

A GUIDE FOR MID-MARKET B2B CEOS, PRESIDENTS & FOUNDERS

# Before You Hire Your Next Marketing Leader.

*What the data says, what keeps going wrong, and how to design the next engagement to succeed.*

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**marketri**

TAGLINE

*Grow smarter. Scale faster.*

# Why this is in your hands

*A briefing, not a sales pitch. About twenty minutes, cover to cover.*

If you are reading this, a senior marketer has handed it to you. Possibly a candidate you are considering. Possibly a fractional leader preparing to begin an engagement. Either way, they thought the conversation you are about to have together deserved more than a polite interview. **They were right.**

This guide exists because mid-market marketing hires fail at a rate that would be unacceptable in any other executive function. **66%** of first-time CMO hires do not work out. The default explanation is that the wrong person was hired. The data says otherwise — the right person was hired into a role that was not designed to succeed. That is a structural problem, not a talent problem. It is also a solvable one.

What follows is a briefing. It covers the data, the causes, what great marketing actually looks like from your seat, how to set the next engagement up to succeed, and how to move past experiences that may have made you cautious.

## WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

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# Some numbers worth sitting with

*The data on mid-market marketing leadership is not subtle. The patterns are consistent across industries, company sizes, and functional scopes — and rarely discussed in the room where they matter most.*

**66%**

FIRST-TIME CMO HIRES THAT FAIL

SPENCER STUART

**4.1 yrs**

AVERAGE CMO TENURE — LOWEST IN THE C-SUITE

SPENCER STUART, 2025

**7.7%**

MARKETING BUDGET AS % OF REVENUE, DOWN FROM 10.5%

GARTNER

**40%**

OF FORTUNE 500 STILL USE THE CMO TITLE

SPENCER STUART, 2025

**\$250–400K**

MEDIAN MID-MARKET CMO TOTAL COMPENSATION

PAVILION, 2024

**83%**

OF THE PURCHASE DECISION SHAPED BY MARKETING

GARTNER; 6SENSE

**If a failure rate is this consistent, the failure is upstream of the hire.** CEOs stay longer. CFOs stay longer. Even CROs, whose tenure has collapsed to 25 months, last long enough to build a playbook. Marketing leaders cycle through fast enough that institutional knowledge never compounds.

## What these numbers mean

### FOR YOUR COMPANY

If you hire a marketing leader today, the base rate suggests they will not last four years. If this is not your first attempt, the base rate suggests you have already felt the consequences. The cost of a failed mid-market marketing hire — recruiting, onboarding, ramp time, and opportunity cost — typically runs 1.5 to 2 times the leader's annual compensation. For mid-market companies, that is six figures out the door every time the cycle repeats.

### FOR THE MARKETER

They know these stats. They have either lived through them or watched colleagues do so. They are walking into your company with the same caution you feel, just pointed in the other direction. The interview is not only you evaluating them. It is them evaluating whether your company is one of the two out of three that will work, or one of the one out of three that will.

### FOR YOU, PERSONALLY

You are not alone. You are not exceptionally unlucky. You are operating inside a pattern that affects most mid-market B2B companies. The pattern has specific causes, and those causes can be addressed.

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*66% of first-time CMO hires don't work out. The default explanation is wrong: this is a structural problem, not a talent problem.*

”

# Why this keeps happening

*The failure rate is not mysterious. It has three causes, and most mid-market companies have at least one of them in motion at any given time.*

## CAUSE ONE

### The Seniority Inversion

A senior leader is hired to set strategy and ends up updating the website, formatting sales decks, and writing the newsletter — because there is no team beneath them and no infrastructure to execute against. The role was senior. The work was junior. The leader was priced for strategy and consumed for tactics.

## CAUSE TWO

### The Marketing Discount

Sales leaders are paid on outcomes, with significant variable upside tied to revenue. Marketing leaders are typically paid a flat base, with a small or no variable component, and bonuses tied to activities rather than outcomes. The comp structure tells the marketing leader, implicitly, that they are a cost center.

## CAUSE THREE

### The Missing Middle

Mid-market marketing teams cluster at the top and bottom of the org chart — a leader and a coordinator or two, with nothing in between. Strategy gets developed but not executed. Execution happens but without strategic direction. Leadership concludes that marketing is not working.

## A NOTE ON NAMING THE CAUSE

Most mid-market companies have one of these three causes in motion. A few have all three. The first step in addressing any of them is naming it out loud. **An unnamed structural problem is almost impossible to fix because it gets blamed on the people living inside it.**

## A note on what modern solves for this

*A full marketing department is often outside what a \$20M to \$200M company can fund. That constraint is real — it is also not the barrier it used to be.*

Modern mid-market marketing functions tend to be built as flexible arrangements rather than traditional departments. There are three common models, each suited to a different situation.

### MODEL 01 — FRACTIONAL EXECUTION WITH AN IN-HOUSE LEADER

The senior marketing hire stays on staff. The specialist execution — demand generation, content production, paid media, analytics, brand design — is delivered by fractional partners. Suited to companies that need a permanent voice of marketing in the executive room but cannot justify a full internal team underneath that voice.

### MODEL 02 — FRACTIONAL LEADERSHIP WITH IN-HOUSE EXECUTION

The execution is owned by internal team members — a manager, a couple of coordinators. The strategic leadership is fractional, brought in by someone who has seen what you are trying to build play out in dozens of similar companies. Suited to companies that have capable executors already in place but are missing the senior experience needed to direct them.

### MODEL 03 — A COMBINATION OF THE TWO

A fractional leader, a small in-house execution core, and fractional specialists layered in for work that requires depth the internal team does not have. This is the model most \$20M to \$200M B2B companies are quietly moving toward, because it matches the shape of the work to the shape of the budget.

#### HOT TOPIC — THE AI NOTE

#### **Account for what AI has changed before any hiring decision is made.**

The jobs that existed five years ago are not the jobs that exist today. Roles that once required a full-time hire now require a different blend of human judgment and AI-assisted production. Companies that build their marketing function without accounting for what AI has changed will overstaff in some places, understaff in others, and hire for skills that are depreciating faster than they realize.

## The sequence that matters

*Most mid-market companies start by asking who to hire. The more useful first question is what the function should actually look like.*

### STRUCTURE BEFORE STAFFING

CEOs are wise to engage a marketing consultant adept at structuring modern mid-market departments before decisions are made about who to hire, what to outsource, and how to innovate with AI. The cost of that conversation is small. The cost of skipping it shows up in the next failed hire.

Structuring the function before staffing it is what separates companies that cycle through marketing leaders from companies that build a marketing function that produces. **That sequence, simple as it sounds, is the single most important decision a mid-market CEO makes about marketing.**

#### IN PRACTICE

A two-week structural review — covering scope, comp design, team shape, AI leverage, and reporting cadence — typically pays for itself many times over by changing the next hire from a coin flip into a designed outcome.

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# What great marketing actually looks like

*Five practices define a healthy marketing function. The absence of any one shows up in results within six months.*

## 01 — STRATEGY BEFORE EXECUTION

Great marketing leads with strategy rooted in deep research. A clearly defined ideal customer profile. Prioritized target markets chosen with discipline, not enthusiasm. A differentiated value proposition the company can actually defend. Without these three things, every downstream campaign is a guess in expensive clothes.

## 02 — A MARKETING ENGINE, NOT A MARKETING TEAM

Great marketing happens when an engine is built, not just a headcount. The right people in the right roles, full-time or fractional. A modern tech stack that lets a lean team scale. Documented best practices that make quality outputs repeatable rather than heroic. An engine produces. A team, without the other two pieces, often just performs.

## 03 — OPTIMIZATION AS A DISCIPLINE

Great marketing tracks what is working and what is not, and spends as much time optimizing existing efforts as it spends producing new ones. Most mid-market functions run closer to 90/10. The stronger ratio is 60/40. New deliverables feel like progress. Optimization is where the compounding actually happens.

## 04 — AI AS INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT A NOVELTY

Great marketing leverages AI consistently across the department. Automations for repetitive work. Agents where they outperform humans. Systematic use in content creation, research, and analysis. Not one senior marketer using ChatGPT in a browser tab while everyone else watches. AI that is not embedded in workflows is AI that produces anecdotes, not leverage.

## 05 — DASHBOARDS THAT MAP TO REVENUE

Great marketing has KPI dashboards that connect department activity to business outcomes — not activity dashboards, not vanity metrics. Dashboards where the CEO and the marketing leader can look at the same screen and agree on what is working, what is not, and what to do about it.

## What this does *not* look like:

### Random Acts of Marketing

*The most common failure mode in mid-market B2B marketing is not bad marketing. It is constant movement that never compounds into a gain.*

#### **NO STRATEGY UPSTREAM**

The senior marketer does not have a voice at the strategy table. Marketing gets looped in after decisions are made, asked to produce materials that support directions the function was not part of setting. The work can only be reactive because the input arrived late.

#### **NO ENGINE UNDERNEATH**

The marketing plan looks like a list of tasks in no particular order of priority. Webinars, social campaigns, events, website updates, and sales collateral all sit at the same level. Everything becomes urgent because nothing is strategic.

#### **NO DISCIPLINE AROUND SCOPE**

The working cadence allows new tasks to be added continually without anything coming off the list. A request in Slack on Tuesday becomes a deliverable by Friday, on top of committed work already scheduled. The function is always busy. The function is rarely making progress on the work that would actually move the business.

Random Acts of Marketing is often mistaken for productivity. It is not. **It is the visible symptom of a function that has been denied the conditions it needs to produce.**

Great marketing, by contrast, is often quiet. It compounds. The measurable outputs tend to be lagging indicators, which is part of what makes it hard to evaluate in real time. The leading indicators are there, but they require a shared language between the CEO and the marketing leader to see them.

# What we say, what we mean

*Most conversations between CEOs and marketing leaders contain a second conversation underneath the first one. Both parties know it. Neither party names it.*

## THE CEO SAYS

## THE MARKETING LEADER HEARS

**"I saw a brand video on LinkedIn by a competitor. We should do something like that."**

*Another foundational project when I have been asked to drive pipeline.*

**"We need to use AI."**

*I need to learn AI on my own and figure out how to deploy it internally without budget.*

**"You do not need to attend the executive meeting."**

*I do not view marketing as strategic. We are still responsible for pipeline.*

**"We have decided to roll out a major product upgrade in the next three months."**

*Surprise. Your marketing plan is now obsolete and your budget does not align.*

**"Can you put together a quick deck for the board on Friday."**

*The real work I committed to this week will not happen. The deck will take the next two days.*

**"Let's table the brand work for now. We need to focus on leads."**

*I do not understand that brand work is what will make the leads convert. I will ask why conversion rates are low in six months.*

**"Sales is saying they do not have enough leads."**

*Sales has not worked the leads they already have. We are about to spend the next three months solving the wrong problem.*

**"Marketing feels quiet right now."**

*I am not seeing the visible activity I use to measure whether marketing is working. The pipeline has not dropped. I have not checked.*

## Translating the other direction

*The point is not that one side is right and the other is wrong. Most of the friction is not disagreement — it is translation lag. Closing that lag is most of the work.*

| THE MARKETING LEADER SAYS   | THE CEO HEARS  | WHAT THEY ACTUALLY MEAN  |
|---|--|--|
| <b>"I need a team capable of executing."</b>                            | <i>More budget requests without delivering pipeline.</i>                 | The plan you approved cannot be delivered by the resources you approved. One of them has to change.                              |
| <b>"Constant Contact is not a CRM."</b>                                 | <i>She wants to replace a tool that seems to be working.</i>             | We are about to make pipeline decisions based on data this system cannot produce.  |
| <b>"AIO is the new SEO. We need to invest in updating the website."</b> | <i>Another acronym I do not understand. Why should I invest in that.</i> | Buyers are using AI to find vendors and we are not showing up. In six months this will be a pipeline problem.                    |
| <b>"We need to define what a qualified lead actually is."</b>           | <i>She is stalling on lead generation.</i>                               | Sales and marketing disagree on what counts. Until we align, every pipeline conversation is a fight about the scoreboard.        |
| <b>"We should sunset this program."</b>                                 | <i>She is giving up on something we invested in.</i>                     | This program is consuming 30% of the team's time for 5% of the pipeline. Letting it die is the most strategic move this quarter. |

# How to level-set from day one

*Mutual commitments between a CEO and an incoming marketing leader, written as statements both can agree to in the first thirty days — a way to make the implicit explicit.*

| FROM THE CEO  | FROM THE MARKETING LEADER  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>I will agree on the definition of "working" before the work begins.</b></p> <p>We will name the leading indicators we both trust, the lagging indicators we care about, and the timeline on which each should move.</p> | <p><b>I will tell you what will not work, not only what will.</b></p> <p>Part of the role is protecting the company from investments that look attractive but are unlikely to produce.</p>                               |
| <p><b>I will not ask for ROI on brand investment inside ninety days.</b></p> <p>Brand is a compounding asset. Demanding returns on a quarterly cycle is the fastest way to starve it before it produces.</p>                  | <p><b>I will translate my work into revenue language.</b></p> <p>The metrics that map to revenue I will highlight. The ones that do not, I will explain in terms you can use with the board.</p>                         |
| <p><b>I will not redesign the plan in Slack at 11pm.</b></p> <p>If I see something that worries me, I will write it down and bring it to our standing meeting. Anxiety is not a strategic input.</p>                          | <p><b>I will tell you when you are the bottleneck.</b></p> <p>If approvals are slow, if direction changes mid-campaign, if the executive team is not aligned, I will name it rather than work around it.</p>             |
| <p><b>I will tell you when I am the bottleneck.</b></p> <p>If budget approvals are slow, if I am second-guessing in ways that undermine execution, I will name it rather than leave you to work around it.</p>                | <p><b>I will protect your calendar from marketing minutiae.</b></p> <p>You should not be reviewing subject lines or approving social copy. If I am sending you that level of work, we have a scope problem to solve.</p> |
| <p><b>I will give the plan at least six months to produce visible results.</b></p> <p>That is the floor, not the ceiling. I will not use month four as a referendum on the entire function.</p>                               | <p><b>I will present post-mortems honestly.</b></p> <p>Campaigns that worked, campaigns that did not, and what I learned from each. Not highlight reels. Real data, including the parts that embarrass me.</p>           |

## A SUGGESTION

Read this compact together in the first week. Revisit it at 30, 60, and 90 days. Most conditions that sink a mid-market engagement get installed in the first 90 days — and most are preventable with a conversation neither party thought to have.

# Putting past experiences behind you

*If you have hired marketing leaders before, and those hires have not worked out the way you hoped, this section is for you.*

You are probably carrying something. Not a grievance — something quieter. A set of doubts that now attaches to every marketing decision. A small voice that asks, when the next plan is presented, whether this one will also turn out to be theater. That voice is not irrational. It is earned. **It is also, with respect, not predictive.**

The failure of a previous marketing hire is evidence about that hire and that role as it was designed. It is not evidence about what is possible in your company — and especially not about what is possible with a role designed differently this time.

The risk, if the past runs unexamined, is that the scars become the strategy. Every plan gets second-guessed because the last plan did not produce. Every marketing leader gets undermined in advance, before they have had a chance to succeed.

## THE WAY OUT

The way out is not to pretend the history does not exist. It is to name it, out loud, with the next hire. Something like:

*“I have hired three marketing leaders in the last six years. None worked out. I am going to tell you what I learned from each, what I think I did wrong, and what I am asking you to help me do differently. Here is where I need you to push back on me, even when I do not want you to.”*

That conversation, had on day one, is the single highest-leverage thing a scarred CEO can do. The scars do not have to be the strategy — they can just be the reason you are running this engagement differently.

# What becomes possible

*The mid-market B2B companies that have gotten marketing right are not a different species. They do not have more budget, better talent, or a secret framework. They have three things in common.*

## 01 — THEY DESIGNED THE ROLE TO SUCCEED

Whatever the title — CMO, CGO, VP of Marketing, fractional CMO — the person in the seat has a scope, a budget, and a team that matches what they are being held accountable for. The job was built before the person was hired.

## 02 — THEY GAVE MARKETING A SEAT AT THE REAL TABLE

Not the marketing table. The revenue table. The pricing table. The client strategy table — the one where the decisions that shape the company are actually made. Marketing leaders who are not in those rooms cannot produce what those rooms expect.

## 03 — THEY HELD THE LINE THROUGH THE UNCOMFORTABLE MIDDLE

Every marketing plan has a stretch — usually months three through eight — where leading indicators have not yet moved into lagging results. The companies that produce strong outcomes held the line and waited for the work to compound.

**If you put those three things in motion, the base rate changes.** The odds tilt from two out of three failing to something closer to the inverse. That is a meaningfully different starting point.

### THE ENDING

*A different ending is available.  
It starts with the conversation you are about to have.*

# Deb Andrews

*Founder, Marketri. Twenty years across four seats that produce the patterns this guide describes.*

Most consultants who write guides like this one have occupied exactly one of the seats involved in the problem. Either they were marketers once, or they are consultants now, or they have built a firm. Rarely all three.

Over the past two decades, I have sat in four of the seats that produce the patterns this guide describes.

## The in-house senior marketer

The VP of Marketing handed a title and not a team. The one who learned what the Seniority Inversion feels like at 10pm on a Tuesday, updating the website because nobody else would.

## The fractional CMO

Across dozens of mid-market engagements, I have seen the same patterns repeat with enough consistency that they stopped being stories and started being data.

## The founder of Marketri

I have built and run a firm. I have sat in the CEO seat. I have made calls that looked right in the moment and wrong in hindsight. That experience is what makes the advice usable rather than theoretical.

## The advisor to CEOs

Across the full spectrum — from CEOs who confused activity for strategy, to CEOs who had been burned so many times they could no longer tell a good plan from a bad one.

## About Marketri

Marketri is a fractional marketing firm serving mid-market B2B companies. We provide marketing strategy, execution, and analytics on a retainer basis. Our work focuses on helping companies build marketing functions that actually produce — without the cost and risk of staffing an entire department from scratch.

If the guide has resonated, the next conversation is the one where we look at your specific situation together and decide what the right path forward is.

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