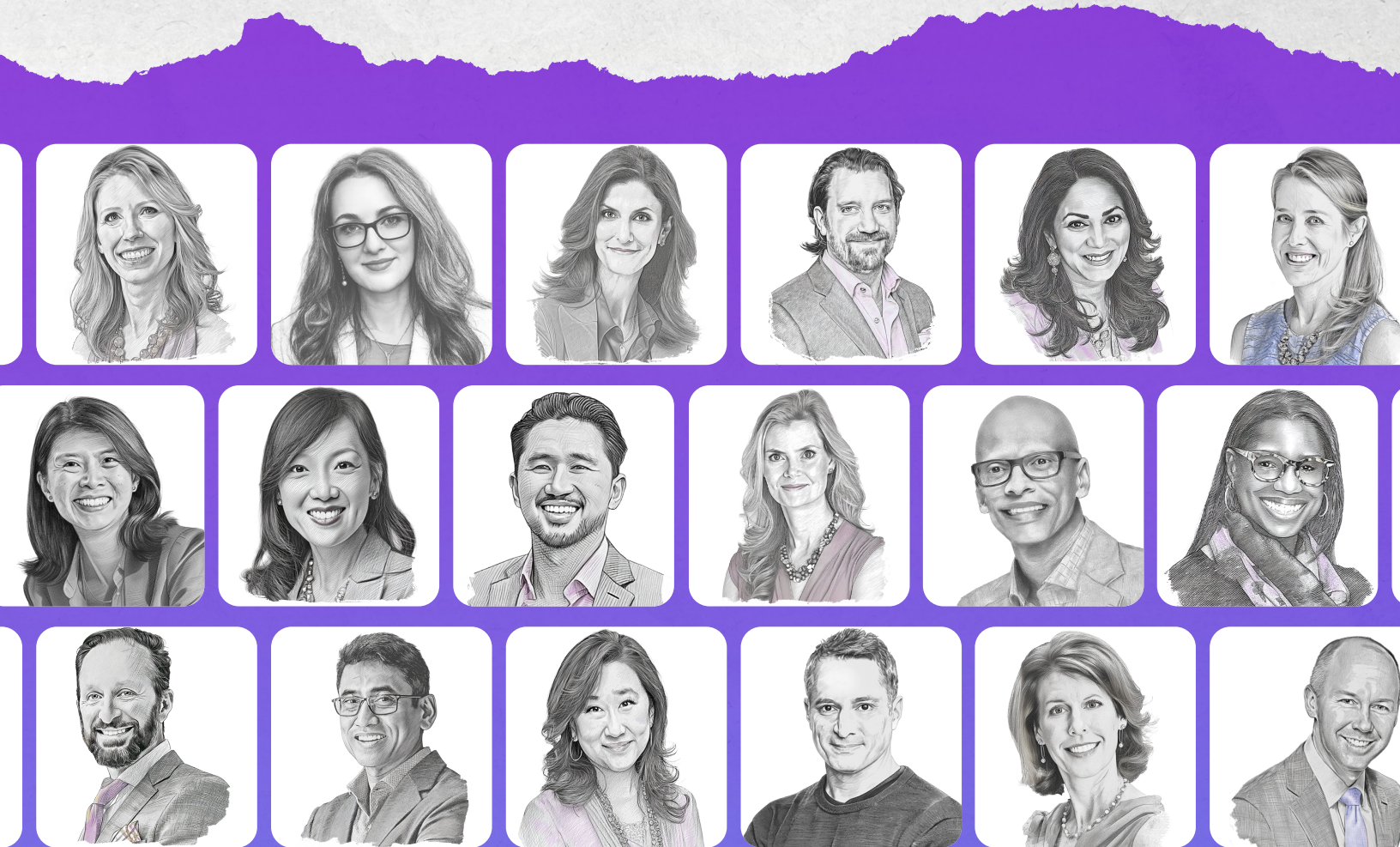




THE B2B CMO IMPERATIVE

The New Rules for B2B Marketing Leadership in 2026

How the Best B2B CMOs Are Rewriting the Role



FOREWARD

I co-founded Marketo in 2006 and helped write the very playbook this report says has run its course: marketing automation, lead scoring, MQLs, the whole demand gen machine. It worked, until it didn't. Customer acquisition cost is up 74 percent since 2016. Half of B2B teams missed their pipeline goals last year. 84 percent of CMOs report strategic dysfunction with their own C-suite. I carry some responsibility for that story, which is part of why I started both Phave and the B2B CMO Project, to help solve it.

Phave is next-generation marketing automation, built to reason about each buyer instead of routing them through rules someone wrote in advance. But better software alone doesn't fix this. It takes marketers who can compare notes, test ideas together, and figure out what's actually working before the case studies catch up. That's what Sydney Sloan and I built the B2B CMO Project for. It's hard to be a strategic marketer right now, and we all need research, real community, and people in the same seat to help us succeed. This report is a product of that community: the CMOs who showed up, answered honestly, and shared their insights.



Jon Miller

Founder and CEO, Phave

Co-founder and CEO, The B2B CMO Project

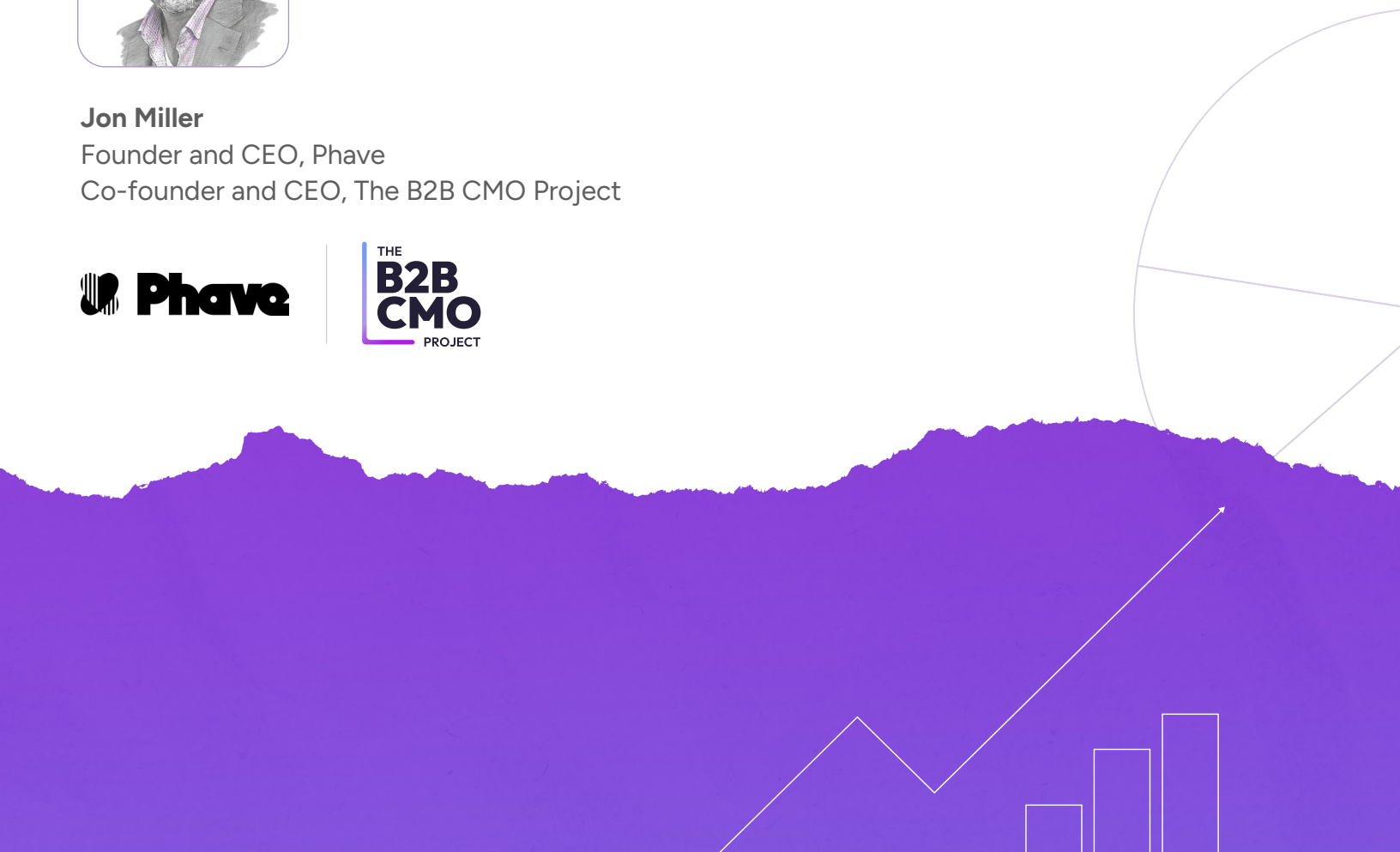


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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The B2B CMO Project is a research and community initiative founded by Jon Miller (co-founder of Marketo and Engagio, CEO of Phave) and Sydney Sloan (former CMO of SalesLoft and G2). The findings in this report draw on recorded interviews with more than 50 B2B CMOs at companies including Zoom, Salesforce, Nutanix, Snowflake, PagerDuty, and Sprout Social. Our goal: give CMOs the clearest possible picture of what has stopped working, what the best leaders and operators are doing differently, and exactly what to do about it.

2.3X

More revenue growth at companies with a single empowered growth leader on the executive committee

(McKinsey 2025)

84%

Of CMOs report high strategic dysfunction with the C-suite

(Gartner 2025)

14%

Of CEOs view their CMO as effective at market shaping

(Gartner 2025)

34%

Of Fortune 500 firms have no C-suite marketing leader

(Spencer Stuart 2025)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviews with more than 50 senior B2B marketing leaders point to a consistent conclusion: the traditional CMO playbook has run its course. The tactics that built marketing's credibility over the past fifteen years have exhausted their effectiveness, and the metrics CMOs used to prove their value have, paradoxically, undermined their standing with the C-suite.

But the research also surfaced a clear pattern among the CMOs who have earned strong executive trust and expanded their influence. This report distills that pattern into five imperatives and a concrete action agenda, with specific moves you can make in the next 30, 60, and 90 days.

THE CENTRAL THESIS

B2B CMOs who thrive in 2026 and beyond will abandon the role of marketing operator and fully embrace the role of business co-owner: the executive who owns positioning, customer insight, brand reputation, and market momentum, and who uses that expertise to shape commercial strategy alongside the CEO, CFO and CRO. Getting there requires improved credibility with the C-suite, new metrics that connect better to revenue, long-term investment in brand, leadership through AI disruption, and an organization built for what comes next.

WHY THE OLD B2B PLAYBOOK IS FINISHED

Jon Miller co-founded Marketo in 2006 and helped write the playbook that defined B2B marketing for the next fifteen years: marketing automation, MQL-based funnels, lead scoring, demand generation programs. That playbook worked. Until it did not. As Zoom CMO Kim Storin puts it, “I don’t think any of it works anymore.”

Sydney Sloan has seen the same shift from the CMO seat at Alfresco, SalesLoft, and G2: the buyers have changed, the buying process has changed, and the C-suite’s expectations of marketing have changed — but most marketing organizations haven’t kept pace.

The underlying problem is one of design. The traditional demand gen model treated marketing like a gumball

machine: insert budget, receive leads. That mental model drives every bad decision that follows: gating content to capture form fills, scoring individuals instead of accounts, optimizing for MQLs that sales ignores, running more outbound volume when the first wave gets no response. It’s a machine built to harvest demand from the 5% of buyers actively in-market at any given time, while doing nothing to create demand among the other 95%. When you’ve saturated the 5% — and after 15 years of everyone running the same playbook, you have — the machine stops working.

Too many capable CMOs find themselves caught between a playbook that no longer works and a C-suite that doesn’t yet trust the alternative. Closing that gap is what the five imperatives in this report are designed to do.



“When it comes to the classic B2B playbook — MQLs, lead scoring, gated content — I don’t think any of it works anymore.”

— Kimberly Storin, CMO, Zoom

\$2.00

Median SaaS New CAC Ratio,
up 74% from \$1.15 in 2016

(Benchmarkit)

50%

Of B2B teams missed pipeline
goals; only 34% met lead
generation goals

(Pipeline360)

40%

Of B2B deals stall due to
internal misalignment within
buying groups, often driven
by stakeholders marketing
never identified

(Edelman-LinkedIn 2025)

59%

Of CMOs report insufficient
budget to execute their strat-
egy, while budgets remain
flat at 7.7% of revenue

(Gartner 2025)

Imperative 01

Earn Your Seat by Becoming a Business Executive First

The Credibility Gap Is the Real Problem

The most consistent finding across our CMO interviews was not about strategy or technology. It was about credibility. CMOs who hold their seat and expand their influence do so by adopting what Patrick Lencioni calls a “First Team” mentality: their primary team is not marketing — it is the CEO and C-suite peers. That shift in orientation changes how you communicate, how you allocate your time, how you measure success, and how you build trust.



“As a C-suite executive, I lead as a business strategist first, marketer second. At Nutanix, that perspective has ensured marketing contributes directly to business priorities, be it growth, retention or positioning. When we solve core business challenges first, strong results naturally follow.”

— Mandy Dhaliwal, CMO, Nutanix

The irony is that the metrics CMOs used to try to prove impact on revenue (MQLs, marketing-sourced pipeline, cost-per-lead, etc.) are ultimately the same metrics that undermined their credibility with the C-suite. When you report in marketing language, you get treated as a tactical marketing function; when you report on ‘cost per’, you get seen as a cost center. As noted in Imperative 2, the CMOs in our research who have the strongest executive relationships report differently: they lead with business outcomes, and they treat marketing metrics as internal diagnostics, not board-level scorecards.

How the Best CMOs Build C-Suite Trust

Our research identified these consistent trust-building mechanisms among high-credibility CMOs:

1. Surface Problems and Risk Before Anyone Asks

Victoria Albert, CMO at INFUSE, recommends CMOs “surface risk early, name it plainly, and show the corrective path before it’s being asked”. She notes that credibility “is not about your charisma”; it is the “evidence of trust that you’re building over time with every decision that you make”. The same principle applies to reporting failures.

UiPath’s CMO Michael Atalla makes the same point: “Be honest when you miss. It’s okay to have red on some of your metrics. They can’t all be green all of the time.” The CMO who surfaces a problem before the CFO finds it in a spreadsheet builds more trust than the one who only reports wins.

2. Deliver Strategic Wins the Whole Company Can See

Trust compounds fastest when marketing delivers something the whole company can celebrate. Dhaliwal repositioned Nutanix within the first nine months and “the entire market stood up and took notice.” At Amplitude, Tifenn Dano Kwan built credibility by securing the top Forrester Wave ranking — a visible, company-wide win that elevated marketing’s standing across the executive team.

3. Build Deep Knowledge of Every Peer’s P&L Challenges

Katie Foote, CMO at Manhattan Associates, doesn’t wait for peers to come to her. She starts by learning each executive’s specific business challenges and demonstrating that she understands them before proposing how marketing can help. The CMO who asks the CFO about their cost-of-capital concerns and the CRO about their retention numbers will always out-influence the CMO who shows up with a campaign deck.

4. Own the Customer Voice

No other C-suite executive owns customer intelligence the way a CMO can. Scott Morris at Sprout Social describes the role as being the “voice of the customer at scale” — and finds it gives marketing influence over broad business decisions around competition and category creation. When you’re the executive who brings structured customer insight into those conversations, you get invited into rooms that have nothing to do with campaigns.

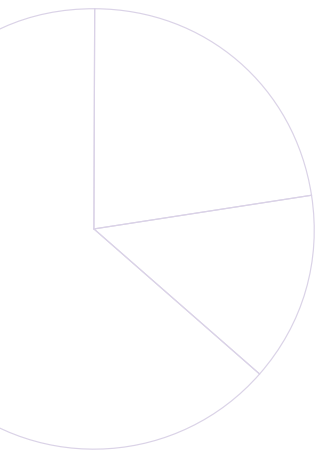


SYDNEY'S OBSERVATION

The CMOs who struggle most are those who believe their job is to educate the C-suite about marketing. The CMOs who thrive are those who educate themselves about the business — then use marketing to solve it. That inversion is everything.

5. Do Exactly What You Said You Would Do

Strategic repositioning and customer insight matter less if the C-suite can’t count on you to execute. Several CMOs in our research identified simple, relentless follow-through as the foundation everything else rests on. Amplitude’s CMO was direct: the best way to build credibility is making sure peers feel “they can count on you to deliver what you say you were going to deliver. I know it sounds pretty simple, but this is the best way to build credibility.” Heidi Bullock at Tealium earned her initial credibility by setting two explicit tracks — a long-term strategy and a short-term demand goal — and then hitting the short-term goal immediately. Predictability is underrated. It buys you the political capital to push for longer-term investments.



Action Agenda: Imperative 1

Earn Your Seat by Becoming a Business Executive First

TIME FRAME: Next 30 Days

ACTION

REFRESH YOUR REPORTING

What to do?

Schedule 30-minute sessions with each C-suite peer. Map their top three business challenges. Find the intersection with marketing's capabilities.

Come prepared with your read of their P&L pressure, not just a list of marketing programs you could offer.

TIME FRAME: Next 60 Days

ACTION

BUILD A RISK REGISTER

What to do?

Create a living document of marketing risks and their mitigation plans.

Share it proactively with the CEO and CFO monthly. Include at least one metric in the red, since proactive honesty builds more credibility than a dashboard of green.

TIME FRAME: Next 90 Days

ACTION

REWRITE YOUR OPERATING RHYTHM

What to do?

Replace MQL reporting with a business-outcome dashboard focused on brand awareness and pipeline. But get alignment from sales and finance before you pull the plug, since replacing a shared metric without consensus will cost you credibility faster than the MQL ever did.

TIME FRAME: Next 6 Months

ACTION

LAND A VISIBLE STRATEGIC WIN

What to do?

Identify one business-level initiative where marketing can deliver a result the whole company sees.

Execute with tight milestones; internal visibility matters as much as the win itself.

Imperative 02

Prove Marketing's Value in the Language of the Board

The Metrics Problem

Marketing has a measurement problem that is largely self-inflicted. For a decade, B2B marketing organizations have reported metrics that matter to marketers: impressions, MQLs, cost-per-click, email open rates. The CFO does not care. The CEO does not care. And frankly, those metrics do not connect to revenue, so they should not care. As UiPath's CMO puts it, coming in with 20 metrics at the C-level is "a big mistake."



"A marketing leader reports in the language of revenue. That's not a high bar. It's the only bar. Everything else is activity."

— Victoria Albert, CMO, INFUSE

The Problem with MQLs

For years, the North Star of CMO reporting was the MQL. But under pressure to hit targets, it was too easy to loosen thresholds until any webinar attendee or eBook download qualified. Sales started ignoring them, the contract between marketing and sales broke down, and trust eroded with it. Worse, MQLs are fundamentally lead-centric in a world where B2B buying is done by committees of six to sixteen people. Scoring one person tells you almost nothing about whether an account is actually in-market.

The framework below uses three categories to replace MQLs. Hand-Raisers are explicit requests for sales contact. They convert at the highest rates and sales trusts them — nobody complains about lead quality when the buyer has already raised their hand. But a Hand-Raiser-only strategy is too passive and too late. By the time someone raises their hand, they've already formed preferences and built a

shortlist, most likely without you on it. As Mike Bosworth's Solution Selling research showed, companies that engage buyers while their pain is still latent and bring them to an active evaluation win over 90% of the time.

That's why you need two other categories. MQA (Marketing Qualified Account, or Buying Group) represents marketing's evidence-based judgment that an account shows meaningful in-market signals — the proactive counterpart to Hand-Raisers. MEA (Marketing Engaged) represents ICP accounts engaging but not yet showing buying behavior; this is your future pipeline and the best opportunity for the kind of outreach that creates demand rather than captures it. The key is to treat each category differently, with its own expected conversion rate and engagement approach; tracking them separately is what rebuilds trust with sales.



“When we use the same vernacular as the business—bookings, retention, and deal velocity—that is where we shift from being executors to becoming a true strategic partner.”

— Katherine Post Calvert, Chief Marketing and Growth Officer, PagerDuty

The New Measurement Framework

The CMOs in our research who have the strongest C-suite relationships share a common measurement philosophy. They have abandoned vanity metrics in favor of a small set of business-outcome measures that collectively answer four questions:

1. **Visibility:** Do buyers find us when researching?
2. **Consideration:** Are we included in their evaluation once they're in-market?
3. **Preference:** Do we differentiate effectively vs. alternatives?
4. **Velocity:** Once they're in-market, can we accelerate their decision?

The New CMO Dashboard

The metrics are intentionally organized from business outcomes to marketing operations. Tier 1 includes shared business metrics like NRR and win rate, e.g. metrics the CMO reports alongside the CRO and CFO, not in isolation. That's by design. If your board-level dashboard only contains metrics that no other executive shares, you're reinforcing the perception that marketing operates in its own silo.

Tier 1: Business Outcomes (Board-Level)

- Pipeline created (new and expansion) across all sources
- Revenue conversion rate and win rate contribution
- Net Revenue Retention (NRR) and churn rate

- Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC) and CAC payback period
- Marketing efficiency: total pipeline generated per marketing investment dollar

Tier 2: Leading Indicators (CEO and CFO Level)

- Hand-Raiser volume and conversion rate
- MQA volume and conversion rate
- Pipeline quality: velocity and win rate by segment
- Customer health: engagement score and NPS
- Brand health index: composite of aided/unaided awareness, brand preference, share of voice, sentiment, organic search trends, and AEO citation share

Tier 3: Operational Metrics (Marketing Team Level)

- MEA volume: ICP accounts engaging but not yet showing buying signals
- MQA-to-opportunity qualification rate
- Buying group coverage and target account engagement
- Program performance and efficiency (investment per pipeline dollar)
- Customer advocacy and reference ability



JON'S COUNTERPOINT: RETHINKING ATTRIBUTION

Several CMOs in our research emphasized tracking marketing-sourced versus sales-sourced pipeline. But attribution rests on the assumption that B2B buying is a simple linear process where we can see and track what creates and influences deals. It isn't. We all know buying decisions are shaped across the buying committee by conversations at private dinners, experiences at events, and brand impressions built over years. None of that shows up in your attribution model. Assigning credit in a complex system where most of the influence is invisible isn't measurement. It's storytelling.

I'd reconcile it this way. Use attribution where it's most useful: optimizing your channel mix, diagnosing what's working, investing more in the best programs. In other words, use it to IMPROVE your marketing, not PROVE its value. But don't let it become the organizing principle for how marketing and sales work together. The moment sourced pipeline becomes a team's primary scorecard, the relay race dynamics take over.

Track it in the back office. Lead with shared outcomes in the room.

Allocating 'credit' also breaks teamwork. When marketing and sales each optimize for their own number, you get a relay race: rigid handoffs, finger-pointing, and dropped opportunities. In my opinion, the best GTM organizations operate more like a soccer team, where all players move fluidly to advance the ball and nobody obsesses over which position scored the goal. They report on the total pipeline against shared targets.

That said, a CMO cannot simply walk into a board meeting and tell the CFO that marketing's value is invisible. CMOs at companies like UiPath, Relias, and Contrast Security explicitly track marketing-generated pipeline to justify their budgets, and even CMOs who champion shared goals still sometimes rely on attribution models and/or self-reported attribution because their CFOs are intensely focused on efficiency.



"It's never a completely clear picture especially in a world of B2B... prospects don't think, I'm gonna go inbound today. They do their own research, they may respond to outbound messaging. They may have a conversation with a digital agency as part of their journey. We need to make that integrated."

— Josh Koenig, SVP of Marketing, Pantheon

Measuring Brand in Financial Terms

Brand measurement has historically been where CFOs question the investment. The breakthrough is in framing it as a financial lever: a strong brand reduces Customer Acquisition Cost, accelerates sales cycle velocity, and improves win rates. The Amplitude CMO's brand health score — a composite of AI visibility score, PR press score, social score, and web traffic — gives the CFO something concrete they can track quarter over quarter. Cindy Zhou at Imprivata has added LLM citation share, tracking how often the brand surfaces as an answer in ChatGPT and Claude queries. These are not soft metrics. They are early-warning indicators of pipeline health and company success (see Imperative 3).

Action Agenda: Imperative 2

Prove Marketing's Value in the Language of the Board

TIME FRAME: Next 30 Days

ACTION

REFRESH YOUR REPORTING

What to do?

Replace MQL reporting with a business-outcome dashboard focused on brand awareness and pipeline. But get alignment from sales and finance before you pull the plug, since replacing a shared metric without consensus will cost you credibility faster than the MQL ever did.

TIME FRAME: Next 60 Days

ACTION

BUILD YOUR BRAND INDEX

What to do?

Create a composite brand health score. Present it as a leading indicator of pipeline health, not a marketing vanity metric.

Baseline it now so you can show directional movement.

TIME FRAME: Next 90 Days

ACTION

CONNECT CAC TO BRAND INVESTMENT

What to do?

Begin tracking the correlation of brand health with conversion rates and pipeline created 90 days later. Even one quarter of correlation can change the CFO conversation.

TIME FRAME: Next 6 Months

ACTION

EDUCATE THE BOARD

What to do?

Prepare a 10-minute board session on how modern B2B buying has changed, what actually works, why the metrics need to change, and what you're doing differently.

Imperative 03

Invest in Brand as a Strategic Economic Asset

Brand Is a Strategic Investment

The CMOs surveyed show why the case for brand has shifted from a “nice to have” to a commercial imperative.

At any given moment, approximately 95% of your potential buyers are not in an active buying cycle — but they are forming impressions and developing preferences. The job of a brand is to create that mental availability so that when buyers finally enter the market, your company is already top of mind and on the shortlist.

Forrester reports that 92% of B2B buyers begin the purchase process with at least one vendor already in mind, and 41% have locked in a preferred vendor before formal evaluation. Gartner adds that 61% of buyers now prefer a rep-free experience — meaning most shortlists are built, ranked, and nearly decided before sales ever gets a seat at the table.

The implication: If you’re not already in consideration when buyers enter an active buying cycle, you’ve lost before sales ever gets involved.

And companies that stop investing in brand do so at their own peril. As CloudBees CMO Raj Sarkar warns, “if you stop your brand spend,” you will inevitably watch your “middle and bottom of funnel... dry up,” resulting in a “cost of acquisition [that] just goes up over time”. Often, these lagging indicators make the connection hard to see — until the real damage to your pipeline has already been done.



“Brand is the one thing that will continue to differentiate the company. It is the multiplier that helps all other programs be more noticeable and effective.”

— Lena Waters, 2x CMO and GTM Advisor

Making the Economic Case for Brand

The economic case for a brand has three dimensions: efficiency, growth, and long-term compounding. The most persuasive CMOs pick the argument that fits their CFO's current priorities.

Efficiency Arguments

- **Awareness reduces the cost of every demand generation program you run.** The same campaign performs better when buyers already recognize your name. Buyers who know you exist convert at higher rates, at lower cost, and sooner.
- **A strong brand shortens the sales cycle.** Buyers who arrive with pre-existing positive impressions require less nurturing and convert at higher rates. Building early preference directly expedites the sales cycle and guarantees you make the shortlist — so you're not left out of deals before sales ever gets involved.
- **Premium brand unlocks premium pricing.** When buyers perceive you as the category leader, they're less price-sensitive. Snowflake CMO Denise Persson notes that as technologies become more similar, brand is what builds trust and "what allows you to charge a premium for your product".

Growth Arguments

- **Brand is the ultimate moat against commoditization.** As AI accelerates product development, feature parity is arriving faster than ever. Brand is increasingly the only durable differentiator. Competitors can copy a feature, but they can't copy a brand.
- **Brand is the prerequisite for category expansion.** If the market only knows you for one thing, you can't sell them a second. UiPath's CMO made this argument internally to justify long-term brand investment: transitioning the company's identity from RPA to agentic automation required brand investment first, saying "to make that transition, you absolutely must invest in the brand." Relias CMO Amy King used the same logic to shift market perception from a point solution to an expanded platform. The pattern is consistent: you can't outgrow your category without first outgrowing your reputation.
- **AI visibility requires brand.** If buyers use ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini to research vendors, only brands with genuine presence and authority will appear in those results. If buyers and machines can't find you early, nothing else downstream matters. This makes brand investment a prerequisite for AI-era visibility, not an optional add-on.

Long-Term Arguments

- **Brand compounds over time.** Unlike performance marketing, which stops the moment spend stops, brand investment builds a durable commercial asset. Demand generation drives revenue now; brand drives revenue in the future. A healthy marketing strategy balances both, and the CMOs who can articulate that distinction in financial terms are the ones who protect long-term brand budgets.
- **Brand drives customer retention.** Brand value doesn't stop at the close. The strongest case to the C-suite is that brand is a compounding asset across the entire customer lifecycle, reinforcing the decision to stay and directly supporting retention. In a recurring revenue model, that argument lands in financial terms the CFO already cares about.

Investment Benchmarks

Binet and Field's research on B2B effectiveness recommends allocating roughly 46% of budget to brand building and 54% to demand generation. Most CMOs agree with the principle. The 2025 Brand vs Demand survey of 168 B2B technology companies found that CMOs' preferred split is 50% demand and 40% brand (the remaining 10% goes to ops, tech, and similar).

But preferred and actual are two different things: the real split is 70% demand and 25% brand. CMOs know they're underinvesting, and they haven't been able to close the gap.

The constraint is measurement, not conviction. In the same survey, 73% said brand makes demand gen more efficient. 63% said brand directly fuels pipeline. Yet only 28% could tie brand investment to pipeline dollars. Brand gets cut first not because CMOs doubt it works, but because demand gen has the dashboards and brand doesn't.

If you want the ability to rebalance, brand has to show up where the board already looks: pipeline velocity, CAC efficiency, win rate, and investment per pipeline dollar.



"The real challenge is building enough digital mass so your brand becomes the natural choice when buyers are ready to engage."

— Lisa Cole, CMO of 2X and author of "The Limitless CMO"

Where CMOs Are Building Brand

AI has made content creation nearly free. The result: feeds filled with polished content that offers nothing, even when superficially personalized. As Honeycomb CMO Julie Neumann warns, the ease of generation has led to a “massive distribution of AI slop.” Cutting through requires content and messaging that is unmistakably human in its origin and point of view.

That’s why across our interviews, three brand-building strategies were emphasized:

1. Experiences That Can’t Be Summarized

When AI can create any content asset, human, in-person moments become the differentiator. The CMOs we interviewed are consistently shifting budget from large trade shows toward curated, high-touch events where customers validate the brand in conversation with prospects. Peter Isaacson at Invoca is “leaning more into in-person” with hosted dinners and targeted events. Sprout Social’s Morris describes a deliberate shift toward “fewer bigger events” designed to “win over the hearts and minds” of key executives. These intimate settings drive outsized conversion, provided buyers feel the event is forward-looking and that the brand is acting as a genuine thought partner.

2. Relationships That Can’t Be Automated

When buyers can’t distinguish signal from noise, they use the source as a proxy for quality. David Keene at Agentive identifies customer case studies as “the lowest cost and most effective way of building awareness right now.” Peer-to-peer learning works because you can’t cement a market position until others are telling your story for you. This also explains why ecosystem-led growth and B2B influencer programs are gaining traction. Forrester predicts 75% of enterprise B2B companies will increase influencer relations budgets in 2026. Trust flows through relationships faster than through content.

3. Craftsmanship That Signals Substance

When anything can be generated in seconds, evidence of genuine human effort becomes a trust signal. Companies like Carta and Gong have built category authority by publishing insights derived from proprietary data that no AI could generate, because the underlying data doesn’t exist in any training set. To stand out, brands must double down on original ideas and quality production rather than outsourcing their thinking to machines.

The common thread: all three require investment that can’t be shortcut. That’s what makes them durable in an era where most marketing content is commoditized.



SYDNEY'S DIRECT ADVICE

Every CMO I know loses the brand budget fight the same way: by asking for it. The moment “I need more budget for brand” crosses your lips, you’ve framed the conversation on the CFO’s terms and the CFO always wins that one. The move I’ve learned the hard way is to stop asking and start cutting. Every B2B marketing organization I’ve led carried 20–25% of its demand spend in programs nobody would defend in a room: paid social that’s ghosting, overpaying for PPC and building gated content no one downloads. That’s your brand budget. Don’t petition for it — redirect it. Walk into your CFO with a flat total budget, a sharper mix, and a commitment to a rising brand index alongside keeping your commitment to your pipeline goal.

The harder truth: if you need your CFO’s permission to build your brand, you’ve already lost the credibility war from Imperative 1. The CMOs who actually fund brand aren’t the ones with the best ROI models — they’re the ones whose CEOs trust them enough to let them make the call. That trust is banked one forecast at a time, long before the brand ever comes up. So if brand is getting cut again this quarter, the problem isn’t your brand case. It’s that you haven’t earned enough pipeline credibility to spend it yet.

Action Agenda: Imperative 3

Invest in Brand as a Strategic Economic Asset

TIME FRAME: Next 30 Days

ACTION

MAP YOUR 95-5 EXPOSURE

What to do?

Estimate the size of your out-of-market TAM and model what it would cost to be in consideration when they enter a buying cycle.

Compare that against your current brand investment. The gap between those two numbers is your brand underinvestment problem, expressed in terms a CFO can act on.

TIME FRAME: Next 60 Days

ACTION

SURVEY YOUR BRAND HEALTH

What to do?

Add a lightweight brand survey to your brand tracking. Track aided and unaided awareness, brand perception, and shortlist position in your ICP.

Budget ~\$10K and two to three weeks for 100 targeted respondents.

TIME FRAME: Next 90 Days

ACTION

BUILD A CUSTOMER EVIDENCE PROGRAM

What to do?

Create a systematic process for capturing, producing, and distributing customer evidence. Prioritize video and peer review formats.

TIME FRAME: Next 6 Months

ACTION

MODEL BRAND ROI WITH THE CFO

What to do?

Build an economic model showing how brand investment lowers CAC, improves win rates, and shortens sales cycles. Create the model in the language of investment returns, not marketing metrics.

Cut low performing demand gen programs and redirect the investment to brand. Once you can prove it's working you can ask for more budget.

Imperative 04

Lead Marketing Through AI's Disruption of the Customer Journey

AI Is Rewiring The Buying Process

Buyers now use ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini to research vendors before engaging sales — and by the time they reach your website, they have a different intent than they would have a year ago. When a buyer asks an LLM to compare vendors in your category, whether your company appears, how it's characterized, and what evidence gets cited matters as much as your Google ranking used to. As Agentive's Keene puts it, ensuring high visibility with key LLMs is now the primary mechanism for "making the shortlist."

Traffic may be down, but AI-referred traffic converts at significantly higher rates. Chargebee CMO Guy Marion reports that LLM-based traffic is "converting at a vastly higher rate than traditional direct or even SEO inbound traffic." The implication: fewer visitors, but the ones who arrive are more qualified and further along in their buying process. These visitors have already been briefed by an LLM so they don't need your 101 content. They need fast paths to pricing, technical depth, and a reason to talk to sales.

But optimizing for AI search is just the beginning. The deeper shift is that AI agents are becoming a permanent audience for B2B marketing alongside human buyers. Today, agents summarize vendor websites and filter email inboxes. Tomorrow, they'll research categories, evaluate vendors, and make shortlist recommendations on behalf of their human stakeholders. Scott Brinker calls this "marketing to tech": treating AI agents as members of the buying committee.

For CMOs, this means rethinking marketing to serve dual audiences. Humans need branded experiences optimized for emotional engagement. Agents need structured access to the information they're looking for: pricing, capabilities, competitive differentiation, integration details. That's why CMOs are investing in structured content designed explicitly for LLMs, review sites, and communities — because if buyers and machines can't find you early, nothing else downstream matters. As Xebia CMO Keith Landis frames it, "the job is to market to AI in order to get to the human connections that ultimately close deals."

A practical caveat: the current work to optimize static content specifically for AI engines (structured FAQs, schema markup, machine-readable formatting) matters in 2026, and the CMOs in our research confirmed this. But over time, these specific technical tactics will likely become less necessary as AI gets better at reading human-optimized content, much the way early SEO keyword stuffing gave way to Google simply understanding good content. The durable investment is in investing in quality brand and treating AI agents as a core audience. The specific markup tactics are a temporary bridge.



“We have to really lean into the traffic that comes from LLMs and understand that when that traffic comes to us, it is more engaged [and] they are more informed.”

— Amber Armstrong, CMO, Salesforce Agentforce

33%

Decline in Google search traffic globally in 2025

(Chartbeat/Reuters Institute)

90%

Of buyers use ChatGPT or AI tools for research before engaging a vendor

(HubSpot)

3-4

The number of brands cited by AI in a typical response

(BrightEdge/Amsive 2025)

15T

Amount of B2B purchases handled by AI agents by 2028

(Gartner)

The New Visibility Stack

The shift from SEO to now adding AEO (Answer Engine Optimization) is one of the most concrete structural changes in B2B marketing right now. Goldcast reports that they have steeply increased their discoverability on LLMs, which has led to a considerable rise in demos as the type of content they create evolves. Brands that structure content to be cited as authoritative answers, rather than just ranked pages, are gaining early-mover advantage.

Layer 1: Entity Authority

Ensure your content and influencers (CEO, employees and paid influencers) are clearly and consistently represented across the structured data sources that LLMs train on: Wikipedia, Crunchbase, LinkedIn, G2, Reddit, analyst reports, and authoritative press coverage. As Sprout Social CMO Scott Morris notes, it's critical to shift investments toward platforms like G2 because “that’s where modern buyers go to make a lot of their decisions”.

Layer 2: Answer-Structured Content

Redesign key content assets, including buyer guides, comparison pages, and use-case documentation, to answer the specific questions buyers ask as prompts in AI systems. Structure content in your customers' voice with clear topic labeling, FAQ formats, and factual claims that are easy to extract and cite. The goal is to make your information as surfaceable as possible for generative search engines, not just traditional ones.

Layer 3: Third-Party Validation

LLMs weigh third-party sources heavily when people prompt for "the best solution for X". Analyst rankings (Forrester Wave, Gartner Magic Quadrant), peer review platforms, and credible press coverage all feed the AI visibility engine. Build a systematic program for earning these citations.

Layer 4: AI Visibility Measurement

Build an AI citation share metric into your brand index. Use your AEO tools to capture share of answer, citation source, sentiment and LLM referral traffic conversions. Track whether your brand appears, how it is characterized, and whether the evidence cited is accurate. Treat this as you would an SEO ranking report. Amplitude, for instance, has already developed a composite brand health score built partially on an "AI visibility score" to track how they appear in LLM responses, while Webflow's Chief Evangelist Guy Yalif measures market momentum by showing an "increase in answer engine visibility and traffic".



THE AEO REALITY CHECK

Run this test right now: Ask five people to open ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini and type the question your best prospect would ask when they start evaluating vendors in your category. How does your brand appear? What does the AI say about you? What does it say about your top three competitors? The first thing that you'll notice is that every person's answer will be different, it's not the same as how you would run the test on Google Search. This is why you need to invest in an AEO tool that can give you a better, more consistent view of the top prompts and the citation sources of who's powering the answers.

AI as a New Capability, Not Just a New Audience

AI hasn't just changed how buyers research. It also gives CMOs capabilities that weren't previously possible.

The most significant opportunity is for true personalization. For 25 years, marketing technology has promised 1:1 personalization but hasn't delivered. B2B buying is too non-linear, buying committees are too large, and rules-based systems couldn't handle the complexity. The latest wave of AI-generated "personalization" hasn't helped either. When every vendor sends an email that sounds like it was written by a machine referencing your latest LinkedIn post, it stops feeling personal and starts feeling like surveillance.

However, as Denise Persson notes, true AI transformation lies in the "ability to hyper personalize using data to increase your relevance" rather than just automating gener-

ic outreach. Real personalization means the right action for every buyer and account: which offer, through which channel, with what content, at what time, customized to each person's interests and the context of their buying group and account.

Reasoning AI can now finally do this at scale, evaluating all available signals and sequencing the best actions across dozens of campaigns and thousands of accounts simultaneously. AI now excels at buyer signal interpretation and pattern recognition, allowing marketers to bypass tedious lead scoring and instantly personalize actions. It also provides "air traffic control" across the entire marketing program, preventing the message conflicts and frequency overload that plague any organization running multiple campaigns.



"Your brand is being summarized by AI hundreds of times a day. The question is whether you've given it anything worth saying."

— Alexandra London, CMO of G2

Preparing Your Team for the AI Transformation

As AI takes over more campaign execution, the talent profile changes. Zoom's Storin observes that the focus must shift toward hiring more "orchestrators who can manage AI-driven workflows, because that's where speed, efficiency, and scale now come from". The CMOs making the most progress are also investing in AI literacy across the entire team — not just in the ops function, but across content, demand gen, and field marketing.

The human side of this transition deserves as much attention as the technical side. Teams that feel like they're being automated will disengage. Teams that feel like they're being equipped will accelerate. That makes AI change management a retention and capability issue, not just a technology rollout.

Action Agenda: Imperative 4

Lead Marketing Through AI Disruption

TIME FRAME: Next 2 Weeks

ACTION

AUDIT YOUR AI VISIBILITY

What to do?

Invest in an AEO product to get visibility into prompts and citations.

Run Webflow's AEO checker on your site and add LLM referral tracking in GA4.

Review Reddit threads where you or competitors are discussed.

Optimize your G2 profile with natural language, and FAQs.

TIME FRAME: Next 30 Days

ACTION

SET UP MEASUREMENT

What to do?

Establish baseline LLM visibility dashboard.

Measure share of answer, citation source and influence, sentiment and LLM referral traffic.

Monitor conversion rates vs. other source types.

TIME FRAME: Next 45 Days

ACTION

BUILD YOUR AEO CONTENT STRATEGY

What to do?

Build an AI forward content engine trained on the voice of your customer.

Write FAQ-structured content pieces targeting real buyer problems /prompts.

Add competitive comparison content, pro / con lists in LLM friendly formats.

Optimize your website for LLM access.

TIME FRAME: Next 60 Days

ACTION

AUDIT PROGRAMS FOR DUAL AUDIENCES

What to do?

Identify where AI agents are mediating your content before humans see it.

Monitor top citation sources and continue to influence answers (Reddit, G2, LinkedIn, etc.)

Assess whether you're serving both structured content for agents and a compelling brand experience for humans. Redesign at least one.

TIME FRAME: Next 6 Months

ACTION

PILOT AI-POWERED PERSONALIZATION

What to do?

Pick one segment where you can test reasoning AI for journey orchestration. Allow AI to select the right offer, channel, content, and timing from signals rather than static rules. Measure against a control.

Imperative 05

Build the Organization and Capabilities for the Next Decade

The Talent and Structure Challenge

Of all the challenges CMOs named in our research, enabling our talent to be AI forward and incorporating agents into organizational design were the ones CMOs felt least equipped to solve. Storin identifies the core issue: onboarding the right leadership talent who can “translate this vision, be hands on, and actually make it actionable across the organization”.

The challenge is compounded by a fundamental shift in the marketing skill set. AI fluency, data architecture literacy, buying-group-centric campaign design, and AEO strategy are all skills that did not exist meaningfully two years ago. Building a team for 2026 requires a different talent strategy than the one that built most current marketing organizations. As INFUSE’s Albert points out, the new era of marketing requires “fewer tasks executives and more system thinkers” who can act as the human orchestrators in the middle of a highly automated machine.



“As a CMO today, you need to be good at so many things. You need to be a growth architect, you need to be a technologist, and you need to be a customer-obsessed ambassador.”

— Denise Persson, CMO, Snowflake

Four Principles of High-Performing Marketing Organizations

The CMOs in our research are following four principles that break from traditional marketing org design:

Principle 1: Win the Human Side of AI First, Then Unlock Its Full Power

The shift to an AI-native marketing organization requires active leadership to overcome the natural resistance it creates. Webflow’s Yalif notes that AI adoption is funda-

mentally a “human change management” effort, which is why they established an OKR for every employee to have their own “agentic chief of staff” and build AI fluency. At Nutanix, “every single marketer... is in the process of being certified to be AI proficient”. To make this work, Pager-Duty’s CMO emphasizes the need to actively manage the “existential fear” of job security by providing “psychological safety” so teams feel comfortable failing fast and experimenting.



“The bar for marketing is higher than ever. The most effective teams are harnessing AI and automation, upskilling their workforce, and creating new ways of working to distill what matters, demonstrate their impact, and adapt before the market makes the decision for them.”

— Amy King, CMO, Relias

Principle 2: Build a Unified Data Foundation

AI personalization, intent-based targeting, and autonomous journey orchestration all depend on the same prerequisite: unified, contextualized, activation-ready data. Most marketing organizations are attempting to build AI-powered programs on top of legacy, disconnected CRM, MAP, and analytics stacks. But as Keene notes, the ultimate magic wand for modern marketing is simply “clean data, integrated data”. At Amplitude, it took a year and a half to “connect all of the data sources across all of our systems,” but it resulted in near 100% accuracy for measuring pipeline ROI by channel.

Principle 3: Organize Around Buying Journeys and Customer Experience, Not Channels

The traditional marketing organization — digital, demand gen, content, events, product marketing, comms — is a channel-centric structure that makes coordination difficult and attribution opaque. Today’s CMOs are dismantling channel-centric org charts and rebuilding around how buyers actually move through a decision. The point isn’t alignment between separate functions. Take this opportunity to redesign how your teams align to the new customer journey, consider: (1) merging brand and demand into one team responsible for building influence and capturing in market buyers, (2) build a customer education and experience team that engages buying groups across the entirety of the customer lifecycle, and (3) establish product engagement team that focuses on product usage in product experience that drives usage and adoption.

Principle 4: Building the Peer Network as Competitive Advantage

One of the most consistent pieces of advice in our research: leverage peer communities. The pace of change in B2B marketing is now so high that no individual CMO can track, evaluate, and implement every relevant development. As Shay Mowlem, CMO of Contrast Security warns, today’s complex market challenges are “very hard to solve in a backroom with your own internal team alone”.

The CMOs who navigate best are those with strong peer networks where signal is separated from noise through lived experience. Morris validates this, noting that by leaning into your network, you gain access to “a whole bunch of brains who are thinking about all these problems” who can surface actionable ideas faster than you could on your own.

However, the structure of that network matters. Vantage Head of Marketing Amy Holtzman specifies that busy executives need “non-taxing, real peer-to-peer connections,” deliberately avoiding groups overrun by consultants.

Action Agenda: Imperative 5

Build the Organization and Capabilities for the Next Decade

TIME FRAME: Next 30 Days

ACTION

AUDIT YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM FOR 2026 NEEDS

What to do?

Be honest about whether current leaders can grow into these capabilities or whether you need to hire. The answer shapes your next six months of talent decisions.

TIME FRAME: Next 90 Days

ACTION

MAP YOUR DATA FOUNDATION GAPS

What to do?

Audit the connection between your CRM, MAP, intent data, and analytics stack. Assess whether your current stack can get you there or whether the legacy tools themselves are the constraint.

TIME FRAME: Next 60 Days

ACTION

REDESIGN MARKETING ORG AND ALIGN WITH YOUR PEERS

What to do?

Create a one-page operating framework for how marketing works in the future. Discuss new expected skill sets, role and responsibility changes. Vet it with your C-Suite partners to align with their team changes and update how teams work, where work is offloaded to agents and future strategies for continuous AI innovation.

TIME FRAME: Next 6 Months

ACTION

JOIN A CMO PEER NETWORK

What to do?

Identify three to five peer CMOs in non-competing companies who are navigating the same shifts. Join a regular exchange forum (like The B2B CMO Project.)

The CMO Transformation Roadmap

Most B2B CMOs are stuck in a vicious cycle. Without C-suite credibility, you can't secure long-term brand investment. Without brand investment, building pipeline depends entirely on capturing the 5% already in-market, which gets more expensive every quarter. Without pipeline results, you can't prove marketing's value in terms the CFO respects. And without that proof, you never earn credibility. The typical response (more MQLs, more attribution reports, more demand gen volume) only tightens the trap.

The CMOs featured in this report — from Zoom, Snowflake, PagerDuty, Nutanix, Salesforce, Sprout Social, and others — broke out by attacking the cycle at multiple points simultaneously: earning trust through business fluency, reframing metrics, investing in brand, building AI visibility. When those reinforce each other, the cycle reverses. Credibility unlocks brand investment. Brand investment builds pipeline. Pipeline results prove marketing's value. And that proof deepens credibility further

The question is where to enter the cycle given where you are today.

FINDING YOUR STARTING POINT

Every imperative includes a detailed action agenda, so the question is where to start. Look for the constraint that, if addressed first, would unlock the others:

- **If your CEO or CFO views marketing as a cost center:** Start with Imperative 1. Run the C-suite audit. Surface a risk before anyone asks you about it. No strategic shift survives without executive sponsorship.
- **If you have executive trust but keep getting pulled into MQL and attribution debates:** Start with Imperative 2. The three-tier framework (Business Outcomes, Leading Indicators, Operating Metrics) gives you a bridge between the metrics your board expects and the ones that actually predict revenue.
- **If pipeline is declining despite steady demand gen investment:** Start with Imperative 3. You likely have a brand problem showing up as a pipeline problem. Map your 95-5 exposure and model what it costs to be absent when buyers enter the market.
- **If competitors are gaining AI visibility while your web traffic is flat:** Start with Imperative 4. Run the AEO audit this week. The results will make the case.
- **If you have the strategy but can't execute:** Start with Imperative 5. Strategy without the right team and data foundation is a slide deck.

Most CMOs will recognize themselves in more than one of these. Pick the one that, if solved, would make the others easier.

The ones making progress share a common trait: they stopped optimizing a broken system and started building a new one.

THE BOTTOM LINE



The traditional B2B playbook was built for a world that no longer exists, and the metrics it generated actively undermined the credibility it was supposed to build. This report has laid out what replaces it: five imperatives, grounded in the experience of more than 50 CMOs who are navigating the same transition. None of them have it fully figured out. But the ones making progress share a common trait: they stopped optimizing a broken system and started building a new one. The playbook has changed. The question is whether you'll change with it.

Want to hear more from your peers?



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APPENDIX:

KEY RESEARCH SOURCES AND CMO CONTRIBUTORS

Primary Research: CMO Interview Contributors

The following senior marketing leaders contributed insights directly to this report through primary interviews:

Victoria Albert, CMO, INFUSE
Amber Armstrong, CMO, Salesforce Agentforce
Michael Atalla, CMO, UiPath
Heidi Bullock, CMO, Tealium
Katherine Post Calvert, Chief Marketing and Growth Officer, PagerDuty
Lisa Cole, CMO, 2X
Mandy Dhaliwal, CMO, Nutanix
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Renny Fidlón, CMO, Ancira
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Amy King, CMO, Relias
Keith Landis, CMO, Xebia
Alexandra London, CMO, G2
Scott Morris, CMO, Sprout Social
Shay Mowlem, CMO, Contrast Security
Julie Neumann, CMO, Honeycomb
Denise Persson, CMO, Snowflake
Raj Sarkar, CMO, CloudBees
Kimberly Storin, CMO, Zoom
Lena Waters, Strategic Advisor
Guy Yalif, Chief Evangelist, Webflow
Cindy Zhou, CMO, Imprivata

Secondary Research and Data Sources

- [McKinsey: The Power of Partnership — How the CEO-CMO Relationship Can Drive Outsize Growth \(2023\)](#)
- [McKinsey: The Changing Role of the CMO and What It Means for Growth](#)
- [Forrester Research: B2B Marketing Decision-Maker Benchmarks \(2025–2026\)](#)
- [Gartner: CMO Spend Survey and Strategic Dysfunction Research \(2025\)](#)
- [HubSpot: 2026 State of Marketing Report \(1,500 global marketing leaders\)](#)
- [Jon Miller: 11 Predictions for B2B Go-to-Market in 2026 \(Chiefmartec, January 2026\)](#)
- [G2 / Sydney Sloan: 2025 B2B Software Buyer Behavior Report](#)
- [Renegade Marketing: State of Marketing Leadership 2025 \(CMO Super Huddle Data\)](#)
- [Brand vs Demand Benchmarks \(Benchmarkit, 2025\)](#)



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