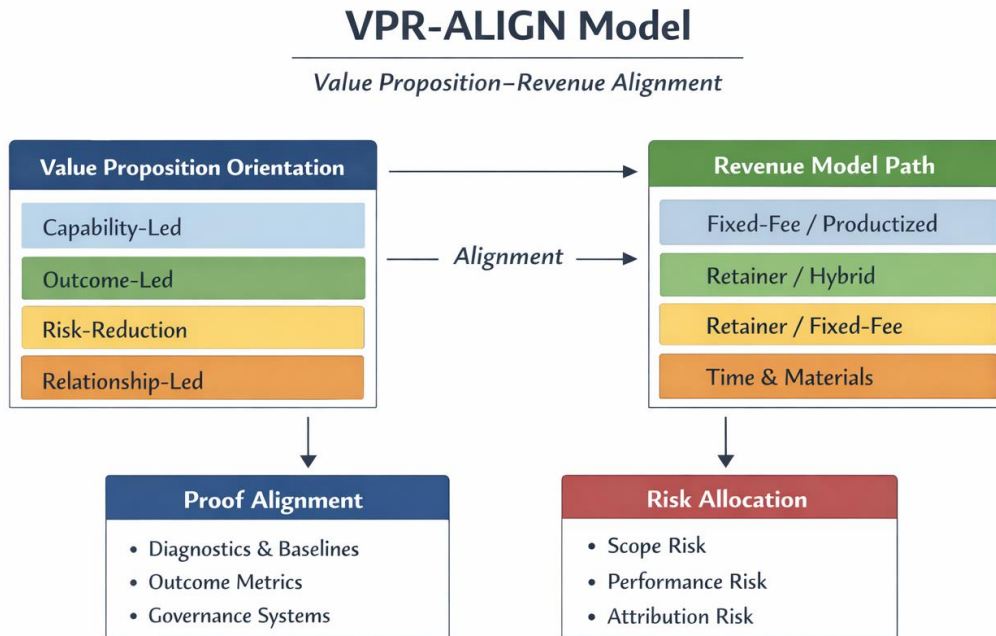
Outcome-led propositions showed the widest range of revenue models. In the coded set, outcome-led sources were distributed across retainers, hybrid/productized models, fixed fees, and one explicit performance-based structure. This dispersion reflects the fact that outcomes can be pursued through different operational logics: an ongoing experimentation cadence, a packaged diagnostic plus implementation sequence, or a variable fee component when measurement is reliable enough. Empirical evidence on consulting fees indicates that premium pricing can be sustained when process quality is visible and when clients can link work to perceived value (Momparler et al., 2015), while configurational analysis suggests multiple viable pathways to high fees (Lassala et al., 2016).

To summarize association strength, a contingency analysis between proposition orientation and revenue model group in the coded dataset suggests a strong relationship (chi-square = 26.80, df = 12; Cramer's V = 0.67). Because the dataset is curated and the coding is interpretive, this statistic is used as a descriptive indicator of pattern intensity rather than a basis for population inference.

Still, it formalizes a practical observation: the more an offer shifts from "we can do marketing tasks" to "we will manage a decision-grade growth system" or "we will reduce risk and variance," the more input-based pricing becomes inconsistent with the promise.

The practitioner layer reinforces the same directional movement. Marketing leaders increasingly emphasize measurement, personalization, and trust, which increases demand for propositions framed around results and governance (HubSpot, 2025; Salesforce, 2024). B2B benchmarks also highlight that buyers respond to credible signals and clear business linkage, which rewards consultancies that can state a value proposition in terms that buyers can test and defend internally (LinkedIn, 2024). These trends do not eliminate the need for expertise; they change what must be made visible for expertise to translate into differentiated pricing.

To translate the empirical alignment patterns into a practical consulting framework, this study proposes the VPR-ALIGN Model (Value Proposition–Revenue Alignment). The model explains how positioning in marketing consulting becomes economically credible only when the dominant client-facing promise is matched with a compatible revenue logic. In this framework, differentiation is treated not as a communication layer alone, but as a structured alignment between what the consultancy promises, how that promise is evidenced, and how the firm captures value through contracts and pricing architecture.



At the first stage, the model identifies the consultancy’s **dominant value proposition orientation**. This orientation may be capability-led, outcome-led, risk-reduction, or relationship-led. The practical purpose of this step is to clarify what the client is primarily being asked to believe: superior expertise, measurable business improvement, greater operational certainty, or adaptive

long-term partnership. By isolating the dominant promise, the model prevents hybrid positioning from becoming vague or internally inconsistent. In consulting practice, this is critical because buyers interpret offers through the strongest visible signal rather than through every element of the proposal.

At the second stage, the model assigns the **credible revenue model path** that best fits that proposition. Capability-led offers tend to gain strength when they are modularized into fixed-fee or hybrid/productized formats rather than being sold as undefined expertise. Outcome-led offers align most naturally with retainers, hybrid structures, and in some cases carefully bounded performance-linked components. Risk-reduction propositions fit retainer and fixed-fee governance models because their value depends on continuity, monitoring, and corrective discipline. Relationship-led propositions are most compatible with time-and-materials structures, although this pairing is strategically weaker unless the relational promise is anchored in a more concrete operational logic. In this way, the model turns abstract positioning choices into actionable monetization decisions.

At the third stage, **proof alignment** is established. The VPR-ALIGN Model assumes that no positioning claim can support premium pricing unless the consultancy also builds the proof assets appropriate to that claim. For capability-led offers, proof may take the form of proprietary diagnostics, structured audits, and visible process modules. For outcome-led offers, proof requires baselines, measurement rights, benchmarks, and a credible outcome window. For risk-reduction offers, the central evidence lies in governance routines, reporting discipline, control systems, and variance-reduction logic. For relationship-led offers, proof depends on trust signals, continuity structures, and expectation management mechanisms. This stage is essential because it links the pricing format to the specific evidence that makes the pricing believable.

At the final stage, the model specifies the **risk allocation logic** embedded in the offer. The practical contribution of VPR-ALIGN is that it reveals how scope risk, performance risk, and attribution risk are distributed between consultant and client under each alignment pattern. A consultancy that promises outcomes but bills only for hours communicates uncertainty. A consultancy that promises risk reduction but lacks retainer-based governance lacks delivery coherence. A consultancy that modularizes its expertise and matches it with hybrid or productized revenue structures creates a stronger signal of control and repeatability. Thus, the VPR-ALIGN Model converts the article's empirical findings into a practical design mechanism for marketing consulting firms seeking stronger differentiation, more credible pricing, and better consistency between strategy and monetization.

Discussion and Implications

The patterns suggest a simple but consequential conclusion: in marketing consulting, positioning claims and revenue models function as mutually reinforcing signals. The buyer reads the revenue model as an implicit statement about uncertainty and accountability. A time-and-materials

proposal signals that outputs and outcomes cannot be credibly pre-committed, or that measurement is too contested to price performance risk. That message can be appropriate for exploratory work, but it can also anchor the consultant in a commodity frame where the only negotiable variable is the hourly rate.

The alignment framework developed here links proposition and revenue logic through risk allocation. Three risks dominate marketing consulting. Scope risk is the risk that work expands beyond what was priced. Performance risk is the risk that intended business impact does not materialize. Attribution risk is the risk that impact cannot be credibly attributed to the consultant's actions. Contract research in professional services shows that pricing formats and contract terms are chosen partly to manage these risks and verification problems (Homburg & Stebel, 2009). A coherent positioning begins by naming which risk the consultancy is designed to reduce and which risk it will not claim to control. Evidence on co-created consulting value further supports this view: when client and consultant jointly shape activities and decisions, governance and measurement become part of the service itself (Oesterle et al., 2022).

Capability-led propositions can support stronger monetization when they are expressed as systems rather than as general expertise. Business model research suggests value capture stabilizes when activities are modular and reproducible (Teece, 2010; Zott et al., 2011). In practical terms, this means turning capabilities into packaged diagnostics, audits, and roadmaps with clear outputs. A capability-led consultancy that can standardize its diagnostic method can credibly sell fixed-fee products and hybrid delivery paths. Without that modularity, the same consultancy is pushed toward input-based billing because the buyer cannot see what the hours will produce.

Outcome-led propositions are powerful, but they are fragile without measurement rights and governance. Empirical evidence on consulting fees suggests clients pay more when the link between work and perceived value is clearer and when service quality becomes visible in process and outcomes (Momparker et al., 2015). Yet marketing outcomes are confounded by seasonality, competitor moves, product shifts, and sales execution. The practical response is not to abandon outcome language; it is to define outcomes in a way that is measurable and fair. This often requires a baseline, a measurement window, and an explicit agreement about what will be held constant and what will be treated as a contextual variable. In many cases, a practical contracting move is to sell an operating cadence and learning system (measurement, experimentation, iteration) rather than to guarantee a single revenue figure; this keeps accountability real while keeping attribution claims defensible.

Risk-reduction propositions are often underused in marketing consulting, yet contemporary evidence suggests they are becoming more relevant. As AI and data capabilities expand, reputational, regulatory, and trust risks become strategic issues, not only compliance issues (Deloitte Digital, 2025; Salesforce, 2024). A consultancy that positions itself around risk reduction promises stability: governance of data quality, brand consistency, experiment integrity, and

reporting reliability. Those promises naturally fit retainers because risk reduction is rarely achieved through one-off deliverables. The retainer finances monitoring, quality control, and corrective action, which is precisely what the client is buying.

Relationship-led propositions, by contrast, can become a trap if they are the only differentiator. Trust and partnership are necessary in consulting, but buyers still screen for quality cues and concrete fit, especially when budgets are scrutinized (Pemer & Skjølsvik, 2019; LinkedIn, 2024). When the value proposition is framed only as "we are partners," comparison becomes easier and price becomes the main lever. Satisfaction research shows that relationship quality is crucial, yet it also shows that clients evaluate the consultant on expectation alignment and perceived competence, not only on friendliness (Haverila et al., 2011). A relationship-led position becomes durable when it is anchored to a specific promise and a repeatable process that makes the partnership productive. Evidence on consulting-firm marketing practices indicates that credibility building is common, yet the linkage between marketing, offer design, and pricing is often weak, which makes such traps more likely in practice (Gabbianelli & Pencarelli, 2024).

The framework also clarifies why value-based and performance-linked pricing is both attractive and rare. The coded evidence includes an explicit performance pricing path, but it sits alongside warnings implied by contracting and cue research. Performance pricing shifts performance risk to the consultant, and that shift is only rational when the consultant has control over key drivers and can measure impact credibly. In marketing consulting, control is typically partial. A practical compromise is hybrid pricing: a retainer that funds baseline delivery and measurement, paired with a variable component linked to intermediate metrics that are closer to the consultant's sphere of influence. This approach reflects the idea of multiple paths to premium pricing and acknowledges attribution uncertainty (Lassala et al., 2016; Homburg & Stebel, 2009).

This study has limitations. The evidence set is curated rather than exhaustive, and coding simplifies complex arguments into dominant orientations. Empirical studies vary by industry, geography, and service type, which can moderate proposition-revenue relationships. Practitioner reports may reflect platform incentives and may generalize across diverse contexts. Yet the central claim does not depend on any single source. It is supported by converging logic: strategy requires trade-offs (Porter, 1996), value propositions must be implementable to be credible (Payne et al., 2020), and revenue models are part of the signal set buyers use under uncertainty (Pemer & Skjølsvik, 2019).

The practical contribution

The practical contribution of the paper is an empirical alignment framework that connects the customer-facing promise to monetization logic. When consultants decide what kind of promise they are making, they simultaneously decide which uncertainties must be controlled and which proof assets must be built. This is the point where differentiation becomes durable. It becomes a contract structure, a delivery system, and a portfolio of evidence that competitors cannot copy quickly.

Conclusions

Positioning and differentiation in marketing consulting are often treated as creative messaging tasks. The evidence synthesized here supports a more disciplined view. Positioning is a design decision that shapes which revenue models are credible and which are fragile. Capability-led propositions tend to fit input-based logic unless the offer is modularized, in which case productized and hybrid models become feasible. Outcome-led propositions support retainers and, under strict measurement conditions, performance components. Risk-reduction propositions naturally fit retainers and fixed-fee governance packages because their value is realized through continuity and control. In practice, the same alignment decision dictates which proof assets must be built, from diagnostics and benchmarks to measurement rights and case evidence, because without proof the revenue model becomes a negotiation weakness.

Future research should test the framework with primary data, but even as an evidence-coded synthesis it yields a pragmatic conclusion: differentiated positioning is credible when it is economically consistent. If a consultancy claims outcomes yet sells only hours, it communicates uncertainty. If it sells commitments while lacking governance, it risks overclaiming. The strongest positioning is the one where value proposition, proof, and revenue model are aligned and therefore believable.

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