

16 Lessons I Wish I Knew As A First-Time B2B Marketing Leader.

Contents: 16 Lessons I Wish I Knew As A First-Time B2B Marketing Leader

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First - a little background on me, Dave. I have been in the B2B SaaS space for the last decade.

I was the first full-time marketing hire at a company called Drift, which some of you may be familiar with. At Drift, I went from marketing manager to VP of Marketing over the course of four years. I helped build the marketing team from zero to 30 people. Drift was awesomely successful.

Then I left Drift to go be CMO at a company called Privy - Privy was acquired by attentive mobile in June of 2021, and now I spend my time today doing a bunch of different things, one of them is a community for B2B Marketing Pros called Exit Five.



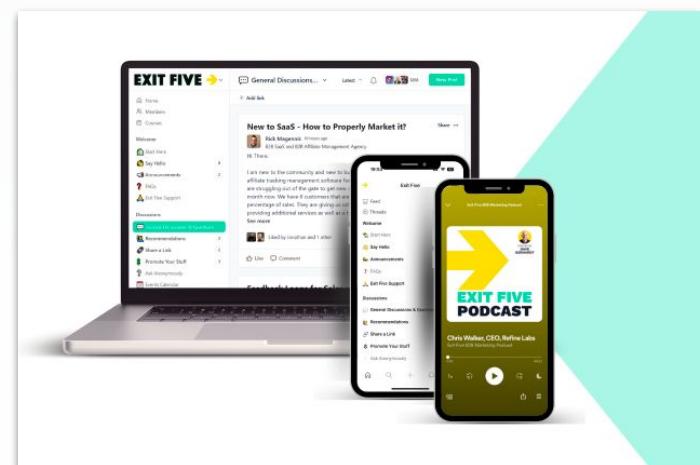
\$1B Valuation



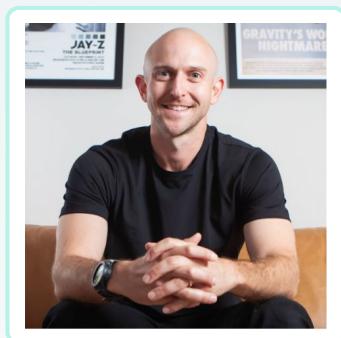
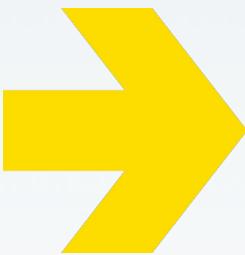
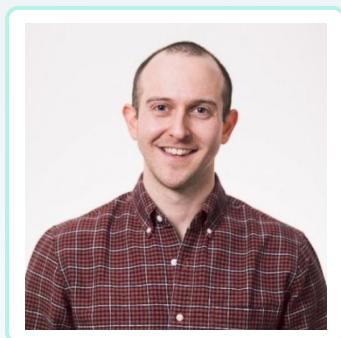
2021 Acquisition

In some form or another, I've been building Exit Five for about 8 years. It started out with a podcast of my own, and I built a Patreon community to talk about B2B marketing.

Now, Exit Five is now a community of 3,500+ B2B SaaS marketers who have come together to grow their careers. It's also a podcast - we release new episodes every week. And we have a newsletter of over 14,000 people where I share marketing insights from my career and the conversations from the community.



I made the jump from marketing manager to CMO over the course of five years... which is a really accelerated time period. And I made a ton of mistakes along the way. I'm able to call them mistakes now because I have the wisdom of time.



**Marketing
Manager**

CMO

One of the main things I learned the hard way is that **being a good marketer is very different than being a good marketing leader**.

Making the jump from good marketer to good marketing leader is really about understanding that you need marketing expertise, but also you need to add in the marketing management skills.

**Marketing Leader =
Marketing Expertise +
Management Skills**

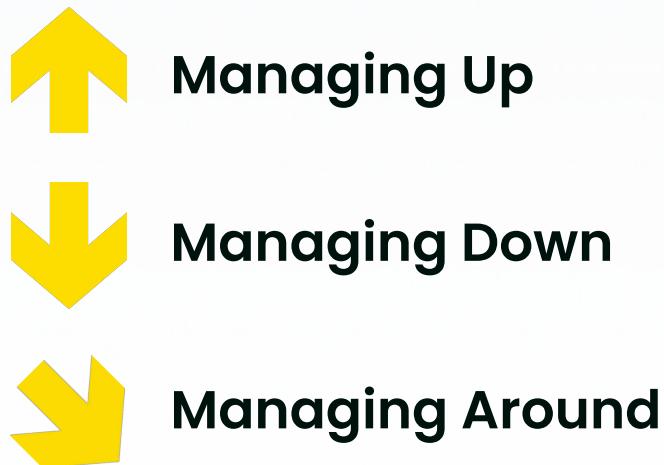
I think the management skills can be broken into three components:

1. Managing up
2. Building a great team
3. And managing around the whole business

I've split these three core concepts into 16 smaller lessons on the leadership skills required to be great in the marketing leader chair.

It's all based on my experiences, and my hope is that you get 1-2 helpful nuggets out of this.

The Skills.



#1

**Forget acronyms, use
your brain. Figure out
how you grow.**

In B2B marketing, it's so easy to get obsessed with our little acronyms and jargon and benchmarks.

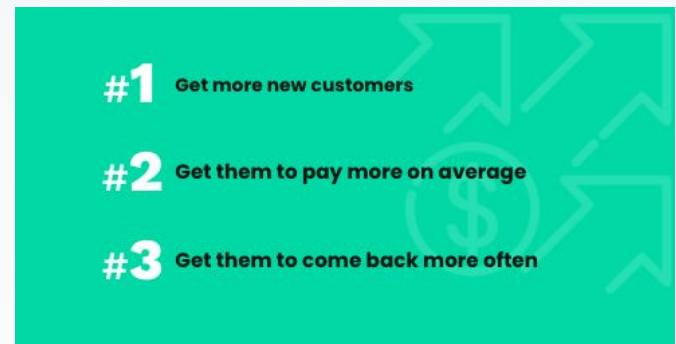
Early in my time at Drift, I was not necessarily a B2B marketing expert, so I wasn't locked into the acronyms anyway, but David (the CEO of Drift) gave me the freedom to just forget about the jargon and use my brain. We outlined the three different ways we could grow the business:

- You can get more customers,
- You can get those company those customers to pay more when they come in, and...
- You can get them to come back more often.

And we acted based on what it took to make those three things happen. That was the end goal, *not* an MQL → SAL ratio.

As a leader, focus on these things. Don't get lost in the MQL PQL SQL SAL definitions and best practices. Get back to the basics and operate from first principles.

Figure out where your 10, 20, 50 best customers came from. Then do more of the things that got them into your funnel. It's often a handful of basic channels. The jargon and separate acronyms for everything overcomplicates the strategy unnecessarily.



#2

**You need a story. The
story becomes the
strategy.**

You need a story to be successful in B2B. Call it a category, call it a movement. Regardless, you need a story that people can bring to their boss about why they should buy your product beyond features + benefits.

Many of them started with a shift happening in the world. “People do research online before they buy now,” or “the best SaaS businesses have over 100% revenue retention” are both changes in the world that present the need for a new category.

HubSpot created inbound marketing. Gainsight championed customer success. Drift conversational marketing. Each led through education + expertise and showed people a new way of doing things. You need the reason before the functionality.

When you simplify your story into two words, the whole company (everyone! Finance, sales, marketing, engineers) can easily frame the story for themselves. We’re building this feature to bring Conversational Marketing into the world, etc.

So many company stories or taglines get so complex that it’s hard to repeat them or really wrap your head around them.



Inbound Marketing



Customer Success



Conversational Marketing

Sell the vision and the story. The strategy will grow out of that.

The story is especially important in B2B – because it can get so technical, but this is a quote from a AMA with Seth Godin. Someone asked, “what’s the difference between B2C and B2B marketing?”

“The secret is understanding that the **people buying from you are still people** but one big difference is they are spending someone else’s money. Your job is to give them a **story** they can tell their boss. If you can’t then the only story available to tell is either I **bought what we bought last time** or I **bought the cheaper one.**”



Seth Godin

#3

**Think hard about
your “offers.”**

In B2B, the most common “offers” are to start your free trial, take a demo, or talk to sales. But only a small fraction of people in the market are actually ready for that action at any given moment.

“All your marketing needs to have an offer telling your ideal prospects exactly what to do and why they want to do it right now. It should be **irresistible** and **time sensitive** and give them **transformative value**.”



Dan Kennedy

Proactiv, Walmart, Quickbooks

The best companies sweat the “offer” – they find a more middle of the funnel offer that addresses (selfishly) a challenge their ideal customer struggles with that also (selfishly) might help the ideal customer see how big their problem really is, or act as justification to start solving their problem. It’s about providing something that’s highly valuable to them right out of the gate.

There are great examples: HubSpot's website grader. Drift did a "test drive" to test the chatbot on your website before talking to anyone. Demandwell has a free SEO audit. Clari has a revenue leakage calculator. These are all smart ideas that are still further down the funnel than an e-book, but work to get qualified buyers in to eventually talk to sales.



Keep in mind, your ridiculously good offer should be related to how you help people. What could you give them that would be really helpful, or give them a taste of how you help paying customers?

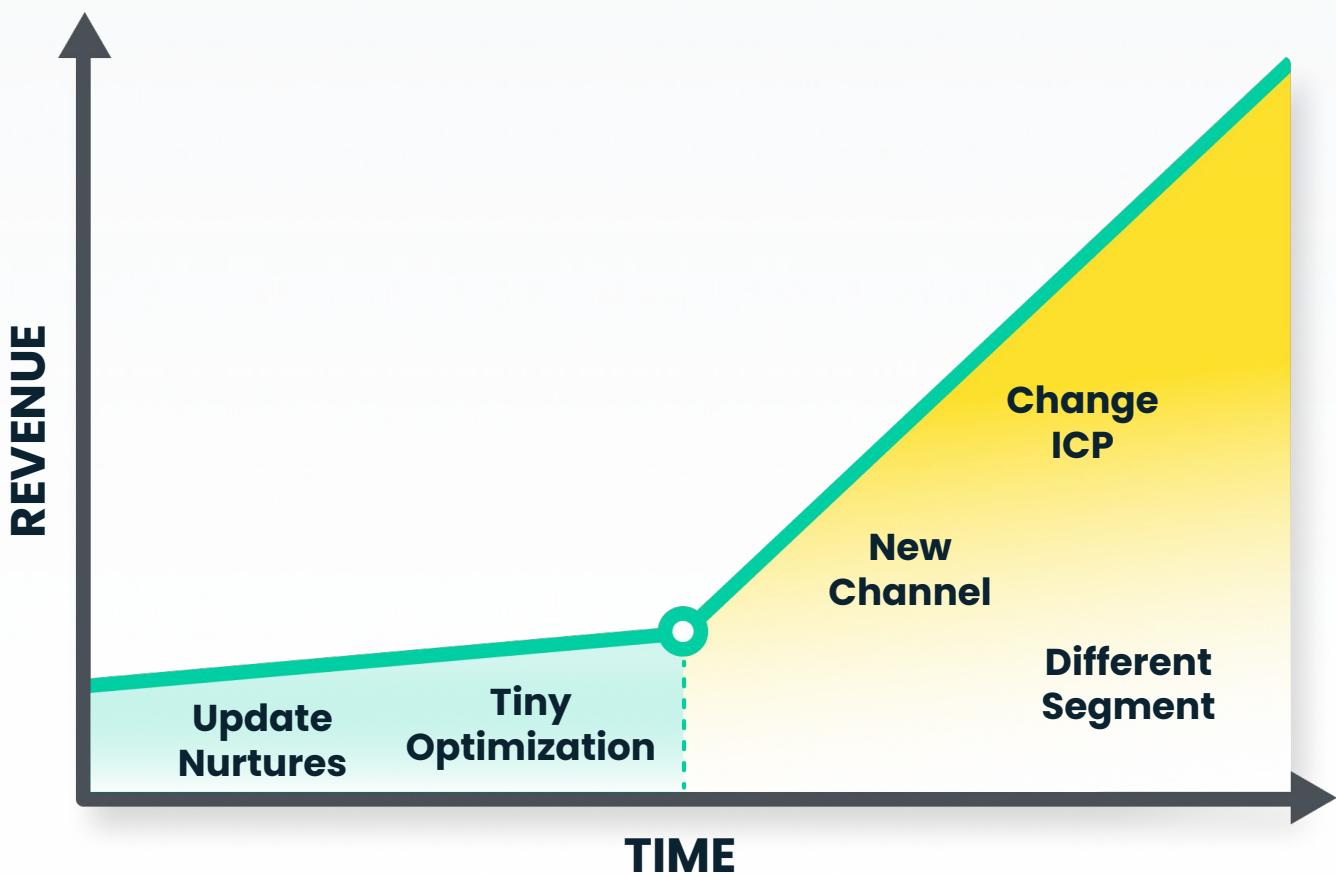
#4

**Push your team past
incremental thinking.**

One of the lessons I learned is that the easiest default is to think in incremental optimizations – for example: if you’re behind on pipeline, we default to optimizing existing systems in small ways. Like “let’s update the email nurture flow,” or “let’s run an A/B test on the demo request page.”

You can waste so many cycles thinking that the next homepage variation or the email series is going to be the thing that gets you out of the revenue hole. Rarely does “nurturing” solve the problem. Take bigger swings.

When really what needs to happen is a much larger shift, like investing in a new channel, approaching a new segment, or new buyer that you can serve.



#5

**Find a way to get on the
same page as sales.**

You must find a way to get on the same page as sales, no matter what. Find a way to put all the internal politics aside. You will never be successful unless you can.

Sales + marketing = revenue *together*.

Find out how the VP of sales is compensated and do everything in your power to get on the same page. Ideally you're compensated on the same wins. Healthy teams give bonuses based on company goals not team goals. Find out and fix it. Manage up to the CEO if needed.

Life is 100% easier when sales + marketing have shared revenue goals.



#6

Don’t “be” finance and ops. Make best friends with finance and ops.

It's very tough to be a successful marketing leader without being able to influence and manage change across the entire org from product to sale to customer success to finance to ops.

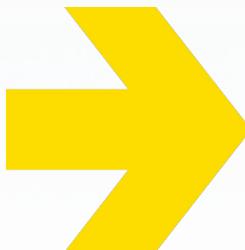
You have to be able to work with all those teams because, as you know, marketing touches all those departments.

Early on in my career I felt like I had to build all the financial models myself, and update every Salesforce report in order to be a good marketing leader. False. This just means you're spending less time leading and thinking strategically.

You need to know what goes into your models and reports, and you should be in lockstep with the other teams you work with when you're collaborating.

Make finance and ops your best friends. Same way you need to be on the same team as sales, you need to be on the same team with finance and ops. Set up weekly, biweekly, or monthly syncs with those teams depending on the intensity of the moment.

Don't be like 28 year old Dave "I got this myself" - DON'T GET DEFENSIVE - take the help, work together.



"I can build the model!" Dave

*You don't want Dave building the model.

"I have business partners" Dave

*My expertise is marketing. Let's collaborate sales + ops + finances + marketing + product

Both teams will push you in different ways over time also - it won't be all roses. Finance will challenge your budget proposal and ask you to spend less. Ops might occasionally tell you that your campaigns didn't work. It's okay. The friction is healthy and in service of the business.

#7

**Show your work and
master internal
communication.**

The top complaint that I hear about marketing (and have experienced myself) is that other teams inside the company don't know what marketing is doing. OR they hear that marketing is doing a lot of work but they don't understand how it all fits into the company goals.

I learned this the hard way in my early days at Drift. We had something on Fridays called "show and tell" where people would present what they worked on. I was the only person doing marketing at the time. It felt like everyone else was an engineer or designer – people who had really cool tangible things to show.

My first week on the job, they're like "all right Dave, what did you work on this week?" And I said, "uhhhh I wrote a blog post."

It was the most humbling experience because it was just dead silent. Nobody cared, nobody understood why that's what I'd done. What I learned was, blog posts are just a tactic. And the next week I came back gave a whole presentation and shared –

"Our goal right now is to build an audience, and we're trying to build web traffic. The way we're going to do that is through organic content. If we do this right, we'll eventually be able to generate X trials a month, and Y customers" etc etc.

It's safe to assume that nobody has any idea about how your work impacts the company, and it's your job to explain it to them.

Not only should you aim to keep the rest of the business up-to-date on the work marketing is doing, but also constantly sharing it fits into the bigger picture, related to company goals.

Your job: Here's how this fits into our company goals.

(safest bet: assume they don't know)

Some systems I like:

- Slack: sharing screenshots, work in progress, teasers, etc.
- Weekly, monthly, quarterly recaps – here's what marketing is up to.
- Take any opportunity to present to the company you can get.
- Create cross-functional check-ins with marketing, product, sales, CS, finance, ops, together.

Take every opportunity to present.

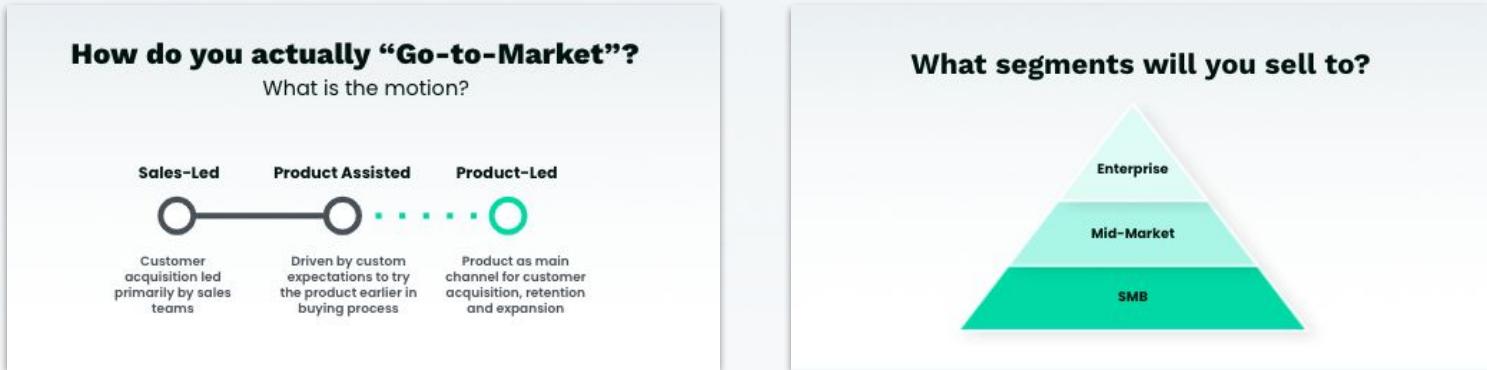
Marketing 1H Plan

#8

**You must be able to
articulate your strategy.**

A lot of marketing leaders or teams aren't really sure what the actual strategy is....this might seem obvious, but I think it's worth pausing and really thinking about. I see people jumping into tactics and channels before aligning on this higher level question of - what is our marketing motion.

The motion is - how are you going to get in front of prospects to drive meetings and revenue? This could be sales led, ABM, product led, or marketing led growth.



I don't think there's one right answer, and believe you can be successful with a number of different approaches, and it's really about knowing your audience and which segments you're selling to.

As a leadership team, you have to have a very clearly defined go to market motion, because most of what you're doing from a marketing standpoint is defined by the GTM motion. The channels, the way you run ads, whether or not you do event sponsorships etc, is all determined by the motion. They're much different if you're supporting sales cold outreach vs pushing people to try a tool for free.

I've been able to do the best work with the marketing team inside of a company when the motion and ICP were really clear.

Your segment should be way tighter than you feel comfortable with also. Like narrow it down to the people who are an absolute no-brainer customer. Once you get into a good rhythm with these folks, only then should you expand.

The segment might inform the strategy also - Ex: at Privy we sold to small businesses so we knew they weren't marketing experts and our marketing had to speak to them and they didn't have a lot of time to figure it out, so we had to lead with simple + clear + educational content.

As a marketing leader you have to have a strong opinion about what your marketing strategy should look like and align the whole organization on those things.

The whole organization must be aligned on these things. And it's your job to drive that alignment.

#9

**You must be able to think
short and long term.**

Easiest way to hit your number is to invest in that channel last year.

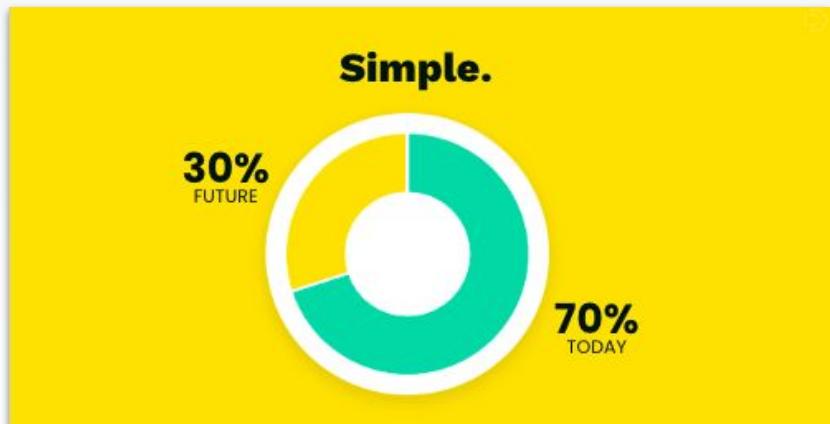
(Wish I knew this one...)

What will your next channels be? Where can you get future growth from? Start testing and learning now before you need it. Then you can be ready to turn it on.

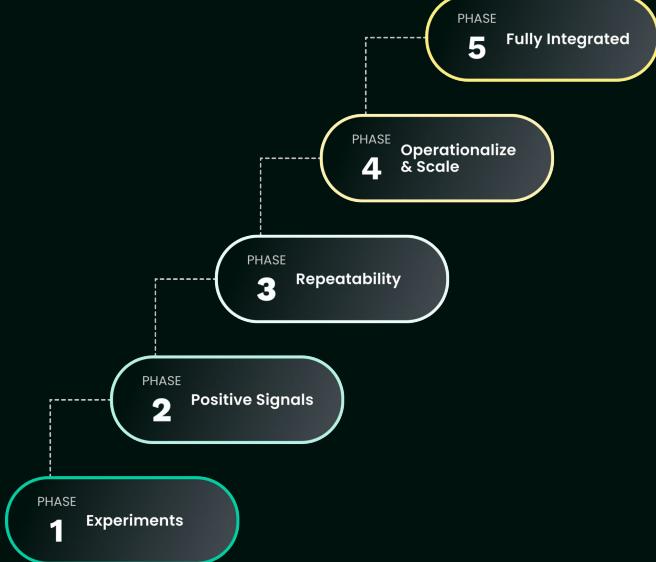
The simplest way is 30:70. See below for a more advanced model from Refine Labs.

You must be able to think short term and long term. Hitting today's goal is great, but what about when the plan jumps 50% next year?

You need to be able to build the foundation for that now. Spend 70% of your time on today and 30% of your time on the future. Be disciplined about laying the groundwork for next year and beyond and it will pay off.



Advanced.



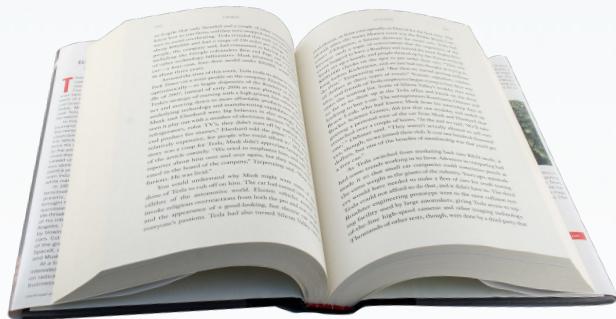
 Refine Labs

#10

**Understand what the CEO
cares about.**

One thing that I used to do is get so far in the weeds so quickly with the CEO – I was sharing all of the 50-100 things that marketing was doing because I wanted to communicate how awesome it was and how fired up we were. But it just doesn't have the intended effect.

When you manage up to the CEO, remember, she cares about two things: revenue and the story. Keep your communication + collaboration tight to those things. She doesn't need to know every detail about what's going on inside of your org and you shouldn't let her.



Revenue

The Story

Just like with communicating with the rest of the org – lean on your strategy in your communication. How are you pacing toward your goals, and which channels are working/not? What needs to change to hit the goal? Do you need help rallying other people in the org?

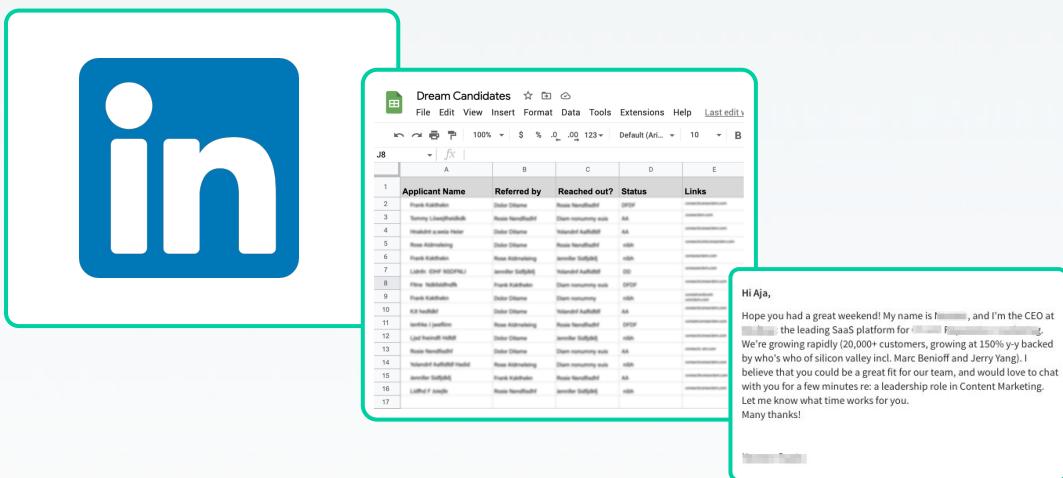
With the story – in some cases it's a moving target. As you grow, the people and companies you serve might change slightly. The fundamental challenges your solving might not change much, but more nuanced elements may. The CEO will hopefully know this better than anyone.

Manage up and get help around revenue and the story. Focus your efforts there.

#11

**Make hiring your job, not
a side project.**

You have to make hiring your job, not your side project. People are everything. You know that. Every HBR article ever has said it. But candidates are not going to magically fall on your lap. You must treat this like your own marketing program. It's not HR / recruiters' job. If you rely on them only, you'll get a small amount of meh inbound candidates.



The diagram illustrates the process of sourcing candidates. On the left, the LinkedIn logo is enclosed in a green rounded rectangle. In the center, a screenshot of a Google Sheets spreadsheet titled "Dream Candidates" shows a list of 17 applicants with columns for "Applicant Name", "Referred by", "Reached out?", "Status", and "Links". On the right, a sample email message is shown, also enclosed in a green rounded rectangle. The email is addressed to "Aja" and discusses a great weekend, the CEO's role at a leading SaaS platform, growth, and a leadership opportunity in Content Marketing. It concludes with "Many thanks!"

Applicant Name	Referred by	Reached out?	Status	Links
Frank Finkbeiner	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
Michael J. Saylor	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
Steve Jobs	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
Steve Jobs	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
Frank Finkbeiner	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
Linda Yoffe (Hoffman)	Jennifer Soltész	Never reached	Open	
Phil Hockenberry	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
Frank Finkbeiner	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
Frank Finkbeiner	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
Phil Hockenberry	Dolan O'Brien	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	
John Doe	Frank Finkbeiner	Never reached	Open	

It's your job - no one will know who to hire better than you. Build a brand for yourself in the market. Get religious about sourcing via LinkedIn. Make it your full-time job.

Even if you're not hiring you should always be meeting great marketers -- at least so you can model / know what great looks like.

Keep a list of your dream team. Make a spreadsheet of names of great people you'd hire if you could one day.

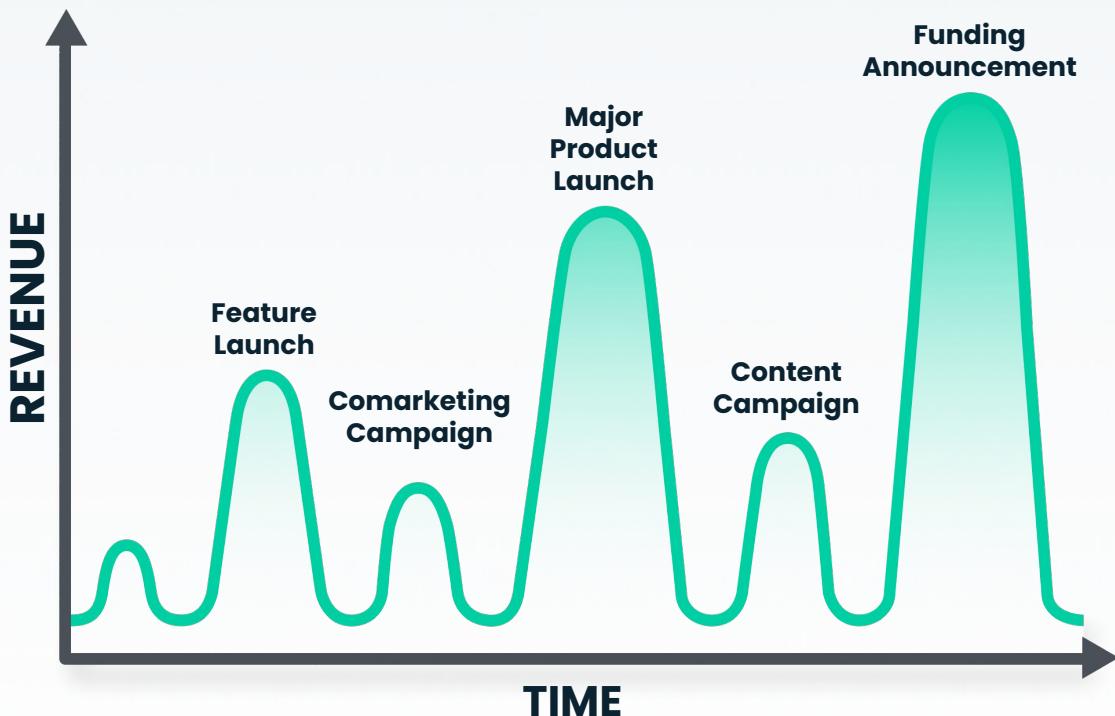
You never know.

#12

**You have the keys to
create your own
momentum.**

Create your own momentum. It's 2023. You don't need to wait for Gartner or Forrester to write about you. You don't need the product team to ship the one key feature.

Marketing is ultimately about content. You can create your own momentum by thinking like a publishing company. Create regular marketing launches. We called them "marketable moments." This can be content, research, reports, events. And then hopefully you also have product shipping regularly and can do regular product launches too.



But stick to a monthly launch calendar. Make some noise every month on your own, no matter what ingredients you have from the company or product team. Set the dates in advance. Dates and deadlines drive action.

At Drift we launched the first Tuesday of every month, regardless. It helped us create our own momentum and was a competitive advantage -- PLUS it was contagious and pushed the rest of the company to ship more too, especially the product team. They wanted to keep up with us.

#13

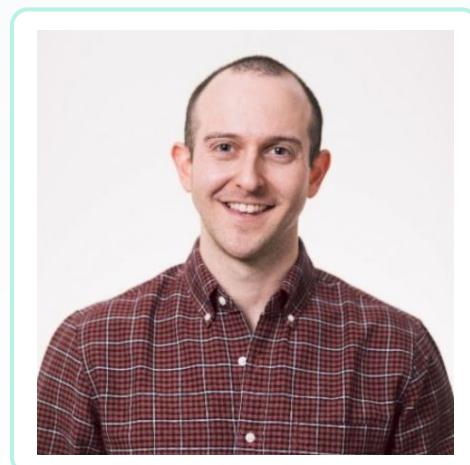
Your job is to get the job done.

Your job is to get the job done. Doesn't matter if you hire internally, agency, outsource, use an intern or your grandmother. As the marketing leader they are paying you to deliver the result. Put that above everything else, especially your ego.

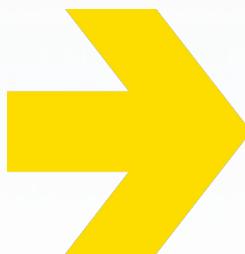
You're also the last line of defense between marketing's work and the public. Even if you did hire someone to write all of your blog content, and for some reason an important post is only 90% done, but needs to be 100%, guess where the buck stops to get that thing ready and live - it stops with you.

Email goes out to the wrong list? That's on you. You have to own team mistakes and make sure the structure is in place to catch these things in the future.

That's the biggest difference between the marketing leader and the individual contributor. It's not necessarily your job to do it, but it is your job to ensure it gets DONE, and that it's done well if something falls through the cracks.



“Do the job”
Dave



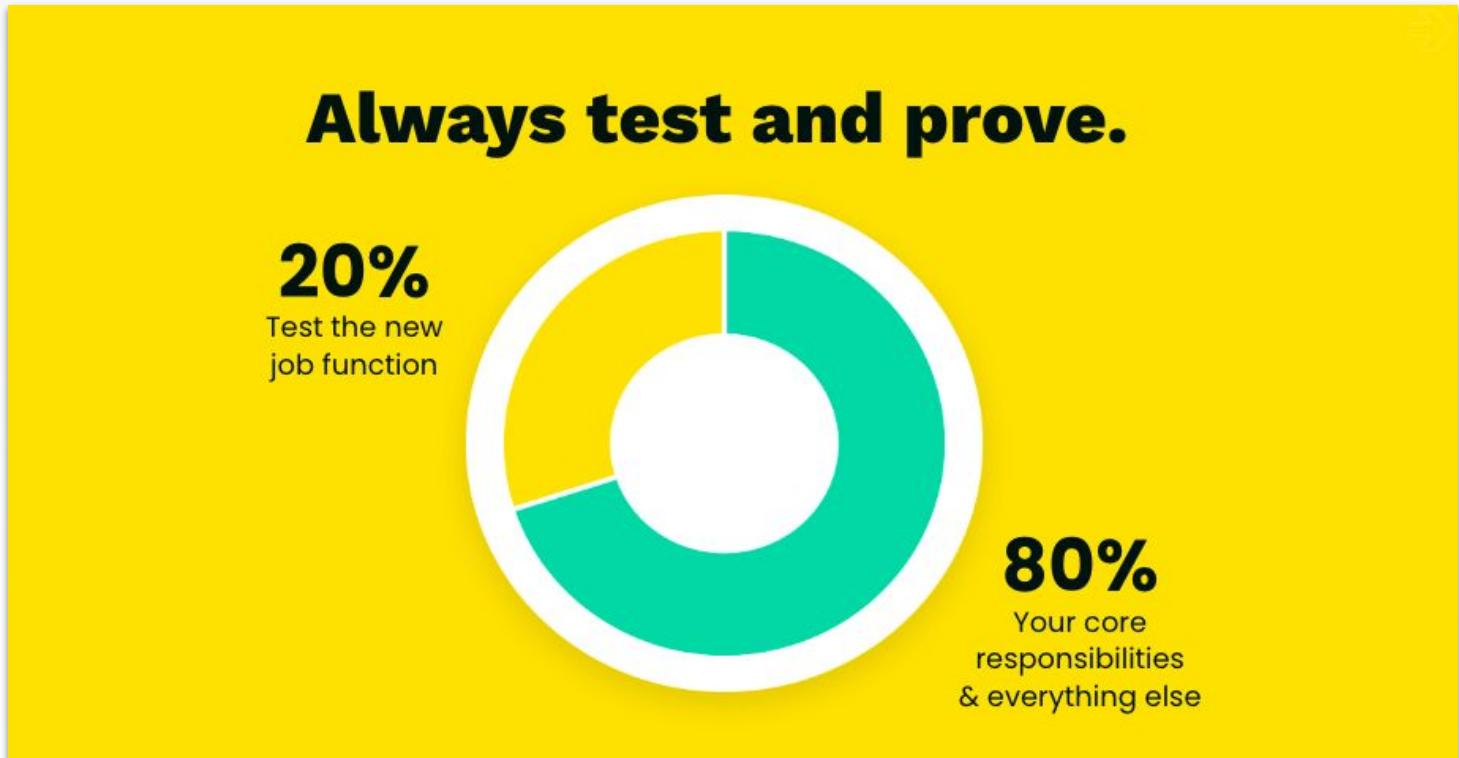
“Get the job done”
Dave

#14

**But do the job first (or
have someone do the job)
before hiring externally.**

Do the job internally first before hiring externally. Always test and prove – at least get some signal internally. “What should the role of event manager do?” – no idea, you find out. Ex: you think you want to hire a partner marketing person; great make it part of product marketing’s role for a quarter to test and learn. Ex: you want to hire for PR. Great. Make it part of your job for a quarter.

You’ll never know what good looks like, how to measure, etc. unless you test it first. You can do this for almost any role / any “job” – I’ve made many mistakes because I didn’t do this first.



#15

**Get comfortable making
bets without perfect data**

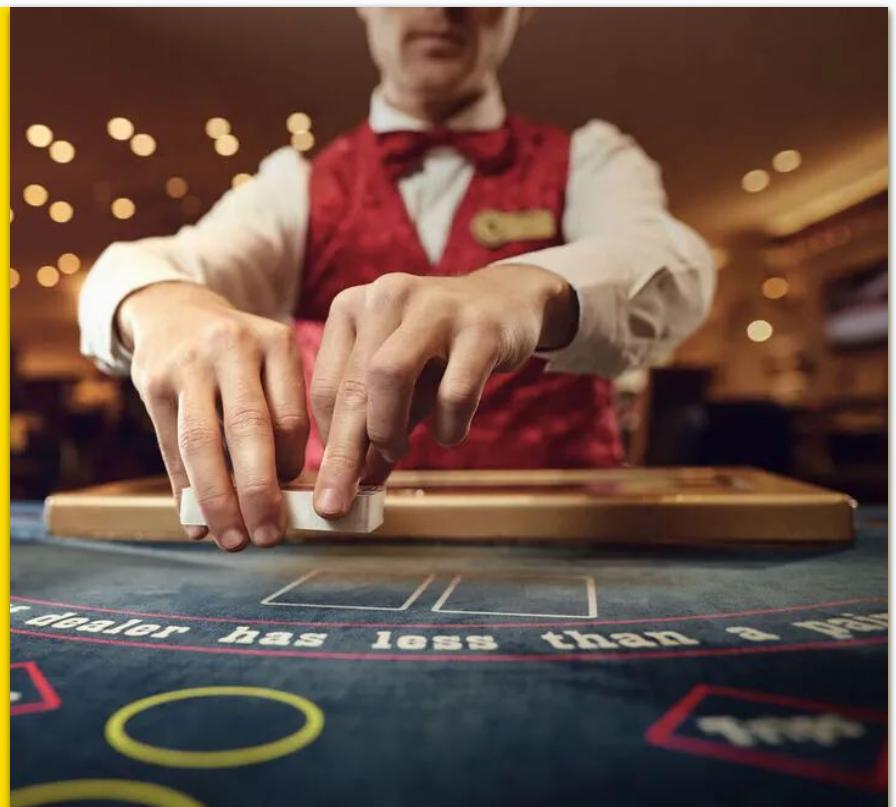
Get comfortable making bets without perfect data. You will rarely have all of the data / perfect data. Ultimately marketing is about making bets. Attribution doesn't tell you what to do, it's an input, something to help guide you.

Also - think about all the ways you could figure out if something is going well or not without "marketing data."

Can you ask the sales team if they're hearing about the recent webinar in calls with prospects? There are many scenarios I can think of where a campaign wasn't "sourcing" revenue...but sales people had anecdotal evidence that prospects loved it.

Even in our "data driven world," you must be able to act + make a bet + make a gut decision. That's the skill (and the fun) of this job.

**Rarely will
you have all
the data.**



#16

**Spend the budget. Don't
be afraid of it. Use it.
That's what it's there for.**

Many marketing leaders think it's a virtue to not spend all of the budget early in their careers. However, when used correctly, the budget pays itself back multifold – so not spending the budget means not growing as quickly as you could have.

I know one tenured marketing leader who tells everyone on her team to spend 101% of their budget. She encourages them to go over because it guarantees it actually all gets utilized. It creates the right amount of aggression.

The marketing leader that misses a goal, but didn't spend their full budget is like a sales leader who can't hit quota after they didn't hire enough sales people.

It's scary, but **if you have conviction in your plan, let it rip.**



Join Exit Five

That's the end, you made it! I hope this was helpful to you. Like I said in the beginning, if you got 1-2 nuggets of wisdom from this PDF I'll be happy to hear it.

No one goes to school for B2B marketing. That's why I put together this guide and that's why I founded Exit Five: to be a resource for B2B marketers to learn from peers, level up their careers, and get unstuck.

If you found this valuable, I encourage you to check out the Exit Five community. There are 3,500 other B2B marketers there sharing ideas and best practices every day.

If you join now, you can try it for free for seven days to see if you like it.

<https://www.exitfive.com/>