MARKETING

FIELD GUIDE

HOW GREAT PRODUCTS BECOME GREAT COMPANIES

A practical guide to customer value, positioning, commercialization, growth, and the decisions that compound.

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UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

CHAPTER 01

WHY GREAT PRODUCTS FAIL

> *"The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool."*

– Richard Feynman

Why some companies succeed brilliantly while others fail has always fascinated me. History is full of technically brilliant products that ultimately disappeared – Netscape, Segway, TiVo, Vine, Flip cameras – while seemingly inferior products (I'm looking at you, healthcare EHRs) went on to dominate their markets. In other cases, pioneers created the model only to watch a nimble fast-follower get scrappy and tilt the market in its favor. The outcome is rarely random, and that's the fascinating part. By good luck or misfortune, I've had a front-row seat to both sides of the equation.

When I joined Salesforce in 2008, the company had fewer than 2,000 employees worldwide. By the time I left, its ranks had swelled to more than 14,000. I arrived shortly after riding shotgun on one of the more spectacular startup failures in U.S. history: Amp'd Mobile, a company that burned through roughly $420 million in venture funding before landing in a pile of ash on the steps of a Delaware bankruptcy court. The remarkable part is that Amp'd was staffed and led by many extremely bright, capable people. Intelligence was never the problem. A handful of consequential missteps was enough to derail the business.

Then came Salesforce, where I got a firsthand glimpse of hyperscaling: how a well-timed value proposition (cloud), exceptional leadership, disciplined execution, and a powerful flywheel could propel a startup from four founders in an apartment to a global technology company. My head was spinning. I could not have engineered a more useful study in contrasts.

SUCCESS VS. FAILURE

For every startup that endures long enough to become a technology behemoth, hundreds more quietly disappear into the trash compactor of business history. Sometimes execution is the culprit. But often the deeper problem is more fundamental: the problem being solved and the solution being delivered never aligned strongly enough to create durable customer value. Founders can point to a thousand downstream reasons for lost traction, but many failures begin much farther upstream.

POINTS OF FAILURE

Products can fail for a thousand reasons, but there are few things in business more heartbreaking than building a seemingly great product that tanks because the timing was off (right product, wrong time), the complexity of production proved too great, or the demand was simply not at a scale that could support the effort needed to grow meaningful revenue. Too often, the offering:

1) Solved a problem that wasn't a real problem (or at least not that anyone would pay for)

2) Solved a temporary problem and the market moved before they could iterate

3) Solved a long-term problem, was a terrific product, but got derailed by a production issues, mismanagement, or simply unfortunate market timing

With the rise of big tech, another increasingly common story is the encroachment into a market segment by a large player that is so ubiquitous and well-resourced that no startup can truly compete at scale. This highlights the importance of pursuing a blue ocean strategy, which we'll talk about a bit later.

FIELD NOTE

In the early 2020s, I dipped my toe into the crypto world by going to work for a blockchain company. One thing to note about the people in this space – they are passionate, undeterred believers in the technology. Coming from the land of SaaS and armed with a lived understanding that a product must deliver high value to land a customer, I viewed the blockchain space with 75% skepticism and 25% optimism. I had hoped I could identify an undiscovered use case that would lead to the great unlock for blockchain at the enterprise level. Sadly, that day never came.

After countless hours of research, internal meetings, and no less than one hundred and fifty briefings with Gartner's top analysts, both for blockchain and vertical segments, the use cases we came up with could never surpass the costs and ease of using classical computing to complete the same tasks. While a few very narrow pockets of success have emerged, blockchain on the whole proved itself to be a solution in search of a problem.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Product failure often begins upstream, long before execution visibly breaks down.
- A technically impressive solution cannot compensate for a weak or insufficiently valuable problem.
- Timing, capital, management, and competition matter, but durable customer value is the foundation.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- ? What evidence tells us the problem we solve is painful enough that customers will pay to fix it?
- ? Are there competing solutions attempting to solve this challenge? What's stopping them from dominating the space?
- ? Which of our current challenges are symptoms and which may point to a more fundamental problem/solution-fit issue?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

IF YOUR PRODUCT DISAPPEARED TOMORROW, WHAT WOULD YOUR CUSTOMERS TRULY MISS?

NEXT CHAPTER

Customers do not buy technology for its own sake. They buy progress, and that changes how we should think about the product itself.

CHAPTER 02

TECHNOLOGY ISN'T THE PRODUCT

> *"Fall in love with the problem, not your solution."*

– Marty Cagan

When you invest so much time, energy, effort, and sacrifice building your v1, it's easy to get lost in the product and to forget that the "product" is simply a means to an end. As Tony Ulwick, founder and creator of the Jobs to be Done theory often says, "People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole!"

Falling in love with your product can create dangerous blind spots that can lead to disaster. It's very easy to believe too greatly in the superiority of your product and then be mystified when an "inferior" competitor you abruptly dismissed surges past you with a new capability that quickly starts capturing market share. Famed Intel CEO Andy Grove said it best, "Only the paranoid survive", and he was right.

It seems paradoxical, but there's something strangely healthy about treating product decisions as if your life – or more clearly, the life of your entire company – depends on it. Never getting comfortable, viewing your product with a critical eye, and heeding the feedback from your most unhappy customers keeps companies on the edge where innovations are most apt to occur. Most importantly, keeping the outcome – what you're really solving for – ever present is the key to staying out of the comfort trap.

FIELD NOTE

Just because AI can help you build a great-looking app in minutes doesn't absolve you of the responsibility of solving a real problem. That burden still belongs to us humans. AI platforms can be remarkably powerful collaborators, but the enduring work of observing a problem, validating its importance, designing a viable solution, and bringing it to market still demands rigor. After all, customers don't buy products. They buy outcomes.

Typically, the product vs. problem shows up in one of two ways:

1) A founder's firsthand experience leads them to build a solution without deeper exploration into exactly what the problem is, what solution would solve this problem in the most efficient and economical way, how widespread the problem actually is, how the problem is being addressed today, and whether he or she is has the experience and drive to persevere when times get tough (and they will get tough).

2) After a product has been in market for some time, it may be iterated upon but with no meaningful differentiations that would help buyers make an educated choice when compared against competing products, at which point price becomes the differentiator, placing you in the death spiral of a race to the bottom.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Technology is an enabler; the customer's desired outcome is the product's reason for existing.
- Founder conviction is valuable only when it is paired with rigorous market validation.
- When meaningful differentiation disappears, price often becomes the default battleground.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? What job is the customer hiring our product to do?

? What evidence would cause us to change or abandon our current solution?

? Are we differentiating around an outcome customers value, or around features we happen to be proud of?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

ARE YOU BUILDING A PRODUCT — OR SIMPLY A MORE SOPHISTICATED WAY TO DELIVER A FEATURE?

NEXT CHAPTER

Once the outcome is clear, the next challenge is giving customers a compelling way to understand why your approach matters.

COMPANIES DON'T COMPETE. NARRATIVES DO.

> *"Facts lead to conclusions, but emotions lead to action."*

– Kevin Roberts, former CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi

At some point in their careers, most marketers fall into the trap of leading with features. I've done it, too. New features are exciting – especially when a competitor doesn't have them yet – but what excites the team that built a product is not necessarily what moves the person buying it. Features provide evidence; meaning creates momentum. That is why storytelling matters: it connects what a product does to why a customer should care.

According to storytelling legend Matthew Dicks, every great story has four components: Stakes, suspense, surprise, and humor. As he astutely notes throughout his work, "If you don't give a clear reason why your audience *should* pay attention to you, you can easily *lose* their attention." This applies as much to your product pitch as it does to a personal story you share with a friend because the best stories *are* personal. But drawing a compelling narrative around a tech product that "cleans up your hard drive" or a new lubricant for steel bearings can be a tall order. The key is to find the human story behind the product, to artfully use metaphors to illustrate the difference between what you're technically selling, and what you're *really* selling. That's a distinction that too few companies convey or at least convey well.

This is where the investment you make in positioning can pay dividends. The clarity that results from your positioning exercises will reveal the stories behind your products, including how the outcomes help make people's lives better or their work easier. Origin stories of product are often extremely compelling. Guy Raz created a wildly successful podcast – How I Built This – by having founders of popular, successful brands walk listeners through how they started their companies. So many of these stories are utterly riveting and personal. There's always a compelling human story if you choose to look deep enough.

FIELD NOTE

Many of you may already be familiar with this exercise, but if not, it's called the Five Why's. The premise is that if you keep asking why something is important, by the fifth 'why', you'll arrive at the heart of why something exists. Often, you can get there in about three why's. This nearly always leads back to how the product improves or is designed to improve the lives of your buyer or consumer, so as part of your storytelling exploration, consider using the Five Why's if you find you get stuck.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Features explain what a product does; narratives help people understand why it matters.
- The most effective product stories connect technical capability to human stakes.
- A clear narrative does not replace a great product – it helps the market recognize one.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? What are we really selling beyond the feature set?

? What human stakes sit behind the problem our product solves?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

COULD A PROSPECT RETELL OUR STORY ACCURATELY AFTER HEARING IT ONCE?

NEXT CHAPTER

A credible narrative cannot be invented in a conference room. To know what matters, you have to start with the customer.

"

FINDING WHAT MATTERS

START WITH THE CUSTOMER, NOT THE PRODUCT

> *"Your opinion, while interesting, is completely irrelevant."*

– Pragmatic Marketing

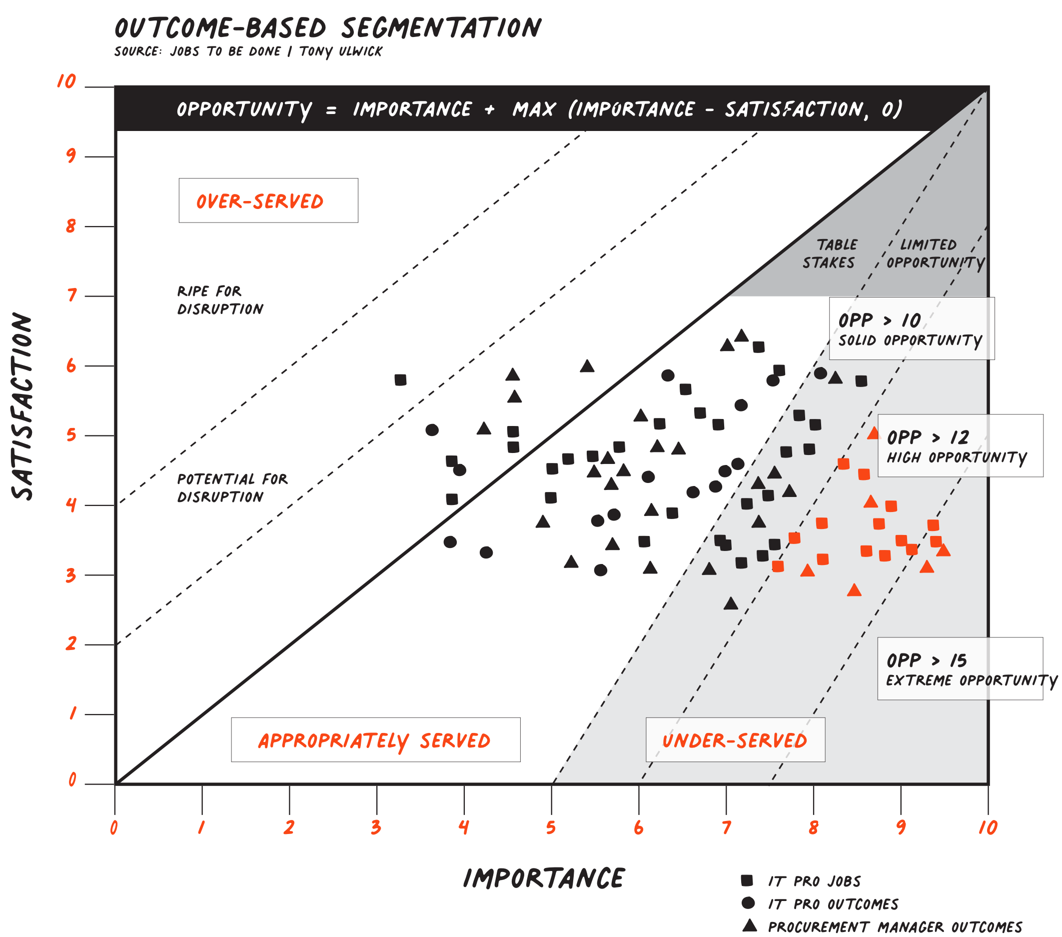
As humans, we are highly biased. The antidote to product bias is remarkably simple: stop guessing and talk to the people who are most likely to need what you're building. Pay attention to what they say – and just as importantly, what they don't. Those conversations can confirm or refute your assumptions, sharpen the problem, and guide a go/no-go decision. Modifying or even scrapping an idea at this stage is cheap. Skipping this work can become very, very expensive later.

People with a shared need or interest tend to congregate in the same places – Reddit boards, on social media, in trade associations, at industry events, and other such watering holes. A well-crafted survey and a series of a dozen or 20-minute conversations can quickly validate or invalidate your thesis while providing invaluable insights as to what's missing in the market. Often, this feedback will uncover an even larger opportunity that might not have been on your radar. Behavioral clues, such as how animated a person becomes when describing the challenge you're exploring are pure gold and can inform a nascent product roadmap or reinvigorate one that has grown lazy or stale.

A final note – treat audience identification as seriously as your product thesis. Without hard customer evidence, your biases can easily sway you towards testing with potential buyer types that are not actually your *best* buyer types, or at least not your biggest, most monetizable ones. Established products have a slight advantage here, but even knowing who your best buyer segments are doesn't mean their needs haven't evolved past where your product is today.

FIELD NOTE

In his well-known book Jobs to Be Done, Tony Ulwick walks us through his own product failure at IBM that led him to formulate the Jobs to Be Done framework. In his book, Ulwick points to numerous examples where companies conduct qualitative and quantitative research to uncover significant unmet needs in a market. Interestingly, the more crowded or mature the market, the more companies seem to copy one another, leading to commoditization and the dreaded 'race to the bottom'. Ulwick frames the products using a simple but effective matrix:



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Customer research is the cheapest place to discover that an assumption is wrong.
- What customers do not say can be as revealing as what they do say.
- Audience selection deserves the same rigor as the product thesis itself.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? Which assumptions about our customer are supported by evidence – and which are merely inherited beliefs?

? Where do our highest-value customers naturally gather, and are we listening there?

? What unmet need keeps surfacing that we have not yet acted on?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

WHAT ASSUMPTION ABOUT YOUR MARKET HAVE YOU STOPPED QUESTIONING?

NEXT CHAPTER

Customer insight creates possibilities. Positioning is the discipline of choosing which possibility you want to own.

CHAPTER 05

POSITIONING IS A STRATEGIC DECISION

> *"Positioning is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect."*

– Al Ries and Jack Trout

Mention the term 'positioning' in a meeting and you'll immediately get a lot of nods. Ask each person around the table to state what positioning means and you'll get a lot of squirming. It's a term that smart colleagues *think* they know but when asked will struggle to articulate. Fortunately, there's April Dunford. April is one of tech marketing's foremost experts on positioning, and she clears things up with this simple description: Positioning is the act of deliberately defining why you are the best at delivering a product or service that a particular audience cares a lot about.

Why does positioning matter so much? Alignment. Does the product your company offers align with the needs of your buyer? Positioning is the forcing function that will help answer this question.

Peek under the hood of any successful company and you'll find that employees on up through managers and across departments can all clearly state what they sell and why it matters so much to the people they sell to. Companies that struggle often do so because they haven't aligned on a consistent narrative. Message consistency and repetition are what build brand equity within your customer base. A great way to test this alignment is by listening to the way your Sales teams pitch the product – the more consistent, the better.

It's important to note that effective positioning doesn't happen on its own. It's deliberate and it has a shelf life. Revisiting your positioning statement every second year is a good practice. Expect to do a mild to serious refresh every 3-5 years, depending on your industry. As you review your positioning, it never hurts to perform a similar examination on your buying audience. Business moves faster than most of us can keep up, and your primary buyer last year might be eclipsed by a completely new buyer. In 2015, Nvidia's primary buying audience was PC PC Gaming hardware manufacturers. By 2023, it was cloud computing companies and massive tech platforms starting the new gold rush for advanced chips capable of handling AI computing capacity. Imagine if Nvidia had ignored the wave of AI chip buyers and stuck with their audience and continued building chips for their gaming component customers.

FIELD NOTE

I won't pretend to describe the positioning exercise here (besides, April does a brilliant job laying it out in her book *Obviously Awesome*), but I would be remiss if I didn't mention the role that competitive framing plays in the positioning process. Knowing which parts of a market that your competitors' own is key to creating the meaningful differentiation you'll need to effectively compete. Once you have a solid v1 of your positioning statement, one litmus test I like to use is this – take the positioning statements of your top five competitors, remove their names and mix yours in with theirs. Then ask your executive team to pick out which one belongs to your company. If your executive team can't identify your positioning statement, your customers certainly won't be able to, in which case, it's back to the drawing board. And if you simply cannot find a significant differentiator, then you have a product problem. That's a much bigger issue, which brings us to the next section.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Positioning is a strategic choice about where you can be meaningfully different for a specific audience.
- Strong positioning aligns the company internally before it communicates anything externally.
- If your differentiation is indistinguishable from competitors, you may have a product problem – not a messaging problem.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? Can employees across Product, Sales, and Marketing explain our value in roughly the same way?

? Which competitive alternative are customers truly comparing us against?

? What do we uniquely deliver that our best customers care deeply about?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

IF YOU REMOVED YOUR LOGO FROM YOUR POSITIONING STATEMENT, WOULD YOUR OWN EXECUTIVE TEAM KNOW IT WAS YOURS?

NEXT CHAPTER

Positioning earns attention. Enduring companies go further: they build products and experiences customers actively want to champion.

BUILD PRODUCTS PEOPLE WANT TO CHAMPION

The true test of a brand is when ownership moves from the walls of the marketing department to become engrained in the hands and hearts of the people who use and rely on your products. I feel this way about Costco. Weirdly, I really wouldn't want to imagine my life without that giant warehouse full of goodness. I think that's why Costco enjoys some of the lowest rates of shoplifting in the industry – no one would dare risk getting booted for life over a jar of almond butter.

When a product becomes a small (or large) part of a consumer's identity, you've got the makings of an enduring company. The question is, can you engineer that type of brand loyalty or is it purely alchemy: good timing, circumstances, a charismatic leader, and abnormally effective execution? Sure, luck and timing matter, but evidence suggests that brand success can indeed be engineered, but only when the outreach and product experience feel like a a natural extension of the brand.

Buyers are smart and they can quickly differentiate cheap marketing ploys from efforts that align with the DNA of the brand. Patagonia does this well. I did a double take recently when I noticed that Patagonia got into the food business, but because I have been wearing their clothing products for decades, I immediately knew that their food products would be sourced sustainably, the packaging would be as recyclable as possible, and the workers would be treated with dignity and fair wages. Branching into food items seemed like a natural extension of their brand.

Contrast that with the countless celebrity-backed products that fizzle. A small number of fans might try a product after the initial glow-up, but their loyalty – which was built over months or years – is to the celebrity, not the product, so when the celebrity's interest fades, so does fan interest in the product. That is not to say that a good celebrity endorsement can't move mountains when the alignment is thoughtfully considered and the necessary groundwork laid. Nike did this to great effect, but Nike existed long before the Air Jordan came out.

ESTABLISHING THE EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

If emotions are the key ingredient to lasting brand loyalty, how do brands build an emotional connection with their base? It starts with a deep understanding of the audience you're serving or setting out to serve and the motivations that are driving them to use your product. What opportunities are there within the product experience to establish an emotional connection that competing brands may have overlooked? Can your product help the buyer look like a rockstar at work? Or make parents look like heroes to their kids? One easy way is by mapping the buyer's journey and identifying every conceivable touch point along the way, looking for creative ways that you could surprise and delight a customer.

A few years ago, my wife and I set up an Airbnb in her hometown outside Atlanta. We ordered mattresses from Zinus, a bed-in-a-box company, which came with a set of instructions. At the very top, the instructions read, "Hand this to the responsible one." I immediately smiled. Suddenly, Zinus wasn't just another mattress company, they were a *clever* mattress company with a sense of humor, which I found irresistible and would buy their products again in a heartbeat.

I can share another personal example of a brand that knocked it out of the park in the most unexpected way. In January of 2025, my wife and I lost our home and nearly all of our belongings in the Pacific Palisades Fire that consumed over 5,500 residential structures. A couple of weeks after the fire, we received a mysterious, large box at the house where we were temporarily staying clear across the country in Atlanta. The box contained nearly $1,000 worth of clothing items gifted to my wife from the brand Frank & Eileen. They simply looked up our Palisades address and did the math. My wife broke down in tears. After enduring such a catastrophic loss, it was amazing to know that a brand she loved so much actually loved her back. The result? A customer for life.

FIELD NOTE

One of the first things I noticed when I joined Salesforce was how fanatical the customers were. To them, Salesforce was more than software – it was a way of life. Remember, these fierce loyalists spent their entire work lives in the Salesforce app, day in, day out. They often knew the features better than the product managers. They knew the bugs, the shortcomings, the workarounds as astutely as a level three support rep, and in spite of its challenges, they kept renewing year after year. They belonged to a community of believers, and the thought of switching to Oracle or Microsoft was akin to blasphemy and could find you excommunicado from Dreamforce with the fear of wandering friendless at the mostly depressing Oracle OpenWorld.

Salesforce wisely took note of this unbridled enthusiasm and turned it up a notch, becoming one of the first enterprise tech companies to turn fervent and fiercely loyal customers into heroes, putting their names and faces directly in the company's marketing. Now, not only could you be part of a tight and ever-expanding community, but now you were famous with signage and billboards and guest speaking roles in breakout sessions. Customers became celebrities within the Salesforce universe which only fed the flywheel for others, who saw this as a fun and aspirational way to cement their personal brand.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Brand loyalty is earned when the product experience consistently reinforces the promise.
- Emotional connection often comes from small, authentic moments – not expensive campaigns.
- The strongest brands turn customers from buyers into participants, advocates, and sometimes even heroes.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? Where in the customer journey could we create a moment people would genuinely tell someone else about?

? What does using our product allow the customer to feel, signal, or become?

? Which brand behaviors would feel authentic for us – and which would feel like a marketing stunt?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

WHERE COULD YOUR COMPANY MAKE A CUSTOMER FEEL SEEN RATHER THAN MERELY SERVED?

NEXT CHAPTER

Loyalty may feel emotional, but creating it consistently requires something very practical: an organization designed around the entire customer lifecycle.

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TURNING INNOVATION INTO GROWTH

CHAPTER 07

COMMERCIALIZATION IS AN ORGANIZATIONAL DISCIPLINE

Taking a company from an idea you dreamed up in the shower to full production and profitability is the very essence of commercialization. Unlike, go-to-market, which is a key component of commercialization success, commercialization goes broad to include the complete, end-to-end lifecycle system of turning an idea into a profitable business. Some of the most successful brands today were started by founders who likely had no clue what commercialization was, but who lived it by making exceptional observations of their market, relentlessly seeking problem-solution fit, experimenting with their product in real time, rallying their internal teams to embrace the mission, and applying a never-quit attitude.

It would be easy to conclude that commercialization is the domain of the Marketing team given most customers started as prospects that Marketing reeled in, but once a lead moves into Sales' and beyond, that customer becomes the domain of every department from Account Management and Customer Success to Support to Finance and even the Product team who must take the customer's feedback and make critical product decisions. Each department must develop its own way of adding value through its unique touchpoints to ensure that customer renews their contract, keeps buying your product, or eagerly recommends you to a friend or a former colleague.

If we look at a traditional customer lifecycle, we see a chart that looks something like this:

AWARENESS (MARKETING)

Your product lands on the radar of a prospect through any one of marketing's channels.

Content → eBooks / Blog / videos / webinars	Company website	Events
AEO / GEO / SEO / Organic search	Outbound marketing	Social media
Paid ads / SEM	Partner marketing	PR / Analyst engagement

↓

INTEREST (STILL MARKETING)

Prospects have done their research and begin to engage with you in a serious discussion about buying your product.

SDR / BDR outreach	Content by industry	3rd-party sources (Reddit, G2, etc.)
ABM campaigns	Content by product type	Pre-decision website visits
Product demos	Case studies	Analyst inquiries

↓

DECISION (USUALLY SALES)

This is where the prospect decides whether your product can help them get the job done or if another competitor would be better.

Onsite presentation	Reference calls	Pilot (30/60/90-day)
Custom proposal	Technical buyer's guides	Implementation guides
Custom ROI report	Comparison checklists	Implementation plans

↓

IMPLEMENTATION (IMPLEMENTATION TEAM)

Your customer just handed you a sizable check and committed to your service for an uncomfortably long time, so nailing the implementation is key. How it begins is how it ends, so no matter what, don't screw this phase up.

Kickoff call / Goals review	Custom workflow design	CSM introduction
Implementation timeline	End-user onboarding	Baseline metrics
Integrations scoping	Onsite visit	User community, guides & resources

↓

SERVICE DELIVERY (PRODUCT)

No other stage in the journey is more critical than this one. If your product delivers as promised – chef's kiss – you've got a customer for at least a couple of renewal cycles. Stumble here and it's going to be a long, expensive, uncertain 12 months with unpleasant feedback and too many support calls.

Product team	CSM	Customer Support

↓

Relationship Strengthening (Account Management, Customer Success, Sales, Customer Success)

Loyalty is built in this stage through every touchpoint a customer has with your product and your brand. From daily use of your product to the cocktail hour you sponsored, how you make your customer feel will determine whether this is a long and happy marriage or a broken engagement.

Monthly CSM calls	Quarterly account review	In-person meetings at events

[STAT] The probability of selling to an existing customer vs. a new one is 14x higher.

↓

Concern (Product, Account Management, Customer Success, Sales, Customer Success, and sometimes your CEO)

If the customer ain't happy, *you* ain't happy. When things start to go badly due to a poor product experience, or worse, a poor customer experience, it needs to be treated like a five-alarm fire with all-hands-on-deck to turn things around. Fortunately, customer rescue can be one of the most powerful retention tools.

Voice of the Customer list	Loss of champion / management	Reduction in licenses
Low engagement, utilization	Budget tightening	Renegotiation of contract
Non-roadmap feature requests	Vendor consolidation	

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LEAVE (EVERY DEPARTMENT, SADLY.)

Clearly, whatever magic there was at signing wore off and now it's splitsville. Perhaps you did in fact ignore all the signs and screw the pooch or maybe a competitor simply cut their price. Either way, the customer is walking. No matter what, be classy in helping them transition, because that customer might be back in 12 months when the grass proves not so green.

Contract expiration / RFP replacement	Data migration to new solution

↓

RETURN (MARKETING, SALES)

I'm not going to lie – winning back a customer you lost is not easy and it likely won't happen. But, let's not abandon hope. Marketing should still keep outreach flowing to ex-customers – release notes, Newsletter, whatever else – and Sales should send an occasional email just to check in because you never know.

Outbound marketing to champions	1:1 emails from Sales rep

Not every company will have this same customer journey, but most have something similar. The important part is to map out in detail what your customer experience is and to then look for opportunities to surprise and delight at every turn.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Commercialization is broader than go-to-market; it spans the entire journey from idea to profitable, repeatable customer value.
- Every department owns moments that influence retention, expansion, and advocacy.
- Mapping the lifecycle exposes gaps between what a company promises and what customers actually experience.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? Who owns each critical moment in our customer lifecycle?

? Where are handoffs between departments creating friction or ambiguity?

? Which post-sale touchpoints have the greatest effect on renewal, expansion, or advocacy?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION MANAGE THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY – OR MERELY MANAGE ITS OWN DEPARTMENTS?

NEXT CHAPTER

Once ownership is clear across the lifecycle, the next task is building the go-to-market engine that turns strategy into coordinated execution.

CHAPTER 08

BUILDING THE GO-TO-MARKET ENGINE

For go-to-market (GTM), one mistake organizations make is jumping in without fully defining what's important about their product and who might actually care well in advance of any creative or content work starting. When you see well-executed, high-performing GTM, it is almost always because the Product Marketing team did the proper foundational work needed to make a campaign successful.

What does that success look like? It starts with the positioning work we covered earlier. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how important positioning is to your GTM efforts. DO NOT SKIP THIS STEP. Positioning work is slog, but the guardrails that result from investing time and thoughtful effort will ensure your message to the market is clear, differentiated, and instantly gettable.

MESSAGING

With your positioning firmly in place, it's time to move on to one of my favorite parts of marketing: messaging. Messaging work is 90% agony and 10% unadulterated bliss when you finally nail it. There's an inverse relationship at play – the better your product, the easier the messaging exercise becomes. Message development gets difficult when:

- You haven't fully defined your personas.
- Your product looks like everyone else's.
- You haven't established the tone of voice for your brand.

After bumbling my way through a few messaging exercises early in my career, an agency we had retained provided a basic framework that proved immeasurably helpful, which I have modified over the years, so it provides a complete encapsulation on a single page with one matrix per product. This is especially helpful if you have a suite of offerings as it helps everyone in the company understand how your products will show up in the market.

FULL SPECTRUM MESSAGING

COMPANY BRAND	NORTHSTAR SOFTWARE					
COMPANY POSITIONING (STRATEGIC INTENT)	NORTHSTAR SOFTWARE HELPS GROWING COMPANIES SIMPLIFY COMPLEX WORK WITH A FLEXIBLE WORKFLOW AUTOMATION PLATFORM THAT CONNECTS TEAMS, DATA, AND EVERYDAY BUSINESS TOOLS. BUILT FOR ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE OUTGROWN SPREADSHEETS AND DISCONNECTED POINT SOLUTIONS, NORTHSTAR GIVES OPERATIONS TEAMS ONE PLACE TO DESIGN WORKFLOWS, AUTOMATE REPETITIVE TASKS, AND SEE WORK IN REAL TIME—WITHOUT REQUIRING A LARGE IT TEAM.					
OFFERINGS	WORKFLOW AUTOMATION		IMPLEMENTATION SERVICES		PRODUCT / TECHNOLOGY	
			ADVISORY	OPTIMIZATION		
DIFFERENTIATORS	FAST TIME TO VALUE WITH LOW-CODE SETUP	PREBUILT TEMPLATES 50+ COMMON INTEGRATIONS FLEXIBLE PERMISSIONS	FLEXIBLE ONBOARDING BASED ON TEAM SIZE AND COMPLEXITY	IMPLEMENTATION SPECIALISTS AND SOLUTION CONSULTANTS	UNIFIED WORKFLOW AUTOMATION AND OPERATIONS PLATFORM	RULES + AI ASSIST SURFACE BOTTLENECKS AND RECOMMEND NEXT ACTIONS
	BUILT FOR MID-MARKET COMPLEXITY WITHOUT ENTERPRISE OVERHEAD	CONFIGURABLE BY BUSINESS TEAMS WITH IT GOVERNANCE	PRACTICAL ONBOARDING FOCUSED ON MEASURABLE FIRST WINS	CERTIFIED PARTNER NETWORK FOR SPECIALIZED INTEGRATIONS	VISUAL WORKFLOW BUILDER SIMPLIFIES PROCESS DESIGN	SELF-SERVICE TEMPLATES FOR FAST STARTS
CAPABILITIES	WORKFLOW DESIGN, TASK ROUTING, APPROVALS, NOTIFICATIONS		WORKFLOW MAPPING, CONFIGURATION, DATA MIGRATION		AUTOMATION, REPORTING, INSIGHTS	
PRODUCTS / TECH	NORTHSTAR FLOW		NORTHSTAR LAUNCH		NORTHSTAR FLOW, NORTHSTAR INSIGHTS, INTEGRATION HUB	
VALUE PROPOSITION	GROWING COMPANIES MAKE BETTER DECISIONS AND MOVE FASTER WHEN TEAMS CAN AUTOMATE ROUTINE WORK, CONNECT CRITICAL INFORMATION, AND SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING ACROSS THE BUSINESS IN ONE SIMPLE PLATFORM.					

☆ ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE BASED ON FRAMEWORKS I'VE DEVELOPED FOR ENTERPRISE CLIENTS. COMPANY AND CONTENT ARE FICTIONALIZED.

SEGMENT MESSAGING: TECHNOLOGY

TECHNOLOGY

NORTHSTAR SOFTWARE

SEGMENT POSITIONING

NORTHSTAR SOFTWARE HELPS MID-SIZED TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES REPLACE FRAGMENTED MANUAL PROCESSES WITH CONNECTED, AUTOMATED WORKFLOWS. THE PLATFORM GIVES OPERATIONS AND IT TEAMS THE FLEXIBILITY TO STANDARDIZE CRITICAL PROCESSES, INTEGRATE EXISTING TOOLS, AND IMPROVE VISIBILITY AS THE BUSINESS SCALES—WITHOUT THE COST AND COMPLEXITY OF A HEAVYWEIGHT ENTERPRISE PLATFORM.

DIFFERENTIATORS

- BUILT FOR DISTRIBUTED GROWTH TEAMS
- SCALES BEYOND SPREADSHEETS AND MANUAL WORK
- LOWER COST THAN MULTIPLE POINT SOLUTIONS
- FLEXIBLE AUTOMATION + AI-ASSISTED INSIGHTS
- ONE PLATFORM → FASTER DEPLOYMENT, FEWER HANDOFFS
- LOW-CODE ADMIN → SPEED, CONTROL, ADAPTABILITY

BUYER TYPES

IT-LED BUYERS

MESSAGES

- STANDARDIZE RECURRING WORK WITHOUT SLOWING TEAMS
- REAL-TIME VISIBILITY INTO WORK AND BOTTLENECKS
- ONE PLATFORM → FEWER HANDOFFS, CLEARER OWNERSHIP
- CONNECT WORKFLOWS ACROSS TEAMS AND SYSTEMS
- IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT WHEN RESOURCES ARE LIMITED
- USE AI INSIGHTS TO FIND DELAYS AND REPETITIVE WORK

OPERATIONS-LED BUYERS

MESSAGES

- REDUCE MANUAL COORDINATION
- WORKS WITH TOOLS TEAMS ALREADY USE
- PARTNER ECOSYSTEM EXTENDS INTEGRATIONS AND DELIVERY
- GOVERNANCE THAT SCALES WITH THE COMPANY
- ONE PLATFORM → SIMPLER, MORE CONSISTENT PROCESSES
- REDUCE SOFTWARE SPRAWL AND MAINTENANCE COST

WHY BUY

- MOVE QUICKLY WITHOUT CREATING OPERATIONAL CHAOS.
- CONNECT PEOPLE, PROCESSES, AND EXISTING TOOLS WHILE AUTOMATING ROUTINE WORK.
- GIVE OPERATIONS SPEED WHILE IT RETAINS GOVERNANCE AND VISIBILITY.
- REDUCE MANUAL WORK, IMPROVE CONSISTENCY, AND SEE HOW WORK MOVES ACROSS THE BUSINESS.

☆ ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE BASED ON FRAMEWORKS I'VE DEVELOPED FOR ENTERPRISE CLIENTS. COMPANY AND CONTENT ARE FICTIONALIZED.

PRICING FOR NEW PRODUCTS

When figuring out how to price your product, the market will give you important guidance, but once again, audience matters. The person buying a Hanes three-pack of white t-shirts is almost certainly not the same person buying a $2,800 cashmere t-shirt from Prada. Both are successful companies. Both sell – at least structurally – the same category of products (t-shirts), but one is selling utility while the other sells exclusivity. Most revenue-generating organizations understand where they land in the market, but if you're thinking of changing your prices within the same brand family, this can have major marketing implications and will inevitably lead you to target a new audience. Buyers of Emporio Armani are not the same buyers as Armani Exchange.

If you've never been through a pricing exercise before, get ready for a firestorm of opinions. When it comes to pricing, execs tend to break into three camps:

CEO: 'We don't charge enough! Our product is better than anything in the market by a mile.'

Sales: 'Our products are too expensive. We're getting killed by [named competitor]!'

Marketing: 'Let's look at what the data supports [shows slide with quantitative, qualitative, and historical research data].'

With pricing, rarely do you land at the perfectly optimized price, but land close and you've done your job. And always, ALWAYS remember to price slightly higher than is comfortable – you can always lower your price, but you can almost never raise your prices without risking a customer revolt (unless there's an inflation or tariff factor).

In some ways, pricing is an exercise in futility as the market will ultimately dictate what you can realistically charge; however, it's also an excellent forcing function for getting honest about how much value your product actually delivers or where your brand may be weak.

PRICE ADJUSTMENTS FOR EXISTING PRODUCTS

If your product suddenly gets a killer feature or a set of features beyond what competitors offer, this is the perfect time to introduce a premium tier rather than raise the price on your loyal customers. Surfacing a second or third pricing option is a good thing as buyers generally prefer more options to fewer, provided your lineup preserves the current price point option. At least in the case of SaaS products, the standard good / better / best model is time-tested, but recently – at least with the AI platforms – the shift to consumption-based pricing seems to be quickly becoming the norm with the leading edge models commanding the highest consumption of tokens and thus generating the highest revenue per compute unit.

As for where to set the new price, this as much art as it is science. We've all heard the stories of founders who were terrified of raising their prices until some type of economic or supply chain shock forced their hand, only to learn that the price increase barely registered with their buyers. How long were they leaving money on the table? Too long, usually, which is why pricing should be continually tested. Entering a new market segment or region can be excellent opportunities to test new pricing as the buying audience doesn't have the historical precedent against which to judge your product.

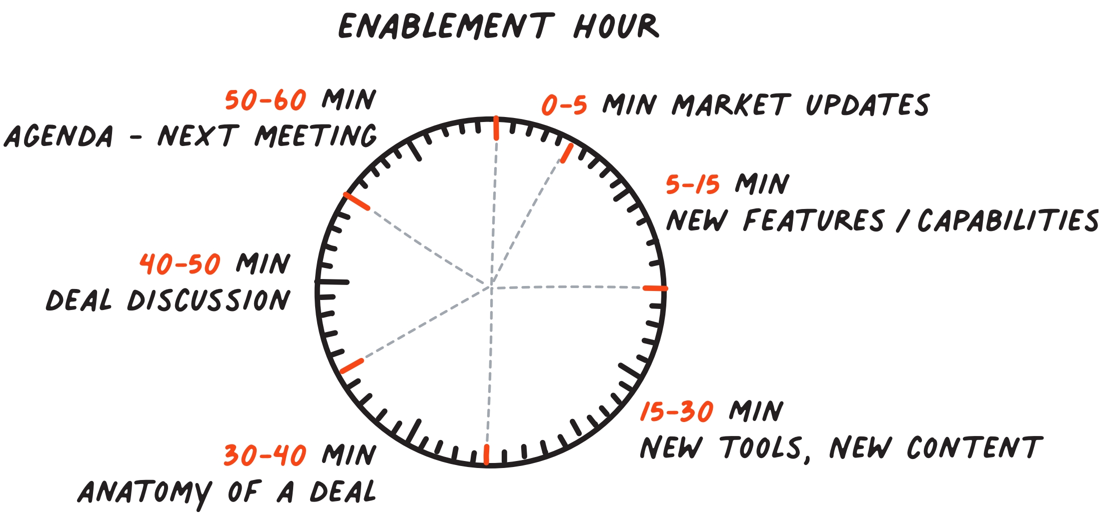
FIELD NOTE

Pro Tip: Enlist the voluntary help of at least one sales rep during every training call. No rep on the planet is going to spend an hour listening intently to someone from Marketing drone on about features – they'll be multi-tasking within the first 30 seconds. But…introduce one of their own and you'll see devices down and eyes up because reps are competitive and always looking for an edge. Hearing how a colleague landed a big deal or navigated a nettlesome customer situation captures reps' attention immediately. Plus, deal wins are always inspiring since they show what's possible.

The big learning here is to keep the curriculum simple and straightforward, but as regionally specific as possible.

ENABLEMENT FOR THE WIN

As products and sales cycles became more complex, the need for an enablement function has only grown. This is especially true if you sell a suite of products as each new product or service compounds the complexity that account executives must master. A general rule of thumb: Enablement manages the logistics while Product Marketing manages what gets presented. Here's how I broke out a typical hour of training:



Enablement becomes most viable after an organization crosses the $10 million revenue mark. Professionally, I've set up two enablement orgs from scratch, and each was notably different. In one instance, the process was straightforward as the company's Sales team was US-based and already had a digital asset management system in place. Worked great. Twice-monthly trainings. High value delivered. Close rates and revenue went up.

The second company had a base of international sellers with no formal digital asset management tool set up. This complicated the enablement rollout as the programming had to coordinate vastly different time zones, various regulatory restrictions, and variations in feature availability by country, not to mention country-specific pricing. We tried establishing regional leaders for EMEA, Asia-Pacific, and both Americas, but ultimately, the training content still felt too high level, and I'm not sure the sellers got as much value from the program as they would have if the training had been more specific to their region.

Note also that the bigger the geography, the bigger the Enablement team you'll likely need. Unfortunately, the second company I helped set up found its Enablement program stretched thin after about 18 months and was unable to deliver a level of specificity that would provide the most benefit to its sales reps.

FIELD NOTE

As launches get close, you'll want to keep the Sales team apprised of product launch details and key dates. Enablement calls are ideal places to communicate these details and you can never start too early. It's a bad look for a sales rep when a customer or prospect mentions a product launch and the rep has no clue what they're talking about. Take care of your Sales team by keeping them in the loop early on.

LAUNCH

Companies most often live or die at the product launch phase. For tech workers, there are few things more professionally satisfying than a successful launch, or better yet, a series of successful launches. A flawless launch is a triumph of strategic planning and tactical execution that builds confidence and brings teams closer together. Personally, I love the launch stage because the stress and long hours build trust among team members and create bonds that very often turn into lifetime friendships.

Conversely, a delayed or poorly executed launch can leave teams deflated and tidying up their LinkedIn profiles. Launches typically get botched in two ways:

1) The Product team missed its ship date and the launch gets pushed. Worse if the date is pushed multiple times.

2) The product is ready to ship, but because of resource constraints, poor planning, or mistimed efforts, Marketing has to scale back its plans to a “soft launch” which all but guarantees a “soft response” from prospects.

Since launches are all about execution, the template below provides a foolproof guide for nailing a comprehensive product launch, and while not all activities are necessary for every launch, seeing the available menu of options can hopefully inspire your next launch or help you think of an activity you might have been overlooking.

1. STRATEGY & PLAN →	2. LAUNCH & ACTIVATE →	3. LEARN & OPTIMIZE
MARKET & COMPETITIVE INSIGHT	PRODUCT READINESS	ADOPTION & ANALYTICS
ICP & BUYER DEFINITION	SALES ENABLEMENT	PIPELINE & FUNNEL
POSITIONING & MESSAGING	CONTENT & WEB	CUSTOMER FEEDBACK
USE CASES & VALUE PROPOSITION	DEMAND GENERATION	WIN / LOSS ANALYSIS
PRICING & PACKAGING	CUSTOMER ONBOARDING	MESSAGING REFINEMENT
GOALS & SUCCESS METRICS	LAUNCH ORCHESTRATION	ROADMAP INPUT

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL THROUGHOUT
PRODUCT + MARKETING + SALES + CUSTOMER SUCCESS + FINANCE + EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

> A LAUNCH ISN'T A MARKETING EVENT. IT'S A COORDINATED COMPANY-WIDE SYSTEM FOR TURNING PRODUCT VALUE INTO CUSTOMER ADOPTION.

DEMAND

Unlike Product teams, which have the mostly singular function of building and shipping product, Marketing has the dual responsibility of not only executing strong, well-coordinated launches, but more importantly, ensuring that launched products gain traction in the market that converts into qualified sales leads. Growth marketers are crucial players in this effort, orchestrating the campaigns and lead nurturing activities that convert prospects at every stage of the marketing funnel.

The fuel of growth marketing is content, which is why it’s great to have a competent content specialist on the team. This role is especially important if you’re leaning on AI to generate your eBooks, landing pages, ad copy, LinkedIn posts, product collateral, and such. In the age of AI slop, the proliferation of poor-quality content disrespects a prospect's time and can tarnish a brand's image. Most damaging, it violates the trust you're building with prospects, causing them to wonder – if the content quality from this company is poor, maybe the product quality is poor, too. A good content manager can serve as both the orchestrator of well-written, well-produced content and the quality control checkpoint that ensures the information you put out into the world delivers rich value to the reader.

Assuming you've got your content function fully locked in, you're ready for the demand engine to crank. This means matching your content to the right funnel stage. Knowing that buyers typically go through three phases – discovery, consideration, and decision – the content delivered at each stage should be tailored to the mindset of the buyer at that particular moment in their buying journey.

CUSTOMER SUCCESS

For any company that relies on recurring revenue and contract renewals, establishing and maintaining a strong Customer Success Management (CSM) function matters by reducing churn. Given that landing a new customer is around 6x higher than keeping an existing one, funding a CSM function makes financial sense once you hit a certain scale. I think of CSM as the thermostat for customer health at the account level. CSM is driven by reporting. Ensuring these teams have accurate and up-to-the-minute account data means getting a clean read when a customer's engagement begins to dip. An attentive CSM will jump into action to figure out what's causing the drop off in use and how to get it back on track.

Very often, these small dips in usage can be leading indicators of a market that is moving away from your core feature set or the encroachment of a competing technology into your space. This is super valuable feedback to pass to the Product and Product Marketing teams as it presents roadmap opportunities that map to where the market is going while providing excellent talking points for Sales that demonstrate that your company is peering ahead to what's on the horizon.

FEEDBACK LOOPS

Good product marketers understand that gathering feedback is a 360° exercise and that valuable insights often come from places you least expect them. Whenever I'm working with a new company, I will try to mine a variety of sources from the C-Suite to frontline support reps. Executive teams see the broader vision of where they want to take the company but are often missing the granularity that can provide vital clues into product opportunities as well as what may be holding the company back.

On the flip side, customer-facing roles might have a myopic view of the business, but they have a front row seat to issues related to product performance, post-sale support, competitive pressures, reasons for churn, and so much more. Sales has an equally if not more valuable role to play in that the stakes are often highest for buyers who are going out on a limb by committing the company's dollars to a very large purchase or an annual or even multi-year contract with a vendor. The truth comes out when a buyer's reputation is on the line.

Departments to tap for insights include:

- C-Suite
- Sales, including:
- Sales leaders
- Account executives
- Inside sales reps
- SDRs/BDRs
- Solution design resources
- Account managers
- Customer Support
- Customer success managers
- Product managers

A couple of final tactics that have become rich sources of feedback include:

DEMOS AT TRADE SHOWS

It's remarkable to me what you learn when demoing a product at a trade show. Prospects and existing customers will open up about concerns, communicate features they'd love to see, tell you what competing products have that you don't, and in some cases, share how grateful they are for your product and how much they love it. There have been times where three days at a large, annual trade show would yield as many findings as the entire year of tapping reps for feedback.

THIRD-PARTY FOLLOW-UP ON LOST DEALS

Employing a third-party consultant to call on prospects that chose a competitor's solution over yours can reveal insights that a prospect would never share to your face. Considerate buyers appreciate the massive time and effort that go into preparing a pitch, so they're reluctant to deliver raw, unfiltered feedback to the sales team that worked so hard but then lost the deal. They will, however, share that information with a third-party, which is what makes this exercise so valuable. The insights gained should go directly to both the Product team to potentially inform their roadmap and to the Sales team for refining their pitch.

There's another aspect that emerged to third-party follow-up, which I could have never anticipated. Some buyers, when called by the consultant, informed the consultant that they simply delayed the buying decision and that the deal was still alive and that the vendor was still in the running. Mind-blowing. When this information was relayed back to the Sales team, they immediately reengaged. This is not a one-off. I've seen it happen many times now. Moral of the story? A deal that's dead may not actually be dead.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- High-performing GTM begins with positioning, not campaigns.
- Messaging, pricing, enablement, launch, demand, Customer Success, and feedback loops operate as one connected system.
- The strongest GTM engines learn continuously: market signals flow back into Product, Marketing, and Sales decisions.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? Which part of our GTM engine is currently limiting the performance of everything downstream?

? Are Sales and Marketing telling the same story to the same audience?

? How quickly does customer and lost-deal feedback make its way back into roadmap and messaging decisions?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

IF DEMAND DOUBLED TOMORROW, WOULD YOUR GO-TO-MARKET SYSTEM SCALE — OR EXPOSE THE CRACKS?

NEXT CHAPTER

AI can dramatically accelerate nearly every part of this engine. The danger is mistaking greater speed for better judgment.

CHAPTER 09

AI CHANGES THE SPEED, NOT THE PRINCIPLES

> *"Imagination is more important than knowledge."*

– Albert Einstein

The pace of change in the tech industry has been accelerating since its inception in the 1950s, but compared to the age of AI, the pace of even recent decades feels laughably quaint. We've all watched with anxiety as AI solves impossible math problems and creeps up the productivity food chain. And while the recent waves of tech layoffs may be more attributable to over-hiring than the knock-on effects of AI, there's an underlying sense that the hand of AI is at work somewhere beneath the surface with most of us gripping nervously with each new model release.

For career professionals, AI is a legitimate threat because it is ruthlessly fast and efficient, particularly for roles that involve any type or programmatic or rote work. A part of me worries about the younger generation whose entry level jobs are being taken over by AI agents – who will these future generations of our workforce learn from? I think of the wonderfully talented and bright people I was able to model after in the early years of my career, and how I wouldn't have had the career I've had without that exposure at an impressionable stage.

On the other side of the equation, AI is a true superpower for startup founders and will usher in a golden age of entrepreneurialism by allowing expensive tasks to be completed by a team of agents, provided the number of agents is kept to a manageable level.

Like many of you, I follow YCombinator closely and their approach to recording everything and putting it into a repository or central YC brain called QuarterMaster that knows everything that's going on inside YC and is smarter than any single individual is incredible. I can't help but think that this is the future of business and that tiny upstarts will soon be competing with behemoth companies through the effective use of agents. Legacy companies will attempt to adopt this model, but inertia is a powerful thing to try and overcome, and it's likely the AI-native companies will only get smarter, faster, and deliver more effective products over time.

MY APPROACH TO AI IN 2026

Like many of you, I think about AI nearly every day – how it impacts my work, how and when to apply it, and its effect on the broader economy. AI fills in the gaps in my knowledge, but it is not a terribly original thinker. This is where you, the human, earn your keep. Never discount what you know or assume the model knows what you know. It doesn't, particularly when it comes to lived experiences.

One exercise I use frequently to ensure I'm seeing a product or service from the human perspective is to put myself in the shoes of my target buyer and ask how using this product makes me feel. What hesitations would I have personally if I were considering this product? Does this product solve the problem I have better than my current way of solving it? Is changing worth it? What will be the social reaction from friends and colleagues if I choose to use this product? Prior to AI taking over our world, these are questions we would normally ask when developing a new offering, but because they're subjective and originated through human experience, ChatGPT or Claude won't likely think to ask such questions.

Of course, once you raise a point or question, models are great at expounding on it, but until then, the topic might remain dormant even if it's an important and relevant topic. I've discovered this exercise leads not only to a richer, more well-rounded body of responses, but it can shift the trajectory of a thread entirely. This accelerated learning is one of my favorite outcomes of using AI tools because I can get up to speed quickly without suffering the embarrassment of asking a question I should most obviously know but don't.

As it applies to marketing, I have always been overly prescriptive when it comes to detailing what I want from my team and from vendors, so AI is tailor-made for people like me. This is obvious, but worth restating, particularly as we get lazier – the better the prompt, the better the output.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Regardless of how you feel about AI, there's no denying that it does magical things, and I have no shame in saying that I love using it, though I feel like a forever novice barely keeping my head above water. But as much as we all have come to rely on AI, we shouldn't discount the fact that human insights, authenticity, and our own innate ingenuity matter greatly and that these tools are here to serve us, not the other way around.

FIELD NOTE

I'm currently working on a series of products and services for people as they age, and many of the prompts and questions I introduce could only have come from my direct experience caring for two treasured loved ones in their final years. Many times, these are practical things that would seem obvious, but AI doesn't know what it's like to be awakened at 2am by a confused parent or the extreme time and effort needed to transport a senior to a doctor's appointment. Only you, the human, can make these experiences part of the conversation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- AI compresses the time required to research, analyze, create, and iterate – but it does not eliminate the need for judgment.
- Lived experience, empathy, taste, and problem selection remain distinctly human sources of advantage.
- AI-native companies may gain structural speed advantages, but speed only compounds value when the underlying direction is sound.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

? Where can AI remove low-value friction without removing human judgment?

? What do we know from lived experience that our models do not?

? Are we using AI to deepen our thinking – or simply to produce more output?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

WHAT BECOMES MORE VALUABLE WHEN EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO THE SAME POWERFUL TOOLS?

NEXT CHAPTER

Tools can accelerate a company. They cannot determine what kind of company it becomes. That is the work of leadership, culture, talent, and trust.

IV

BUILDING GREAT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 10

THE COMPANIES THAT ENDURE

I'm a big fan of business author Jim Collins. In his co-written book Beyond Entrepreneurship – a book Reid Hoffman says he's read six times – Jim presents an extraordinary analysis of what it takes to build the 100-year company. Citing data from companies like IBM and L.L. Bean he notes several key factors that include assembling the right team, leading with purpose, and exercising extreme persistence. His well-researched examples deliver compelling proof that success can be formulaic. Ultimately, great companies endure because advantages compound.

CULTURE

Building a strong company culture doesn't happen by accident. It takes deliberate, daily action and a continual investment in your employees' professional growth and emotional well-being and it starts at the top. I once worked at an early stage tech company that had built a terrific culture, and they did it with small actions – food truck Wednesdays, Monday all-hands, twice-yearly company gatherings, team dinners, costume contests at Halloween, and a shared belief in the mission. Each morning when the COO arrived at the office, he would walk around the various departments and fist bump every employee. This probably took five minutes out of his day, but it made even the most junior staffer feel like they were seen and that their contributions mattered. No ivory towers, just direct human connection that drew employees closer together.

Post-Covid, building a great culture feels significantly harder, even with RTO policies in full effect. Beyond the fragmentation, several factors have dented this effort, including the constant threat of layoffs, geographically dispersed teams, hot-desking, and of course the looming threat of AI. In spite of these headwinds, there's plenty that can be done to build a world-class culture, including:

- Delivering a clear and inspiring mission that each employee can support in their own way
- Drafting a short set of values and living them daily
- Celebrating individuals for their successes and promoting from within whenever possible

- Creating a safe environment in which to attempt ambitious projects
- Minding the little things that make a workplace enjoyable – they matter more than you realize

LEADERSHIP

Say what you want, but leadership really does start at the top. Below is a list of questions that can shine a light on the type of organization you're building or have built, and how you answer the questions below could be shaping your organization. Most leaders would give themselves higher-than-average marks when answering these questions, but the true test of leadership is how your employees would answer the questions about you and how you respond when the feedback isn't so great.

- What behaviors do you tolerate and which do you deem unacceptable?
- Do you respect your employees enough to have difficult conversations?
- Do you respect your employees in general?
- Do you approach difficult decisions with compassion and kindness?
- How comfortable are you receiving and responding to feedback about your own leadership?
- Do certain staff members receive special treatment? Why?
- In one-on-one meetings, are you fully present or are you constantly checking your phone?
- Do your meetings start on time or are you chronically running behind?
- Does your organization engage with the community, or do you only serve yourselves?

How you, as a leader, answer these questions will have a cascading effect all the way down the organization. Ultimately, employees want to know that you care about them and that you value the time, energy, and intelligence they're investing in your company. They must feel it. As an executive, you likely have far more to gain professionally and financially than a mid-level manager and so recognizing and rewarding their hard work is an important way to keep them inspired in their role.

HIRING

For me, talent recruitment is one of the truly great challenges in building and maintaining a company. If you're like me, you've made some spectacular hires in your career, and you've also likely made a few regrettable ones. Hiring is a tricky dance – candidates embellish their achievements while companies paper over major challenges facing the business. Each side attempts to appear more attractive to the other, and most times, things work out just fine. But occasionally, a candidate discovers that a company is in deeper trouble than they let on or, on the company side, a new hire's personality challenges surface that make the team question the hiring decision, eroding trust.

As a candidate, I often ask if direct reports for the position can be added to the interview panel as I want to probe to get a read on the temperature of the department, not to get people to reveal dark secrets, but to read the nonverbal cues that can speak louder than any verbal confession. As a hiring manager, I try to be as transparent as possible and frame any challenges or circumstances in realistic terms without sugar coating anything, noting that solving the challenge would make the candidate a bit of a hero within the department.

CEOs typically have two jobs – deliver the vision for the company and attract amazing talent. This is not a job one does alone, and the force multiplier for getting great talent in the door is having an exceptional recruiting team. Recruiting is laborious work, even with AI tools. Sure, department managers should always keep an eye out for top-tier, hirable talent, but a standout recruiter will deliver candidates so good that it makes the final decision of which candidate to hire agonizingly difficult. Find a great recruiter and you'll have one less thing to worry about.

LEARNING

While the shortages can vary by industry, the United States is suffering a serious skills gap. Consider these sobering statistics:

- 87% of employers report difficulty finding candidates with the right skills or face active talent shortages.
- $8.5 trillion is the expected cumulative GDP loss in the U.S. by 2030 due to ongoing talent shortages and skill mismatches, according to projections from PwC.
- 92% of executives believe American workers lack optimal proficiency, with nearly 45% reporting missed growth opportunities as a result.

Economic impact aside, companies that invest in their employees' advancement typically see higher retention, greater engagement, and lower defection rates to competitors. When a company is willing to invest in its employees, the law of reciprocation kicks in and employees will generally return the favor by investing their time, energy, and talent in the company, especially when this education translates into a clear path to advancement. As we discussed earlier, this is one of the many initiatives that start at the top.

To be fair, not every company can afford to fund an employee's MBA or 18-month training program. Still, there are plenty of low-cost ways a company can invest in their employees' education. LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, Udemy, Maven, and others are all fantastic resources offering high-quality learning content. And for companies willing to spend a little more, there are numerous short-form, certificate-based courses from top-tier universities that won't break the bank.

As a book nerd, I am especially fond of the practice of making popular business titles available to employees for free. We all spend too much time on our screens and providing books or audiobooks to staff is a small way to show you care about advancing their learning. Bonus points if you promote a 'book of the month' during company all-hands.

FIELD NOTE

Perhaps no pivots recently have seemed more abrupt than the move by Allbirds – a shoe company with an excellent product (I'm wearing them now) – to become "an AI company". I'm withholding judgement because I'm rooting for them as a brand, but from the outside, this looks like a dramatic pivot. Sadly, this move looks like one borne of desperation instead of strategy, which is unfortunate because they achieved so much as a shoe company in a relatively short time, and it's not like people suddenly stopped wearing shoes. Sure, footwear is about as crowded of a category as you'll find, but was there no way to improve on their core product? Perhaps the rapid retail expansion proved too much, too fast. I'll be watching this one closely to see how things play out.

INNOVATION

I'm going to get a little judgy here, but I've found that the most innovative companies are ones where the founder had a penchant for tinkering. Someone who wasn't just *capable* of thinking through a problem, but rather *relished* thinking through a problem. This deep understanding that can only arise from an innate passion earned through years of late nights going down rabbit holes out of pure fascination for the subject. This hard-earned domain authority informs an exceptional product vision, allowing these experts to see around corners in ways that the CEO installed by some PE firm cannot.

I often look at a company like Patagonia, where days of high surf will find much of the staff abandoning their desks to chase waves. Is it that these people landed at Patagonia and suddenly became avid outdoorspeople? Highly unlikely. Instead, the company's brand power attracted people with both skills.

DECISION-MAKING

Clarity is king when it comes to decision-making within an organization. Employees may not always like a decision that's handed down, but when the details and rationale are shared with transparency and in a timely manner, it conveys respect.

We used to have a phrase at a large tech company where I worked, "Everything is a priority. Until it's not." A sudden shift in strategy that derails a project that a team has been working on for months can be temporarily demoralizing. A series of sudden shifts will cause lasting damage not only to morale among the rank-and-file but a permanent loss of confidence in an executive team. No doubt, every company needs to pivot as their market evolves, but pivots without a credible plan or that chase the latest trends lead to a loss of confidence over time. These changes can be especially corrosive when they move the company further away from its guiding principles.

TRUST

When the topic of trust comes up, I think of the trust bank analogy. In the same way individuals decide whether their trust bank starts full – meaning they give people the benefit of the doubt – or whether it starts empty – people must earn trust to 'fill' their trust bank, can be similarly reflected in an organization, and again, usually starts at the top. I'm about 75% optimist, 25% realist, so for me, I genuinely want to give people the benefit of the doubt. In doing so, I've developed a type of 'three strikes' rule for direct reports that goes like this:

If someone on my team fails at a task or project or is struggling, I immediately blame myself for not properly supporting this individual and move quickly to identify where I fell short.

If the same or similar failure occurs a second time, I look to see if the shortcoming is behavioral or just part of someone's internal encodings. If the former, then I will talk to this individual, find out what they need to be supported, and then clear the decks to get him or her the resources they say they need.

If this individual fails a third time, then they are almost certainly either not suited for the job and would find success in a different role, or he or she is going through a personal challenge that lies outside of a reasonable accommodation that the company could make. In that latter case, he or she should be afforded a graceful exit with good severance and job finding support provided by the company.

At a broad level, the trust equation for companies is simple:

- Respect the fact that employees are choosing to work at your company.
- Make changes when someone is no longer a great fit so other team members don't have to pick up the slack.

Be as transparent as possible with important developments that could impact the organization.

FIELD NOTE

I once heard a tech investor describe innovation this way, “What smart people are working on during their nights and weekends today is what everyone else will be working on in their day jobs ten years from now.” I have lived this firsthand. Very early in my career, I landed at company doing mobile technology. In the year 2000, there were cell phones and there were Palm Pilots, but no one except maybe RIM and Novatel were attempting to build devices that could deliver an Internet-like experience on any type of handheld device.

While most people assumed that data on a device was an inevitability, mobile tech was treated as a bit of an oddity (the bandwidth constraints of the cellular networks at the time didn’t help our cause). Progress was slow but steady, but it wasn’t until 2007 when Apple released the iPhone that the space received the legitimacy it deserved. By 2010, mobile devices were everywhere. I was ten years ahead of the curve when mobile technology truly exploded. It was then that I learned that success in tech is generally determined 5 to 10 years upstream with bets that look borderline crazy. Considering that OpenAI was started in 2016 only bolsters this thesis.

COMPOUNDING

Good companies can excel at several of the elements we just covered, but the companies that win markets and establish lasting moats generally score an 8/10 or above in all seven areas. Just as flywheels apply to the acceleration of company through innovations and additional products, the flywheel metaphor also applies internally – a scorching Sales team can motivate the Marketing team, which gets Product even more focused on creating greatness. This success lowers turnover and feeds into the Recruiting team who gets fired up knowing the visible growth and momentum will allow them to attract top talent. Each system feeds the next in a virtuous cycle of success that compounds over time – a noble reward for a hard-working, highly functional team.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Enduring companies compound advantages across culture, leadership, talent, learning, innovation, decision-making, and trust.
- The small behaviors leaders repeat become the operating system employees experience every day.
- Long-term success is rarely one breakthrough; it is the cumulative effect of good decisions, strong people, and persistent learning.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- ? What are we doing today that will make this a stronger company five years from now?
- ? Which leadership behaviors are we rewarding – intentionally or unintentionally?
- ? If our best people had an equally attractive offer tomorrow, what would make them stay?

EXECUTIVE REFLECTION

WHAT ARE YOU BUILDING TODAY THAT WILL STILL MATTER WHEN THE CURRENT TECHNOLOGY CYCLE IS OVER?

NEXT CHAPTER

Great products become great companies when customer value and organizational strength reinforce each other long enough to compound.

EPILOGUE

If you made it this far, congrats, and I hope I was able to reward your perseverance with a bit of wisdom you can take away about building innovative products and the companies to support them. Remember that the giants of tomorrow often started quite a ways upstream, pivoted multiple times, and found the product/market fit that allowed them to dominate the market. This is what makes technology-driven fields such a gamble – you never know when or even if the technology you bet on will have its day in the sun, and if it does have its day, will it last or be quickly subsumed by a new, more advanced trend.

From what I've seen, the keys are to bet on the right technology early on, meet the moment when it comes, and then iterate relentlessly to build an unassailable lead. But how do you bet on the right technology in the first place? You certainly can't know for sure, and even the best in the business – venture capitalists – are wrong roughly seven out of ten times. Applying keen observations about future trends, nascent technological capabilities, and a deep understanding of human needs can put you on the right track. The trends I'm watching closely today that look five to ten years out include quantum computing, climate-related tech, and some type of technology-based government reform.

Too many companies today are reactive. They see the AI trend and decide they're going to latch on to this technology and remake a version of existing software in some small corner of the Technosphere, convinced that the world's HOAs will simply die without their AI-driven software. Occasionally, these efforts culminate in an acquisition, but almost never do they result in a 100-year company.

In his book Zero to One, Peter Thiel makes a compelling argument for building companies that are truly innovative (zero to one) vs. companies that are fast followers or incremental improvements on what already exists (1+*n*). This should be a singular, gating criteria for anyone thinking of founding a company. The world doesn't need another AI tool bolted on to some existing technology – it needs more founders pushing the boundaries of innovation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our working years are finite, so choose your problems carefully. You will make mistakes; try not to make the same ones twice. Stay curious, make thoughtful bets, and when the evidence changes, have the courage to change with it. Great products do not become great companies through one brilliant decision. They get there through hundreds of clear-eyed decisions, made repeatedly, in service of something customers genuinely value.

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