

THE MARKETER QUESTION

Nobody needs a marketer. People need *customers*. A marketer is one of several ways to get customers, and by a wide margin the most expensive way to find out you don’t have a product. So before you post the job, let’s do the thing nobody does at this point, which is *think*.

Cost figures are US market, 2026, from the sources at the bottom. Other markets run lower; the ratios hold. Opinions are the author’s and are, as requested, brutally honest.

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HOW TO READ THIS

Answer the five questions in order. Stop where you get a “no” and do what it says. Only a “yes” on all five sends you to the stages, where the hire is a function of size and maturity, not ambition. Cost figures are US, 2026.

FIRST, THE LANGUAGE

Every bad hire begins as a sentence. Here are the sentences, and what they mean when you take the softening out.

“We need to get our name out there.”

→We don’t know who buys this, so we’d like to tell everyone and let them sort it out.

“We need someone to do our social media.”

→We would like to appear busy in public.

“We need to invest in brand.”

→We need customers and would rather not say the word.

“Let’s get an agency.”

→We would like someone to blame in the third quarter.

“Let’s hire someone junior. Cheap, hungry.”

→Let’s hire someone to execute a plan that does not exist, then be surprised.

“We’re bringing in a VP from a big brand.”

→We’re hiring a person who has never worked without twelve staff and a media budget larger than our revenue.

“We’re looking for a rockstar. A ninja. A growth hacker.”

→We want three jobs done for one salary by someone who won’t notice.

“We need a full-funnel omnichannel strategy.”

→Someone read a LinkedIn post.

“Marketing is a cost center.”

→We have never measured it.

“We have a marketing problem.”

→We have a product problem, and marketing is cheaper to blame because it can’t argue back until it’s hired.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

Answer in order. Most people leave at question one or two, which is the whole point: a marketer is what you need when you have run out of *cheaper* things you haven't done yet.

1

Does anyone buy this without you personally in the room?

Not “interested.” Not “loved the demo.” Paid. Twice, ideally.

NO

You don't need a marketer. You need a product people want, or a clearer story about the one you have. Sell it yourself thirty times. That's not marketing; that's research with revenue. Come back after.

YES

Fine. Next. [▶](#)

2

Can you say who it's for and why they pick you in one sentence, without the word “innovative”?

Out loud. To a stranger. Who then repeats it back correctly.

NO

Positioning, not headcount. Buy two or three hours of a senior person's time to write that sentence with you. Then do the marketing yourself, because now you can.

YES

Good. Next. [▶](#)

3

Do you know where your last ten customers came from?

Named source. Not “word of mouth,” which is what people say when they mean “no idea.”

NO

Founder-led marketing plus a spreadsheet. Ask every customer how they found you. Costs nothing, explains everything, and it's the first thing any competent hire would do anyway, at 150 dollars an hour.

YES

Now we're somewhere. Next. [▶](#)

4

Is there one channel where money goes in and customers come out, predictably?

Roughly. You don't need a model; you need a pattern you'd bet your own money on.

NO

Run experiments. Buy the execution by the hour: a freelancer, an AI tool, a very patient cousin. Do not put a salary on the search for a channel. A salary is what you put on a channel you've found.

YES

Last one. [▶](#)

5

Are *you* now the bottleneck?

Experiments stacking up undone. Sales starving for pipeline. You, doing marketing at 11 p.m. and calling it “strategy.”

NO

Keep going. You are the marketer. What you need is hands, not another brain: add execution, keep the judgment.

YES

Congratulations, you need a marketer. *Which* marketer depends entirely on how big you are and how grown-up the business is. That's the next part.

SIX STAGES, SIX ANSWERS

Size and maturity, not ambition. Ambition is what got you here; it is not a hiring plan.

THE IDEA

STAGE 0

Pre-revenue. One to three people. Zero paying customers and a deck with the word “disrupt” in it.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU NEED

Someone to “build buzz” before launch.

SPEND

\$0 to \$500 a month on tools. Maybe a few hundred on a landing page and a logo that isn’t embarrassing.

WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED

You. Founder-led everything, plus the free tools. Talk to fifty people who might pay. Write down what they said, not what you hoped they said.

DON’T

Hire anyone. Retain anyone. Buy buzz. Buzz for a product nobody’s bought is the sound of money leaving.

THE NUMBER — Of 431 VC-backed companies that shut down since 2023, 43% cited poor product-market fit, and two-thirds of those were early-stage companies that never found a market at all. Not “marketed badly.” Never found one.

THE SHOP

STAGE 1

A real small business. Bakery, clinic, plumber, boutique consultancy. One to ten people, under about a million in revenue, and the owner is also the marketing department.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU NEED

An agency. Or “a marketing person.” Or a nephew who’s “good with Instagram.”

SPEND

Half of businesses your size spend under \$1,000 a month total. That’s fine. A few hours of a \$100–175/hour mid-level freelancer beats a \$2,000 retainer that buys you ten hours of a junior and a template.

WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED

You, plus one freelancer, one channel. Google Business Profile, local search, a Meta ad that says what you sell and where. Use the AI tools for the words; you’re one of the 81% doing that already. Pay a specialist by the hour to set up the one channel your customers actually use.

DON’T

Sign a twelve-month agency contract at the entry tier. The entry tier is, by the agencies’ own description, “junior staff, template-based strategy.” You’re renting someone else’s intern.

THE NUMBER — 50% of small businesses have no one dedicated to marketing, and 60% spend one to ten hours a week on it. So does everyone else. The winners just spend those hours on one thing.

THE STARTUP, BEFORE FIT

STAGE 2

Under roughly \$500K ARR. Three to ten people. Some customers, no pattern. Every week a different theory about who the customer is.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU NEED

A growth marketer to “pour fuel on the fire.”

SPEND

Advisory hours at \$175–350; execution by the hour or project; ad tests you can afford to lose. No salaries yet.

WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED

Founder-led marketing, with a senior advisor on call. You are the only person who can change the product when the message doesn't land, so you must be the one hearing that it doesn't. A few paid hours a month of someone senior for positioning; freelancers for hands.

DON'T

Hire a marketer to find product-market fit. There is no fire. You are asking someone to pour fuel on a wet log, and then you will fire them for the smoke.

THE NUMBER — The usual bar for a first marketing hire is around \$500K ARR plus at least one more signal: the founder is the bottleneck, sales needs inbound, or investors expect a go-to-market. One signal is a mood. Two is a decision.

THE STARTUP, AFTER FIT

STAGE 3

\$500K to \$3M ARR. Seed to Series A. Ten to thirty people. One channel works, the founder is drowning, sales wants pipeline yesterday.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU NEED

A Head of Marketing, a brand refresh, and a “content engine.”

SPEND

Senior generalist, \$120–160K base plus equity (the \$70–100K “growth generalist” exists, but that's a junior with a nice title). Fractional CMO \$5–15K a month, average around \$12K, three to six months, no equity.

WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED

One senior generalist who owns one channel and one number. Or the two-piece version: a fractional CMO for strategy, twenty hours a week, plus a junior executor or freelancers for the work. Either way: a person who can build the machine, not a person who wants to manage a team that doesn't exist.

DON'T

Hire a specialist first. Hire a VP with no one to lead. Hire a “Head of Brand.” Hire a junior coordinator and expect strategy from someone whose job description is “execute the strategy.”

THE NUMBER — Replacing an employee costs 50–200% of their salary. Give a new marketer three to six months before you judge the number; give them a number before you give them a laptop.

THE SCALE-UP

STAGE 4

\$3M to \$20M. Series A to B, or an established company that finally noticed. Thirty to 150 people, two or more sales reps hitting quota, a founder who has to stop being the marketing department for the company to survive them.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU NEED

A CMO. Preferably one from a logo you recognize.

SPEND

Head/VP \$140–220K. Team below them. Agencies at the mid tier, \$3–10K a month for 20–40 expert hours, or 15–20% of ad spend for paid media. Fractional CMO only as a bridge while you hire.

WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED

A real Head or VP of Marketing who builds a team of two to five, plus agencies for the specialist channels. Hire the “tweener”: a team lead from a scrappier company ready for their first leadership job, who has personally done the work and knows what a \$40K budget feels like. The big-brand executive has not felt that since 2014.

DON'T

Pay \$350K-plus base for a CMO to run a department of three. Keep the founder “just approving the copy.” Build the team around channels before you’ve built it around revenue.

THE NUMBER — 70% of high-growth startups show signs of premature scaling: headcount before a repeatable, measured growth process. The org chart arrives before the engine, every time, and it is never once the other way around.

THE GROWN-UP

STAGE 5

\$20M and up. 150-plus people. A board, a budget cycle, and at least one person whose entire job is slides.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU NEED

A CMO. Correct, finally. Now the question is which kind.

SPEND

CMO around \$350K base, \$500–650K-plus all-in with bonus and benefits. Marketing overall benchmarks at 7.8% of company revenue, with about 15% of that now going to AI. If your budget is a rounding error, you don’t have a CMO problem, you have a CEO problem.

WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED

A full CMO who is accountable for revenue, not applause, running a proper team, an agency roster, and a budget that is measured. The title is dissolving into “Chief Revenue” and “Chief Commercial” for a reason: companies got tired of paying for awareness and hoping.

DON'T

Hire for the logo on their last badge. Hire someone who has never had to explain a number to a CFO. Confuse “strategic” with “does not personally know how any of the tools work anymore.”

THE NUMBER — Average S&P 500 CMO tenure is 4.1 years, 3.5 in consumer, the shortest seat in the C-suite. And 31% of S&P 500 companies don’t have a CMO at all. That is not a talent shortage. That is a job description nobody can agree on.

THE MENU, BY STAGE

Every option, every stage, one honest word. The black stamps are not judgement. Well. They are a little.

STAGE	YOU + AI TOOLS	FREELANCER / SPECIALIST	AGENCY	FRACTIONAL CMO	IN-HOUSE GENERALIST	HEAD / VP + TEAM	FULL CMO
THE IDEA pre-revenue	BEST Free tools, your own mouth, fifty conversations.	OK A few hours for a landing page and a sentence.	NO Buzz for nothing.	NO Strategy for what?	NO A salary looking for a product.	NO —	NO —
THE SHOP SMB, 1–10 people	BEST Words, posts, emails. You already do this.	BEST One channel, set up properly, by the hour.	OK Only mid-tier (\$3K+/mo) and only if you can also fund the media.	NO One-day audit at most.	OK Near \$1M, one generalist manager, if you can't keep up.	NO —	NO —
STARTUP, BEFORE FIT < \$500K ARR	BEST Founder-led. Only you can change the product when it doesn't land.	OK Hands for experiments, paid by the hour.	NO They'll optimise a funnel that isn't there.	OK A few advisory hours for positioning. Not a retainer.	NO Fuel on a wet log.	NO —	NO —
STARTUP, AFTER FIT \$500K–\$3M ARR	OK Founder stays the face; stops being the hands.	OK Execution under someone who owns the number.	OK One performance channel, short contract, clear KPI.	BEST With an executor attached. Alone, it's an expensive opinion.	BEST Senior generalist. One channel, one metric.	NO Nobody to lead.	NO —
THE SCALE-UP \$3M–\$20M	NO You are the bottleneck. That was the whole diagnosis.	OK Overflow and specialist work.	BEST Specialist channels: paid, SEO, PR. Managed by your lead.	OK Bridge while you hire. Not a destination.	OK As the team, under a lead.	BEST The “tweener” lead who builds two to five.	NO \$350K to run three people.
THE GROWN-UP \$20M+	NO Go run the company.	OK Bench strength.	OK A roster, measured, replaced when stale.	OK Interim only. Real CMOs leave every four years; you'll need one.	OK Team members.	OK Reports to the CMO.	BEST Accountable for revenue. Tenure 4.1 years, so hire like it matters.

■ BEST FIT □ WORKABLE, WITH CONDITIONS ■ NO. JUST NO.

WHAT EACH THING COSTS, AND WHAT IT IS

US rates, 2026. The prices are honest. The names are not; that's why each one gets a translation.

YOU + AI TOOLS

\$0-500 / month

Founder-led marketing: the founder talks to customers and writes things down. AI now does the first drafts, the resizing, the reports, the keyword grouping, which is exactly the work junior marketers used to be hired for.

The tools are cheap. Your time is not. But the tools are cheap.

FREELANCER

\$50-100/hr junior • \$100-175 mid • \$175-250 senior • \$250-350+ expert

Retainers run \$3-5K a month for junior, up to \$15-25K for the expert end. You buy hours and hands, and you keep the judgment.

The best deal on this page, provided you know what to ask for. If you don't, you'll pay by the hour for someone to discover that.

AGENCY

\$1-3K entry • \$3-10K mid • \$10K+ enterprise / month

Entry tier buys 10-15 hours of junior staff on a template. Mid tier buys 20-40 expert hours and an actual strategy. Minimums run three to twelve months; paid-media fees run 15-20% of spend.

An agency is a subscription to other people's process. Great when you have a channel and a budget. Otherwise you're paying for the meeting about the meeting.

FRACTIONAL CMO

\$4-20K / month • avg ~\$12K • ~20 hrs/week

Senior judgment without equity or a full salary; typically \$150-500 an hour, three-to-six-month engagements. Roughly 60% cheaper than the full-time version.

A fractional CMO with no one to execute is a very well-paid person telling you what you should be doing. Attach hands or don't bother.

IN-HOUSE GENERALIST

\$70-100K junior-ish • \$120-160K senior, plus equity

First full-time marketer. All-in first year for the cheaper end lands around \$135K once you add benefits, recruiting and equity. Give them one channel, one metric, and three to six months.

The senior version builds the engine. The junior version waits for someone to hand them the blueprint. Guess which one people buy to save money.

HEAD / VP OF MARKETING

\$140-220K base

Builds and runs a team of two to five, manages the agencies, and connects marketing to the revenue number. Hire the operator from the scrappier company, not the executive from the famous one.

A VP with no team is a very expensive individual contributor who resents it.

THE SHORT VERSION, FOR PEOPLE WHO SKIPPED TO THE END, WHICH IS MOST OF YOU.

If nobody buys it, you need a product. If you can't say who it's for, you need a sentence. If you don't know where customers come from, you need a spreadsheet. If nothing works predictably, you need experiments and hired hands. If something works and you're the bottleneck, *now* you need a marketer, and the size of the marketer should match the size of the business, not the size of the ambition.

And when the candidate says they'll "take your brand to the next level," ask them which level you're on now. If they can't answer, they've told you everything.

FULL CMO

~\$350K base • \$500–650K+ all-in

Runs a department, a budget cycle and a board slide. Median seat time: about four years. Six in ten leave upward, so this is a career, not a marriage.

Under \$20M revenue this is a Rolls-Royce with a lawnmower engine. Above it, hire one, and give them a number.

THE AI FOOTNOTE

2026, and moving

SEO specialist postings fell 15% and content marketer roles 11% in a year; Forrester expects 15% of agency jobs to vanish in 2026. Execution is getting cheap. Judgment, taste and customer research are getting expensive.

Translation for every stage above: buy execution, hire judgment. And stop hiring humans to do what a \$20 subscription does at 2 a.m. without complaining.

BENCHMARKS TO ARGUE WITH

Gartner 2026 • Spencer Stuart 2026 • LocaliQ 2026

Marketing budgets average 7.8% of revenue, flat on last year. 56% of CMOs say that isn't enough to deliver their plan. Meanwhile half of small businesses run on under \$1,000 a month and 81% already use AI to write the words.

Everyone thinks they're underfunded. Some of them are. The rest are under-decided.

SOURCES

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2. **Gartner 2026 CMO Spend Survey** – 7.8% of revenue, 15.3% of budget to AI, 56% say budget is insufficient.
<https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2026-05-11-gartner-2026-cmo-spend-survey-finds-cmos-allocate-15-point-3-percent-of-marketing-budgets-to-ai-but-only-30-percent-are-ready-to-scale-ai-capabilities>
3. **CB Insights, Why Startups Fail** – 431 shutdowns since 2023; 70% ran out of capital, 43% poor product-market fit.
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4. **LocaliQ, Small Business Marketing Trends 2026** – 50% no marketing staff, 52% under \$1K/month, 60% spend 1–10 hrs/week, 81% use AI for content.
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