

A 2026 B2B SAAS BENCHMARK REPORT

# The Real Cost of Growth.

What founders at \$1M–\$10M ARR actually pay for pipeline — across agencies, fractional CMOs, and in-house teams — why the math has quietly inverted, and the operating model rewriting it. Every benchmark independently sourced.

7

data-backed  
sections

6

sourced  
exhibits

1

number that  
actually matters

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## CONTENTS

# What's inside, and how to read it.

This report is built to be skimmed by a busy operator and defended in a board meeting. Each section pairs an independently sourced benchmark with a plain-English read on what it means for a company between \$1M and \$10M ARR. Start with the executive summary; jump to any section by the number below.

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Prepared by gRO (Growth Revenue Optimization). All third-party figures were verified against primary or named secondary sources as of May 2026 and are listed in full on page 13. Client and award names are withheld by policy; outcomes cited are historical and engagement-specific.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# The cost of growth has inverted. Here's the math.

For B2B SaaS companies between \$1M and \$10M ARR, the economics of acquiring a customer have quietly turned against the buyer. The price of a qualified lead is climbing, the time to earn that acquisition back is stretching, and trust in the agencies selling the leads is falling — while the in-house alternative now costs more than most companies at this stage can absorb before it produces a result.

This report quantifies that squeeze across four lenses — partner trust, unit economics, channel cost, and team cost — using independently sourced 2025 benchmarks. The conclusion is consistent across all four: **the constraint on growth is no longer execution capacity. It is ownership** — the structural gap between the person who sets the strategy and the person who does the work, and the fact that in every traditional model, neither is accountable to the pipeline number.

## The four numbers that define the squeeze

<p><b>25pts</b></p> <p>Gap between what marketers need from an agency and what they get.</p>	<p><b>18mo</b></p> <p>Median SaaS CAC payback in 2024 — up from 14 the year before.</p>	<p><b>\$150-</b></p> <p><b>250</b></p> <p>Cost of a single enterprise B2B lead on LinkedIn.</p>	<p><b>\$545k+</b></p> <p>Annual cost to build the growth function in-house.</p>
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Sources: Forrester 2025; Benchmarkit 2025; Stackmatix 2025; itemized US market comp. Full citations p.13.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

The companies winning this stage are not spending more — they have removed the gap. One senior operator owns strategy and execution end-to-end, uses AI to scale the work that doesn't require judgment, and answers for one number: pipeline. The rest of this report shows why that shift is rational, not ideological.

01 · THE TRUST GAP

# Budgets are leaving agencies – and so is the trust.

The agency relationship is breaking at the seam that is hardest to repair: confidence in the partner. In Forrester's 2025 B2B Brand and Communications Survey, the share of marketers planning to *increase* agency investment in digital marketing fell 14 points in a single year, with content creation down 10 and brand work down 11. This is not a budget cut at the margins – it is a directional vote of no confidence.

The deeper signal is the satisfaction gap. Eighty percent of marketing leaders say clear communication with their growth partner is critical; only 55% are satisfied – a 25-point gap. On value, 70% prioritize it over cost, yet just 53% feel they receive it. These are not complaints about a single account manager. They are structural: the model puts the people who *report* the numbers at a distance from the people who can *change* them.

EXHIBIT 1

## What founders need vs. what agencies deliver

Say clear communication with their growth partner is critical



Are actually satisfied with their agency



Source: Forrester, "Shrinking Budgets And Rising Expectations Challenge B2B Agency Partnerships," 2025 (2025 B2B Brand And Communications Survey).



“I’ve never seen a founder fire an agency because the dashboards looked bad. They fire them because the number stopped moving – and nobody in the room actually owned it.

– RO MALDONADO, FOUNDER, gRO

### THE BOTTOM LINE

When the partner who explains the miss isn't the partner who can fix it, no amount of communication closes the gap. Trust follows accountability – and accountability requires one owner.

02 · THE UNIT-ECONOMICS TEST

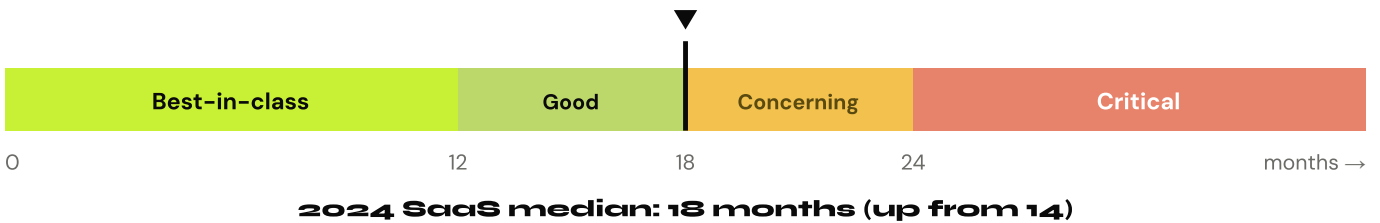
# How long should it take to earn an acquisition back?

CAC payback — the number of months of gross margin it takes to recover the cost of winning a customer — is the single clearest read on whether growth is healthy or quietly bleeding. It cuts through vanity metrics: a campaign can post a strong click-through rate and still sell customers the business loses money on for two years.

The benchmark is moving the wrong way. Benchmarkit's 2025 data puts the median SaaS payback at 18 months in 2024, up from 14 the year prior. Best-in-class companies recover in under 12; past 24 months, growth is effectively unfinanceable without outside capital. For a company at \$1M–\$10M ARR, every month added to payback is working capital you don't have — and the difference between compounding and stalling.

EXHIBIT 2

CAC payback benchmark bands (months to recover)



Sources: Benchmarkit, "2025 SaaS Performance Metrics" (median). First Page Sage, "SaaS CAC Payback Benchmarks: 2025 Report" (band definitions).

<p><b>&lt;12</b></p> <p>Months to payback for best-in-class SaaS. The bar for a fundable growth engine.</p>	<p><b>15</b></p> <p>Median months for B2B SaaS specifically — most sit in the "good-to-concerning" band.</p>	<p><b>24+</b></p> <p>Months where growth becomes structurally unfinanceable without outside capital.</p>
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THE BOTTOM LINE

Payback is leaking in places no agency report surfaces — channel mix, mid-funnel conversion, offer clarity. Finding those leaks before adding spend is the highest-return move available at this stage, and it is the first thing an accountable operator does.

03 · WHERE THE MONEY LEAKS

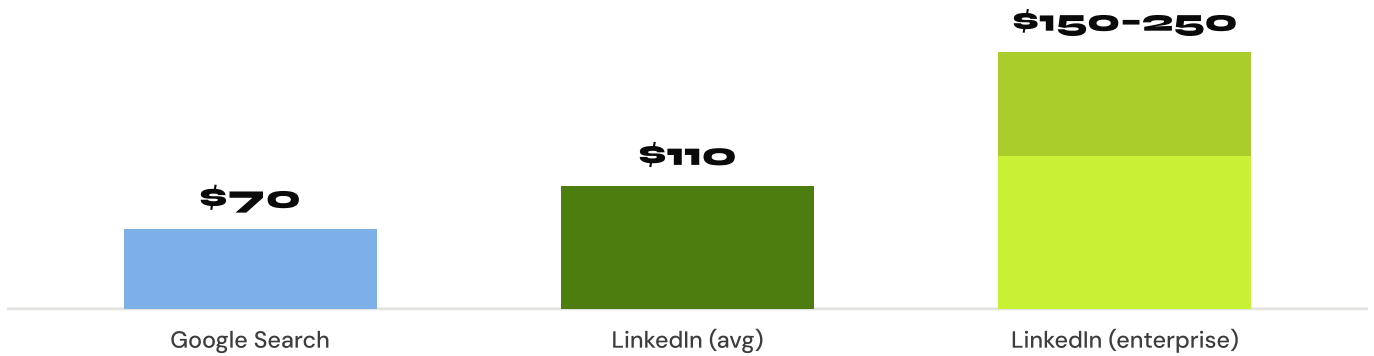
# Every lead is expensive. Wasted leads are catastrophic.

B2B leads are not cheap on any channel. In 2025, the average qualified lead runs roughly \$70 on Google Search and \$110 on LinkedIn — and \$150–\$250 once you're targeting enterprise and C-suite buyers. Those are the rates for a *good* lead. The real damage is paying those rates for leads that never had a chance to convert because the targeting was wrong and no one checked.

This is where the ownership gap shows up as hard dollars. Misconfigured geography, a default age cohort, an audience that can't transact — these don't show up in the CPC and CTR an agency reports. They only surface when a senior operator opens the platform and pulls the breakdown by hand.

EXHIBIT 3

Average B2B cost per qualified lead, by channel (2025, USD)



Sources: WordStream 2025 (~\$70 Google), via Sopro "B2B cost per lead benchmarks 2025." Stackmatix, "LinkedIn Ads Cost Per Lead Benchmarks" (\$110 avg; \$150–250 enterprise).



“Early in my career I inherited two agency campaigns that burned \$13,000 between them — one ran ads to a continent we didn't sell in, the other to an age cohort that never bought. Both took five minutes inside the platform to catch. Nobody had spent those five minutes.

— RO MALDONADO, FOUNDER, GRO

THE BOTTOM LINE

The most expensive line item in paid acquisition isn't media — it's the targeting nobody audited. An operator inside the platform *and* inside the business closes that gap on day one.

04 · THE IN-HOUSE MATH

# What a real growth team costs you every month.

"Build it in-house" promises control. In practice it is five specialist hires, roughly four months to recruit and four more to ramp, and a payroll line that runs in full before a single result lands. The table below is the monthly cost of the team most \$1M–\$10M ARR founders are told they need to cover the funnel end-to-end.

EXHIBIT 4

## Monthly cost to staff the growth function in-house

Head of Growth / VP Marketing	\$15,000 – \$22,000
Paid Media Specialist	\$6,000 – \$10,000
Conversion Copywriter	\$4,000 – \$6,000
Marketing Analyst	\$5,000 – \$7,000
Account / Project Management	\$4,000 – \$6,000
<b>Loaded monthly cost</b>	<b>\$34,000 – \$51,000</b>

Itemized US market compensation ranges, 2025 (illustrative). Excludes benefits, software, recruiting, and ramp inefficiency — all of which push the true figure higher.

Annualized, that is **\$545,000 to \$820,000** before benefits and tooling — and before the eight-month ramp produces measurable pipeline. At \$1M–\$10M ARR, that commits 6–15% of revenue to fixed overhead, with the result still a year out and a severance conversation as the downside case.

**\$545K-**  
**\$820K**

Fully-loaded annual cost of the five-person team, before benefits and tools.

**8 mo**

Typical time to hire and ramp the function — months of cost before the first result.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The in-house team is the most expensive and slowest path to the same functions — strategy, paid acquisition, copy, lifecycle, analytics — and the only one where you carry the hiring, management, and severance risk yourself. You're buying an org chart, not an outcome.

05 · FOUR WAYS TO BUY GROWTH

# Same goal. Four very different bills.

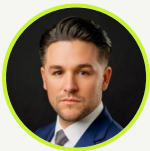
Cost is only half the comparison. The other half is who actually owns the number. Across the in-house team, the traditional agency, and the fractional CMO, the constant is a gap between the person who sets strategy and the person doing the work — and the fact that none of them is on the hook for pipeline. Operator-Led Growth is the only model that removes the gap by making them the same person.

EXHIBIT 5

## How the four models compare

	In-House Team	Traditional Agency	Fractional CMO	Operator-Led Growth
Monthly cost	\$34K–\$51K	\$10K–\$40K	\$5K–\$25K	One operator, flat retainer
Who executes	The team you hire	Rotating junior staff	Hands it to someone else	The same operator who set strategy
Accountable to pipeline	To their manager	To deliverables	To the strategy doc	To the pipeline number
Time to results	~8 months to ramp	Onboarding + "learning quarter"	Strategy fast, execution stalls	Audit in days; building week one
Translation layers	2–3 internal	3–4 (AM→strat→buyer→creative)	2–3 (strategy → executor)	Zero

Cost ranges are illustrative US market figures (in-house from p.07; agency and fractional from common 2025 market pricing). Non-cost rows describe structural model differences.



“Founders don’t actually want a bigger team. They want one person who answers for the pipeline number the same way they have to answer for it to their board.

— RO MALDONADO, FOUNDER, gRO

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Every traditional model preserves a gap between the thinking and the doing. In that gap, judgment is lost and timelines stretch. Removing it — not adding headcount — is what changes the number.

06 · THE MODEL THAT CLOSES THE GAP

# Operator-Led Growth

Operator-Led Growth (OLG) is not a service tier or a rebranded retainer. It is a structural answer to the ownership gap this report has measured: one senior operator owns strategy *and* execution, uses AI to scale the work that doesn't require judgment, and is accountable to a single number — pipeline. It runs as one continuous loop, not a relay race handed between teams.

EXHIBIT 6

The operating loop



**01**  
**One operator owns strategy & execution**  
 The person who diagnoses your funnel writes the copy and reads the data the next morning. No brief to mistranslate, no account team to rotate off.

**02**  
**AI handles execution. Judgment stays human.**  
 AI scales creative, variant testing, and reporting at volume. Senior judgment is spent only where it can't be automated — diagnosis and prioritization.

**03**  
**Accountable to the pipeline number**  
 Not impressions, not campaigns launched — the one number that decides whether your revenue target is in reach.

The leverage is real but secondary: AI is what lets a single operator out-produce a five-person team. The operator — fifteen-plus years of pattern recognition across fintech, financial services, and B2B SaaS — is what makes the output worth producing. Capacity was never the scarce resource. Judgment is.

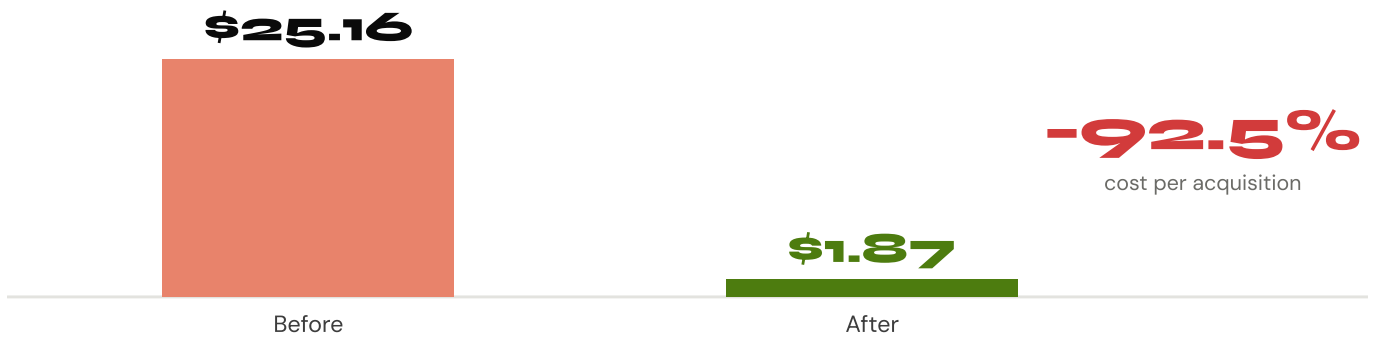
07 · PROOF IN PRACTICE

# The model has already moved real numbers.

The following are anonymized outcomes from fifteen years of operating across fintech, financial services, and B2B SaaS — the same principles gRO runs on today: senior judgment, direct execution, AI leverage, and accountability to the pipeline number. Client and award names are withheld by policy; the mechanics are not.

EXHIBIT 7

## Cost per acquisition, before and after operator ownership — a wealthtech platform



Anonymized outcome from the founder's operating career. Figures are historical and engagement-specific.

<b>603%</b> User growth in 90 days for the same platform, alongside the CAC collapse above.	<b>\$400M+</b> Pipeline contribution delivered at institutional scale, zero compliance-audit infractions.	<b>8</b> Industry awards for SEM and campaign execution across a 15-year career.
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“Every result I'm proud of came from the same move — collapsing the distance between the decision and the execution to zero.

— RO MALDONADO, FOUNDER, gRO

READ THIS HONESTLY

These are portfolio results, anonymized by design. They show what operator ownership produces against a real revenue target — not a guarantee of identical numbers for your funnel. The diagnostic on the next page is how we find out what's possible for yours.

APPLY IT · THE DIAGNOSTIC

# Seven questions before you spend another dollar.

A condensed version of the diagnostic gRO runs at the start of every engagement — one question per funnel stage. Any box you can't confidently check is a place pipeline is leaking, and a place an accountable operator would start.

- POSITIONING**  
Can you state, in one sentence, why your best-fit buyer chooses you over the status quo — and does your site say it that clearly?

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- ICP**  
Is your paid targeting built from your actual closed-won customer data, not a planner's default persona?

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- OFFER**  
Is there a single, low-friction entry offer that turns interest into a booked conversation?

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- ACQUISITION**  
Do you know your CAC and payback by channel this month — not last quarter — and is anyone accountable for it?

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- NURTURE**  
Does a lead who isn't ready today get a sequence that earns the meeting later, or do they go cold?

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- SALES ENABLEMENT**  
Can sales tell, for any lead, where it came from and what it engaged with before the call?

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- RETENTION**  
Is anyone owning expansion and net revenue retention with the same rigor as new acquisition?

**MOST FOUNDERS CHECK THREE OR FOUR**

That's normal at \$1M–\$10M ARR. The full 47-point version scores every stage and ranks the fixes by pipeline impact — it's the first deliverable of any gRO engagement, delivered in writing in five business days.



THE OPERATOR

# Ro Maldonado

Founder of gRO. 15+ years building and owning the full acquisition funnel across fintech, financial services, and B2B SaaS — accountable to a revenue number, not an activity report.

## Start with the audit — not a contract.

A full written audit of your acquisition funnel — CPL by channel, conversion at every stage, offer clarity, audience fit — delivered in five business days. Flat fee of **\$1,500–\$2,500**, credited in full toward the first month of any retainer signed within 60 days. If there's no clear scaling opportunity, the engagement doesn't proceed.

WHAT THE OPERATOR OWNS, END-TO-END

Positioning

Paid acquisition

Lifecycle email

Copy

Analytics

Forecasting

Weekly optimization

**One operator.**  
**One system.**  
**One pipeline number.**

**Ready when you are.**

Reply with a few times that work, or reach out directly.

THE REAL COST OF GROWTH · GRO

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METHODOLOGY & SOURCES

# Every number, sourced.

All third-party benchmarks in this report were verified against primary or named secondary sources as of May 2026. Where figures are presented as a range, the range reflects genuine variation across customer segment, average contract value, and reporting source — not imprecision. Statistics that could not be tied to a verifiable source were excluded rather than published. Cost figures for the in-house and alternative models are clearly labeled as illustrative US market ranges. Outcomes attributed to gRO are anonymized results from the founder's operating career; they are historical, engagement-specific, and not a forecast of results for any other company.

## SOURCES

- 1 **Forrester**, "Shrinking Budgets And Rising Expectations Challenge B2B Agency Partnerships," 2025 (2025 B2B Brand And Communications Survey). — forrester.com
- 2 **Benchmarkit**, "2025 SaaS Performance Metrics" — median CAC payback of 18 months in 2024. — benchmarkit.ai
- 3 **First Page Sage**, "SaaS CAC Payback Benchmarks: 2025 Report" — band definitions (best-in-class <12mo). — firstpagesage.com
- 4 **WordStream** 2025 B2B cost-per-lead data (~\$70, Google Search), reported via **Sopro**, "B2B cost per lead benchmarks by channel and industry (2025)." — sopro.io
- 5 **Stackmatix**, "LinkedIn Ads Cost Per Lead Benchmarks" — \$110 average; \$150–\$250 for enterprise / C-suite targeting. — stackmatix.com
- 6 **In-house compensation** — itemized illustrative US market ranges, 2025; excludes benefits, tooling, and ramp.
- 7 **gRO portfolio outcomes** — anonymized results from the founder's 15-year operating career; client and award names withheld by policy.

### A NOTE ON WHAT WE CUT

Three figures common in marketing decks were removed from this report because no primary source could be confirmed: a frequently cited "89% LinkedIn CPL increase," a "42% of CAC is recoverable" claim, and a "sub-6-month top-quartile payback" that the verified data contradicts. We'd rather publish fewer numbers we can stand behind.