Prologue

"80% of CEOs don't trust or are unimpressed with their CMOs... 74% of [CMOs] say they believe their jobs don't allow them to maximize their impact on the business." - HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

In 2006, I lived in Atlanta and was the new father to a baby daughter. I led the marketing communications department at a company that made baby toys and products sold at Target, Walmart, Toys"R"Us, Babies"R"Us, and their international equivalents.

The company was trying to relaunch their new flagship brand, which was failing in stores despite the efforts of several marketing agencies and a substantial financial investment. As a parent myself, I had an idea what the problem was. The company had seen success in the '90s, but our primary buyers were younger baby boomer moms and older Generation X moms. Now, we were selling to Generation Y (Millennial) moms, and they parented differently. Our positioning had not accounted for that.

Although I was just a 27-year-old marketing director, I raised my hand and said, "I think I can fix it."

And I did.

The work we did on the brand, the logo, and the packaging lasted more than a decade without major changes and is still a mainstay in major retailers like Target and Walmart. Some of the strategies I used to help achieve this success are included in this book.

But first, I want to tell you what happened after I left that company — and how it led me to where I am today.

I was determined to take what I accomplished at the baby products company and use those strategies to do it again. I could have landed a pretty cushy gig at a company like Coca-Cola or Turner, but I didn't like the idea of being a small fish in a giant pond. Instead, I started applying for jobs at smaller companies. But there was a problem: When these folks — most of whom had never had an internal marketing department before — realized that they weren't just committing to my salary, but also to the resources I was going to need and the investments I was going to make, they balked.

I interviewed at an IT company and I had a great interview with the hiring manager, Dave, but then he left me hanging for six weeks. I called him up and said, "Dave, I don't think you're going to hire me as your VP of marketing, so what if I was your agency instead?"

"Actually, that would be terrific," he replied.

Very suddenly, and unintentionally, I was a CEO running my startup agency (a role I stayed in for 18 years), and I was a marketing leader for my clients.

Remember that quote we started with? That CMOs and CEOs don't trust one another's work?

I now had experience representing both sides, and those statistics became very real for me. Neither side is wrong — it's actually understandable why CEOs are so disillusioned, and why marketers feel so disenfranchised. It's easy to understand why I felt compelled to write a book called *Everyone Hates Marketing*: Even the marketers are deeply dissatisfied with the work they produce.

In the summer of 2025, I sat down in front of my MacBook and challenged myself to write a book that would show business leaders how to solve this fundamental disconnect.

The four rules I set for myself in doing this were simple. They are now promises I expect you to hold me accountable for as you read this:

1. This book isn't a 10,000 foot idyllic, philosophical view of what marketing could or should be in a utopian world. This book addresses real concerns and problems in managing marketing in small and midsize businesses without experienced marketing leadership. I provide specific actions to take, at what time, and focus on concepts that will make a measurable impact on your business.
2. I present a framework that will help you make better decisions, gauge success, avoid common pitfalls, and deliver more revenue to your bottom line. I won't give you cliché advice about how you're not spending enough money, or why you need to throw out everything your business has ever created to improve your marketing. And, in keeping with promise #1, that framework is specific and actionable by most any business, regardless of size.
3. The book is simple and accessible for busy CEOs and business owners. My goal is to lay out my framework in 30,000 words or less, in language that any executive could understand, without a deep knowledge of marketing jargon.
4. While I don't stigmatize those that use AI where appropriate, and while there are several points in this book where I suggest how AI might assist you in some of your work, no AI has been used in the writing of this book. It's odd to live in a time where one would feel compelled to disclose such a thing, but I want readers of this book to know that aside from the contributions of a human editor, this book is all me: my stories, my ideas, and my insights based on my quarter-century plus as a practicing marketer.

I hope this book is helpful and I promise to keep my promises as you read this. You and I are going to create a different approach for marketing your business, one that you will not hate, and that process begins now.

Thanks for going on this journey with me.

-Erik Wolf

CHAPTER ONE

The Mountain and The Compass

Two central concepts that will carry you through this book

Two threads are core to the ideas, concepts, and beliefs in this book. The first is Mount Revenue, my analogy for the marketing and sales process. The second is The Revenue Leadership Compass, or just The Compass, as we'll refer to it in this book. The Compass is the framework I use to describe the key ingredients of a strong marketing strategy.

Selling is like climbing a mountain

I wish I had a dollar for every time a CEO or business owner said something like, "Why would I invest in marketing when I can just hire a couple more salespeople?" or "I could just go to a Chamber of Commerce meeting with a stack of business cards and get leads… Why do I need marketing?"

I might not be rich, but I could buy myself something pretty nice.

This represents an unfortunate reality in many organizations, especially small and midsize businesses. Very few people truly know the difference between sales and marketing, or why we have two departments to perform ostensibly the same function: driving revenue for the business.

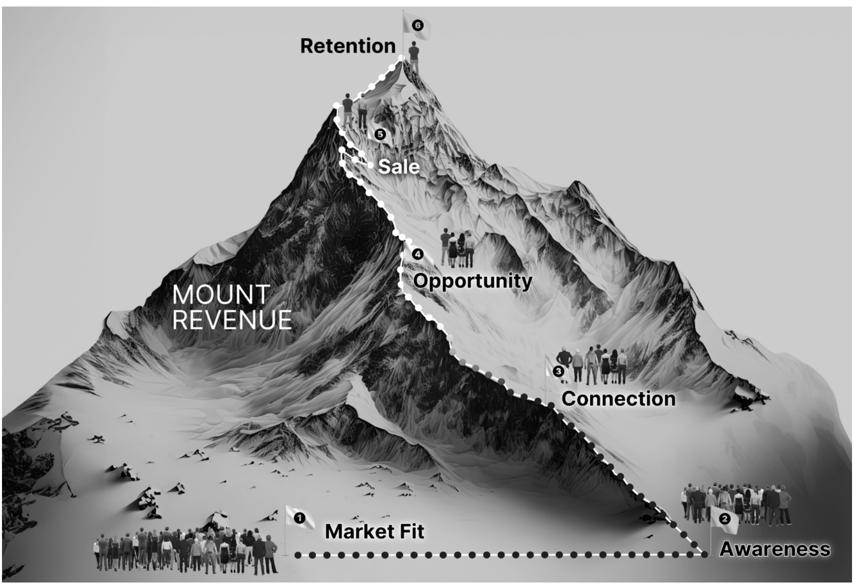
There's an important difference between sales and marketing, but most people miss this distinction.

Sales and marketing do essentially the same thing — leverage communication tools to drive revenue — but at different scales. Sales excels when communications happen one-on-one, and marketing excels when communications is one-to-many.

The difference between sales and marketing is about scale.

How effective am I going to be at generating new leads and opportunities if I do all my awareness building one person at a time? Adding more salespeople only gives me linear growth. If one person can have 15 conversations in a day, two can have 30, and four can have 60. But with the right strategy, one marketer can start hundreds or thousands of conversations in a day. Therefore, marketing increases our capacity for sales in a way that salespeople cannot. Salespeople are, obviously, still crucial — but they only do well in certain parts of the process. The same is true for marketing.

Whenever I sell anything, I'm trying to get a person from the bottom of this mountain to the top. I call it Mount Revenue.



MARKET FIT

At the base of the mountain, I have Market Fit. I can't sell anything if I'm not clear on how my product or service fits into the lives or lifestyles of my marketplace.

AWARENESS

Next is Awareness, because I need to make my target audience aware that my product or service exists.

CONNECTION

At this point, I ask the people in my marketplace to do something: click my ad, visit my website, follow me on social media, say hello to me at the trade show. I call this Connection.

OPPORTUNITY

From there, it's a steeper climb to the next stage, Opportunity. This is where connections start indicating that they might actually be interested in buying from me.

SALE

Now, I have to (obviously) close the deal, which happens at the step marked Sale.

RETENTION

But I'm still not done: Even after I've made the sale, I have to retain that customer and convince them to stay on my mountain.

You may have noticed that about a third of the way up the mountain, the black dots start to fade into white dots. This marks the transition from where one-to-many communications at the bottom of the mountain become less important, and one-to-one communications become more important as we get closer to the top.

This is where sales starts to take over.

So what about the idea, "I could just go to a Chamber of Commerce meeting with a stack of business cards and get leads"? How does Mount Revenue address that?

Every time I make a sale, I need to follow all of these steps. I can't skip any. Going to a networking meeting with a stack of business cards doesn't let me skip ahead to the profitable part of the relationship.

When I walk up to someone and I say, "Tell me about your business," I'm assessing Market Fit.

When I say, "My name is Erik Wolf and I'm a marketing consultant," I'm creating Awareness.

When I say, "I help businesses create marketing ROI by creating leadership and accountability between the executive team and the marketing department, can I give you my card?" I'm making a Connection.

And when I say, "How does your company handle marketing and is it working?" I'm looking for an Opportunity.

I did not magically beam myself to the Opportunity stage.

Why a "sales mountain" and not a "sales funnel"?

I absolutely hate sales funnels. I loathe them. I feel like they send a very bad message about how a sales process works. In a funnel, connections and prospects go in the top, and sales drop out of the bottom.

Why is this wrong?

First, because there is no gravity in a sales process. In fact, just the opposite. It gets harder and harder as you get further in the process, not easier, and at no point is the sale inevitable. Anyone who has sold anything knows this. The funnel was not meant to describe an effective sales process, but rather, a mathematical relationship: A relatively large number of leads are whittled down over time to a closed sale.

Second, the sales funnel implies, because of the math, that the more people we shove into the top of the funnel, the more that will ultimately come out the bottom. This is also not true. Not everyone needs more leads. Some companies need better leads. Some companies need to improve the proposal and follow-up process.

If you're thinking, "But isn't your mountain just an upside-down funnel?", you're not wrong.

Here are the important differences:

» The mountain reinforces the fact that selling is incredibly hard; convincing someone to go all the way to the top is hard and people can turn around anytime they want. And the vast majority of people do turn around.

» We don't build success by getting as many people as humanly possible to the bottom of the mountain, but rather, by removing friction from one stage to the next.

» When we do finally get people to the top of the mountain, do you know what they see from up there? All the other mountains. Buyer's remorse, dissatisfaction, a bad experience: all reasons for people to start thinking that they're on top of the wrong mountain.

Introducing The Compass

Before we start this conversation, recall that 4 out of 5 CEOs don't trust their marketers, and 3 out of 4 marketers don't think they are empowered to be successful. This is a natural result when your goals, tactics, and budget have absolutely nothing to do with each other.

I spoke with a business owner the other day who, to his credit, paused before making the mistake of jumping into a disconnected strategy headfirst. He was looking at a proposal from a marketing agency who was suggesting that he commit $40,000 (not including the cost of advertising) to a marketing effort.

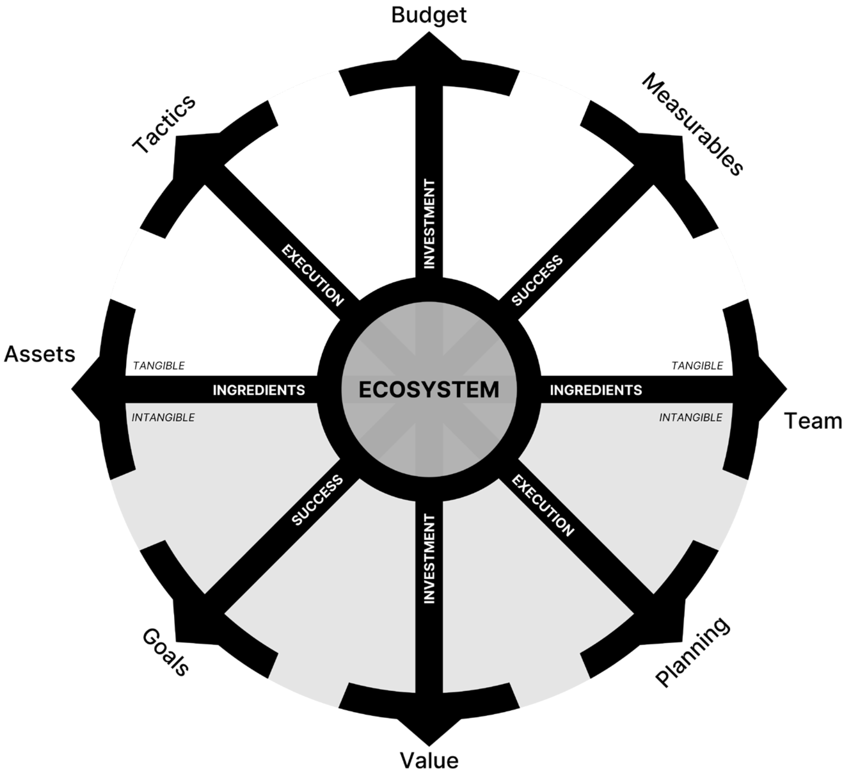
When was that effort going to bear fruit — and what would that fruit look like? The agency didn't have answers.

"What do you think you should get if you spend $40K or more?" I asked. He didn't know.

That's a problem. The Compass solves it.

The Compass is a framework that breaks down everything that is important and crucial to a successful marketing strategy; the things we see, the things we don't, the things that are connected, and how everything contributes to marketing as a whole.

The Compass looks like this:



So, let's get into it. First we have the **Ecosystem** in the center.

This is where everything happens. It houses all of our customers, former, future, and current, as well as our competitors, vendors, and even the economic and political climate we (and our customers) are trying to navigate. Everything we do has to interact with the Ecosystem and none of our efforts will bear fruit if it cannot survive the challenges that the real world and real customers present.

In other words, our ultimate success depends on how well we understand this ecosystem and the needs, problems, and desires of the people living in it.

Emanating from the Ecosystem, we have four directions that need to be considered:

- » **Investment:** How much do we have to spend and what do we need to achieve with that money? Is that realistic? What assumptions have we made that, if proved incorrect, would cause us to fail?
- » **Success:** How exactly will we know if this effort succeeded? What will we measure to make sure we get there?
- » **Ingredients:** What do we have in terms of content, collateral, brand assets, and people that will help us? What do we need in terms of assets or people that we do not currently have? Can we close those gaps?
- » **Execution:** What tactics are we going to employ? How do they fit into our greater plan? What potential failure points might we have in our execution?

The Compass not only acknowledges that all of these aspects are crucial, but that there's another level of complexity that we have to consider.

Every effort, every campaign, everything you do tends to have two components: the part that's easy for you to see, feel, and perceive, and the part that tends to be less tangible, or even fuzzy.

For example, you know how much money you're spending on marketing. Your bank and credit card statements tell us that. But it's sometimes less apparent what you're actually trying to buy with that money.

In other words, what's the real benefit or value that you were supposed to get from that spend? And did you get it?

Investment

If you've heard the expression "Cash rules everything around me," that's true here. The budget is critically important in terms of defining reality. But it's not just about the amount of money that's spent, it also refers to the value you get in return.

Budget numbers are tangible. You see money being spent when you look at your profit and loss reports and credit card statements. Value is not tangible, and can be subjective.

For example, do these statements about value sound familiar?

"I paid the marketing agency, but when will I start making money?"

"We went to the trade show, but did it work?"

Or, as department store owner John Wanamaker famously said more than 100 years ago, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half."

Several years ago, I worked with a tech company whose sales and marketing budget was basically a shopping list: We're going to X conference, we're going to create a new website, we're going to do Google Ads and search engine optimization (SEO), etc.

When we sat down and looked at the lifetime value of every new user the company acquired, we found that they were actually leaving some opportunities on the table. There was more than enough budget to hit the modest goals they had, but with a slightly bigger and more strategic spend, they could achieve a lot more growth.

With that, we'd identified the value of their marketing efforts. That company ended up selling their business just two years later based on the growth we'd identified, and achieved, together.

Success

The metrics are what's tangible here. The numbers might tell a story about revenue, brand awareness, customer satisfaction, or other things. But goals are often a lot fuzzier: Unless you have context, your numbers aren't able to tell us whether you are being successful. And without clear, common goals, all you get is confusion and mistrust.

I had a client at my agency who wanted to grow their customer base by a fixed number of new online sales each month. It seemed simple and I agreed. The problem, it turned out, was that there was a key difference in how I interpreted that goal versus how my client did.

From my perspective, I thought my team was in charge of winning a certain number of new customers per month. From their perspective, they thought they should be netting that growth every month, including the customers that left during that time. But their churn was enormous. They were losing customers almost as fast as they were gaining them, and there was no way that goal was achievable with the resources we had.

The lesson? Goals only work when there's agreement and understanding around what success looks like. Goals shouldn't be debatable.

Ingredients

These are the raw materials that you use to drive revenue growth. On the tangible side, it includes your logo, your content, the marketing materials, sales proposals, and the business website; things you can easily see and interact with.

On the other side is your team and the contributions of the people on that team. These tend to be less tangible, despite the sheer amount of tangible material that many marketing people are able to produce. Marketers also tend to be less visible than their counterparts in other departments. When someone in sales signs a new deal, we celebrate and pay commissions. But the contributions of marketing that helped make the sale possible are often not celebrated as heartily.

I had a meeting with the owner of an accounting firm who was frustrated with his marketing manager. Every week, they would sit down for a one-to-one. The marketing manager would go through their projects item by item and provide the status of every one. But the CEO was frustrated because he wanted his marketing person to bring him a strategy that would help his business grow.

I asked the CEO if the marketing manager knew that was his job, and the CEO paused and said, "I'm not sure."

People are essential to the success of any marketing strategy, and we only get to be successful if everyone knows what's expected of them, and where they have authority and accountability.

Execution

You see a billboard over the highway, the direct mail, the email marketing, and the social media posts. But many people devalue the time it takes to plan those efforts to ensure that the right work is being done. No one has a magic lamp. No one is granting wishes with the snap of a finger, and rushing into the part of the process where we produce stuff often yields poor results. Good decision-making is key, and if you want to be successful picking the right tactics, you have to acknowledge the plan that went into it.

A very early client of mine was desperate for an SEO strategy that drove their company's growth. So they hired a firm, and then a year or so later, they were frustrated by the lack of success. They fired that firm and hired another. Then they did it again. And again. And… again.

But what if the problem wasn't that every SEO firm in town was incompetent? What if the problem was that the expectations my client had about SEO just weren't realistic?

The Compass makes success plannable and repeatable

What you need is to create an environment where marketing (and sales) are set up for success from day one. The Compass provides that. It will help you take a serious inventory of everything you have, everything you need to be successful, and the things that you are missing or could cause you to fail.

The Compass allows you to draw a straight line that connects your market to your budget to your goals to your resources to your tactics, and finally, to results.

So where do we start?

Every arrow on The Compass comes from the Ecosystem at the center.

We're going to start building our plans there and the next two chapters are focused, first, on how we assess and start to understand our Ecosystem, and then how we can harness that Ecosystem to our advantage.

It's truly the most important work we're going to do in this book.

Let's get started.