
THE FRAMEWORK

Define who actually buys. Then build the route to reach them.

A working method for building go-to-market on evidence instead of instinct: five stages to a defensible ideal customer profile, four components of a plan worth documenting, and the handful of metrics that predict revenue.

This is the same framework we run inside a paid assessment. It is written to be used without us. If you would rather not spend a quarter finding out whether it works, that is what a scoping call is for.

Growth is not a product problem nearly as often as people think.

Only one in ten S&P 500 companies has grown faster than GDP for more than thirty years. These are not undercapitalized startups with unproven products. They are the largest, best-resourced companies in the country, and nine out of ten of them cannot sustain growth.

When companies fail outright, running out of capital is the most commonly cited cause, named in 70% of the shutdowns CB Insights analyzed. But 43% cite poor product-market fit, and that is usually the upstream reason the money ran out: the company never established who the buyer actually was, why that buyer would care, or how to reach enough of them to matter. That is a go-to-market failure. Unlike most failures, it is diagnosable early and fixable cheaply, which is the entire reason this document exists.

WHAT GOES WRONG, ALMOST ALWAYS

The ICP is a guess

Targeting is built from who answered the phone last quarter rather than from who converts, expands, and renews. Nobody has checked the assumption against the company's own numbers.

The plan is never written down

It lives in a founder's head or a VP's instincts. Every new hire reinvents the pitch, every campaign starts from zero, and nothing compounds.

Hiring is the only lever

The reflex is headcount. Ramp runs six to nine months, and the cost lands well before the first qualified meeting does, assuming the hire was right.

Tools were bought, not built into a system

A stack of platforms nobody owns end to end, generating activity metrics that look like progress and predict nothing.

How to use this document

Part one is the ICP process, five stages, roughly five to six weeks if you run it properly. Part two is the go-to-market plan those findings feed. Part three is measurement. The last page is a blank template: when you can fill every field on it from evidence rather than opinion, you have a go-to-market strategy. Until then you have a hypothesis, which is fine, as long as you know which one you are holding.

Sources: McKinsey & Company on long-run S&P 500 growth. CB Insights, analysis of 431 venture-backed shutdowns, updated March 2026 — percentages exceed 100% because companies cite more than one cause.

Five stages, built from your evidence.

An ICP is not a persona document or a demographic sketch. It is an evidence-based definition of which buyers produce the best economic outcome for your business, derived from your own history and validated against live market response before you commit budget to it.

STAGE 1 Discovery and data assembly

Establish the factual baseline before forming any opinion. Most of what you need already exists inside the company and has never been read as a single picture.

- The last 24 to 36 months of closed business: client, deal type, contract value, source of introduction, margin, and whether they came back
- Inbound inquiry history, including the opportunities you declined or lost, and the honest reason for each
- The current new-business process as it actually operates today, not as the org chart says it should
- Competitive landscape: who you meet in consideration sets, and where deals are won or lost

OUTPUT A single source of truth on where revenue has actually come from, and at what quality.

STAGE 2 Economic segmentation

Find the pattern already hiding in the book of work. The goal is to rank segments by what they are worth, not by which ones felt good to win.

- Segment historical business by profitability rather than by prestige, logo value, or visibility
- Separate the client types that produced repeat engagements from the ones that produced a single project
- Identify what the highest-value relationships share: sector, size, budget authority, buying cadence, internal structure
- Calculate effective value per relationship over time, not per transaction
- Write down the disqualifiers: the profiles that consumed capacity without proportionate return

OUTPUT A ranked view of which segments deserve pursuit, supported by your own numbers.

STAGE 3 Buyer definition and committee mapping

Move from company-level targeting to person-level targeting. Companies do not buy things; a small group of people inside them does.

- Define the roles that initiate, influence, and approve spend inside the target segments
- Separate the distinct routes to the same budget, since they rarely respond to the same argument
- Map the trigger events that create demand: funding, leadership changes, launches, rebrands, seasonal and planning cycles, regulatory deadlines
- Document the buying process itself, including realistic time from first contact to signature

OUTPUT A written buyer definition specific enough to target directly, with the triggers that indicate timing.

The argument, and the test.

STAGE 4 Positioning and message development

Build the argument that makes a qualified buyer take the meeting. Note the order: this comes after the evidence, not before it. Most companies write the message first and then look for someone to believe it.

- Articulate what you offer that the alternative does not, framed in the buyer's terms rather than your own
- Develop distinct message tracks per segment, because two buyers in different roles do not respond to the same argument
- Position against the realistic alternatives, which include the in-house option and the option of doing nothing this quarter
- Match proof points from existing work to each segment, so the claim arrives with evidence attached
- Draft the outreach messaging you will actually test in stage five

OUTPUT Segment-specific positioning and message frameworks, ready for market validation.

STAGE 5 Market validation and documentation

Test the thesis against reality before committing to it. This is the stage most teams skip, and skipping it is what turns a plausible strategy into an expensive quarter.

- Run live outreach against a sample of the defined profile. Real replies, and typically first meetings, rather than an assumed response
- Refine segment priority and messaging based on what actually engaged
- Build the full plan: segments, channels, message tracks, cadence, sequencing
- Define the metrics that will govern execution, with baseline expectations and a review rhythm
- Document all of it in a form someone who was not in the room can execute against

OUTPUT A complete, documented ICP and go-to-market strategy, validated against live market signal, plus the conversations the test produced.

What "documented" has to mean

A written ICP with firmographics, trigger events, explicit disqualifiers, and buying-committee roles, specific enough that a new salesperson, an agency, or an AI agent could act on it without asking you a single clarifying question. If it needs your interpretation to be usable, it is not documented. It is still in your head.

Four components. Nothing decorative.

The ICP says who. The go-to-market plan says how you reach them, what you say when you do, and how you will know whether it is working. Four components, each of which has to be written down and owned by a named person.

01 Positioning and message

What you say, to whom, and why it matters to them. Built per segment, not one deck for everyone. The test of a positioning statement is whether a competitor could credibly say the same sentence. If they could, it is a category description, not a position.

02 Channel strategy

Where your buyers actually are, and which motions reach them efficiently at your contract value. Contract value is the constraint people ignore: a motion that is rational at a six-figure deal size is ruinous at four figures, and the reverse is equally true. Pick channels the economics support, not the ones that are fashionable.

03 The sales motion

Stages, qualification criteria, and handoffs, documented so that performance becomes measurable and repeatable rather than personal. Without defined stages you cannot diagnose anything: a deal that stalls is indistinguishable from a deal that was never qualified, and both look identical in a forecast.

04 Metrics that matter

The small number of measures that predict revenue, deliberately separated from the activity metrics that only resemble progress. Covered on the next page, because this is where most go-to-market plans quietly fail.

The ownership test

Every component above needs one name attached. Not a team, not a function. A person. Anything owned by everyone is measured by no one, and go-to-market plans die of shared ownership far more often than they die of bad strategy.

Grade the system, not the person.

Most go-to-market dashboards measure the wrong things because the wrong things are the easiest to collect. The useful question about any metric is not whether it is going up. It is how much it would cost someone to fake it.

TIER	WHAT IT IS	WHAT IT COSTS TO FAKE
Tier 1 — Self-reported	Calls logged, emails sent, activities recorded, stage changes, pipeline confidence	Nothing. Diagnostic value only. Never make this a management metric, because whatever you grade people on is what they will produce.
Tier 2 — Customer-generated	Replies, meetings taken, quotes requested, a new stakeholder appearing on the thread	An hour of the customer's time, which your team cannot spend on their behalf. This is your leading indicator.
Tier 3 — System of record	Orders placed, new lines added, renewals, consumption shifts, revenue recognized	Real business movement. This is what you report on, and it lags by a quarter or more.

Track these

- Qualified conversations per segment, per month
- Reply rate by message track, compared honestly
- Conversion from first conversation to opportunity
- Cycle time from first contact to signature
- Win rate inside the defined ICP versus outside it
- Expansion and renewal by segment

Stop reporting these

- Total activity volume of any kind
- Impressions, reach, and follower counts
- Raw lead count with no qualification behind it
- Pipeline value built from self-assigned confidence
- Anything a person can increase without a customer doing something

The honest interval

Tier 3 evidence lags. There will be a window, usually a quarter, where the truthful answer to "is this working" is that it is too early to tell, and the leading indicators point the right way. Say that, rather than filling the gap with activity counts. Teams that fill that window with Tier 1 metrics train everyone to produce Tier 1 metrics, and the damage outlasts the campaign.

Fill this in from evidence.

If any field below has to be filled from opinion, that field is your next piece of work. Print this page.

PRIMARY SEGMENT

Sector, size band, and the economic characteristic that makes them your best buyer.

WHO SIGNS

Title, and who else must agree.

TRIGGER EVENTS

What makes them need this now.

DISQUALIFIERS

The profiles you will decline, and why. A profile with no disqualifiers is not a profile.

THE CLAIM

One sentence a competitor could not credibly say about themselves.

CHANNELS

And why the economics support each.

THE ONE METRIC

Tier 2 or 3. Reviewed how often, by whom.

OWNER

One name. Not a team.

— IF YOU WOULD RATHER NOT RUN IT ALONE

Market problem, or message problem?

A scoping call is thirty minutes. We look at your current motion, your data, and where the leak is. No deck and no pitch. If there is a fit we will say so, and if there is not we will say that too.

[Book a scoping call → calendly.com/aaron-outpacelabs/30min](https://calendly.com/aaron-outpacelabs/30min)

Strategy

ICP definition and the documented go-to-market plan to reach it. Fixed scope, fixed timeline, and you own the output whether or not we go further. You finish with live conversations already in motion, not just a document.

Execution

AI agents running outbound and marketing against the plan, with experienced enterprise closers layered on if you want them.

Build

Custom AI builds and honest build-versus-buy anti-consulting for the places where an existing platform is not the answer.