

From Survival to STRATEGY

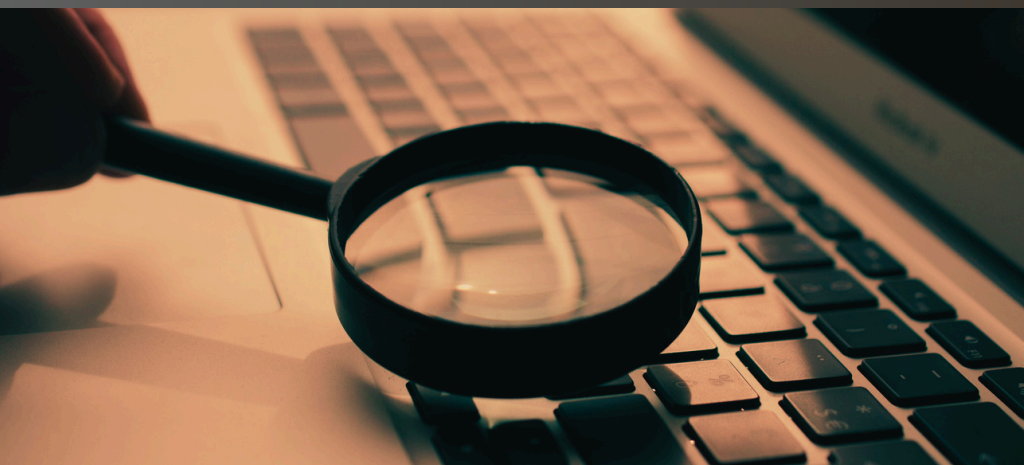
How CMOs Will Lead in 2025

Let's not sugarcoat it: the role of the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) has become one of the most challenging and least secure positions in the C-suite.

Sources may vary slightly on the numbers, but the overall pattern stays the same: CMOs have one of the shortest tenures on average compared to their executive peers. If you ask many CMOs, they'll also tell you it's often the only C-suite role in which every *other* executive is convinced they can do your job.

Marketing, after all, touches so many parts of the business that everyone has a stake, yet few truly understand the complexity of what CMOs face day-to-day: driving revenue, building brand, managing expectations from all sides, and doing it all with shrinking resources.

For those at the helm of the marketing function, the order of the day is balancing short-term demands with the long-term vision that ultimately defines where a business is successful and growing. In this report, we'll delve into the realities of leading the marketing function heading into 2025 and examine how today's CMOs can make an outsized impact in a role that's always under a microscope.



The shift to short-term thinking

CMOs shoulder the weight of a role that's often misunderstood and, in some cases, undervalued. But after several years of economic uncertainty, the struggle feels particularly Sisyphean. With heightened demand for measurable outcomes set against a backdrop of eternally shrinking budgets, today's CMOs are caught in a bind. While long-term strategic thinking is paramount to achieving key objectives, today's economic realities have forced many to prioritize short-term initiatives with immediate ROI – sometimes to the detriment of brand and long-term thinking.

In fact, while **72%** say they believe more focus should be put on long-term brand efforts, **59%** of CMOs say they spend more time on short-term revenue generation – and **66%** say this pattern has intensified over the past year. So why are so many seasoned strategists pursuing a line of strategy they feel is unsustainable?

Despite the need for a long-term repeatable plan for the business, many CMOs feel compelled to prioritize short-term strategies—a decision largely driven by pressure from leadership and concerns about job security. Of those CMOs who admit to prioritizing short-term revenue despite knowing they should be focused on long-term goals, **26%** say this is because they worry about losing their job if they don't make an immediate impact (and fully remote CMOs were **29%** more likely than average to say this). Others blame pressure from the top, with **60%** citing pressure from the CEO and **33%** from the Board.



Short-term gains, long-term strain for B2B

B2B CMOs were **320%** more likely than B2C CMOs to say that their focus on short-term revenue generation has significantly increased over the past 12 months; they were also **67%** more likely to say their budgets have been cut over that same time period

CMOs understand the shortsightedness of this approach. Nearly all respondents (**91%**) agree that without strong brand investment, companies will struggle to reduce the cost of customer acquisition over the long term. They know that focusing exclusively on short-term wins leads to an eventual dead end, yet they're caught in a cycle that's hard to break, grinding to meet growing revenue targets and unable to build the future-proofing strategies their companies need to scale.

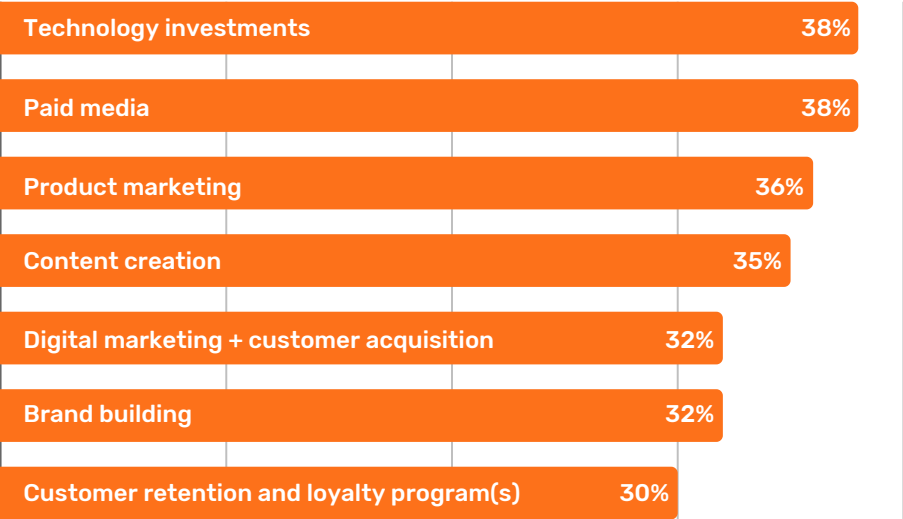
Planning under pressure

As CMOs enter 2025, the pressure from boards, VCs/PEs, and fellow executives may continue to intensify. Unlike the "growth at all costs" mentality of a few years ago, the new mandate is focused on ruthless efficiency—always "doing more with less." This demand for immediate wins clashes with the need for strategic investments, making it challenging for CMOs to align marketing goals with the company's broader objectives.

In an environment where **46%** of CMOs reported budget cuts within the past year and **38%** expect further reductions over the next year, planning ahead is fraught with tension. Nearly half (**49%**) of CMOs feel their 2025 goals are unrealistic, and well over a third (**38%**) report feeling less secure in their role this year than last. Given this shifting landscape, business leaders will need to make critical decisions about where to allocate resources. So, the question is—will executives protect the brand-building efforts they believe will drive sustainable growth, or keep marketing locked in a grind for quick wins?

When asked, CMOs revealed where they plan to place their 2025 bets in order to achieve their goals, and the top choices show a blend of immediate revenue drivers with foundational investments for perennial growth. Technology investments and paid media lead the way, underscoring a focus on infrastructure and measurable returns. At the same time, product marketing, content creation, and brand building also rank high on the list, reflecting an understanding that lasting success requires more than quick wins—it requires building a resonant brand.

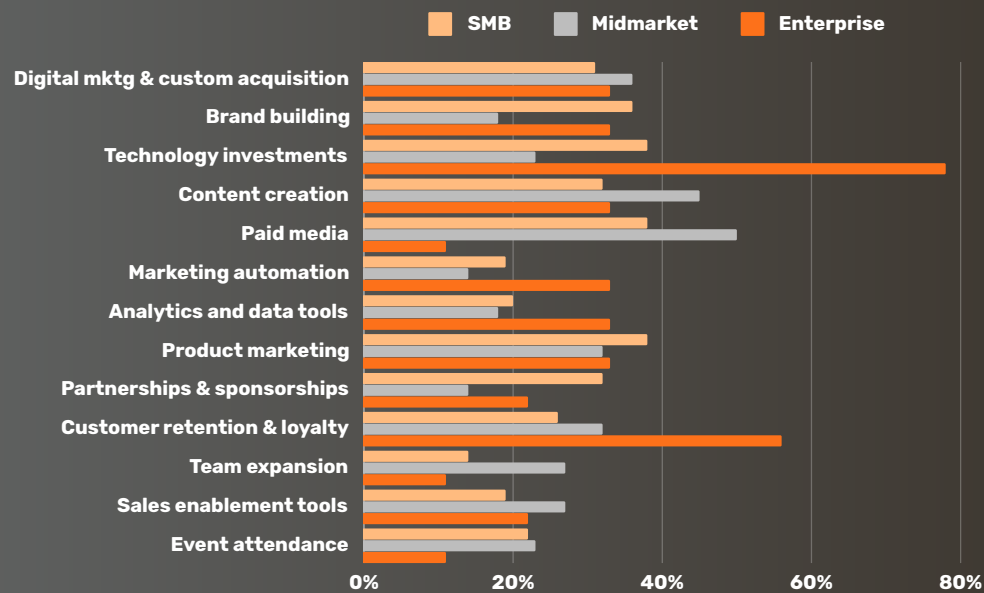
Top 7 Budget Priorities Overall



But the data also shows a nuanced approach to investment—one that adapts based on demographic and firmographic characteristics. While technology investments, paid media, and product marketing rank as top priorities overall, the emphasis within those categories varies among different groups of marketing leaders.

Company size, for example, plays a critical role in shaping budget allocation. Enterprise companies (1,000+ employees) place a notably greater emphasis on customer retention and loyalty programs—an unsurprising focus for firms that are more concerned with protecting and growing their existing market share than with aggressive acquisition. Meanwhile, small businesses (SMBs) and midmarket firms lean more heavily on paid media, digital marketing, and customer acquisition, with the aim of capturing new customers and establishing brand presence.

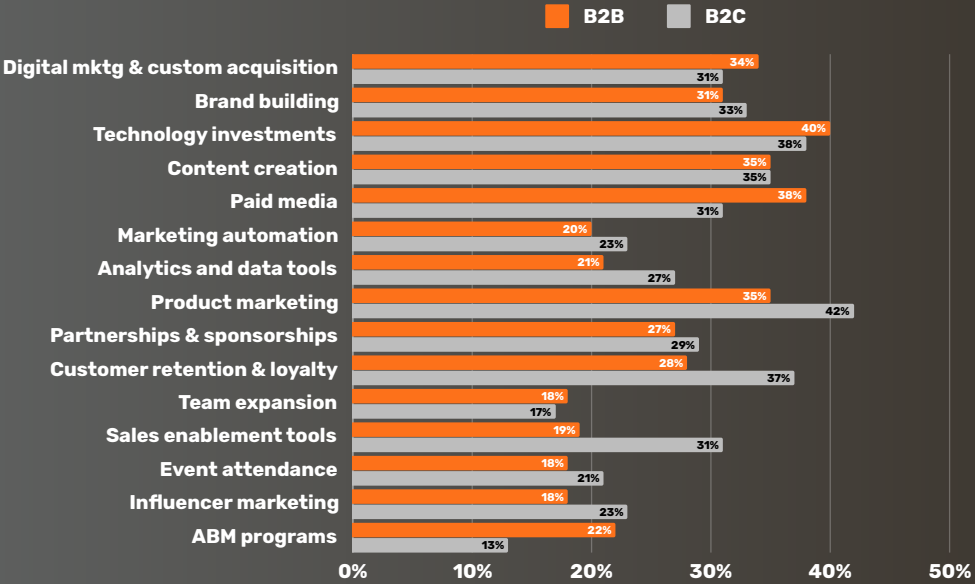
2025 Budgeting Priorities *by Business Size*



Differences between B2B and B2C companies are also striking. B2B companies are not just leading the charge in digital marketing and paid media, but they're also significantly more likely to invest in ABM programs. These choices highlight a calculated focus on precision and personalization, key to navigating the longer sales cycles and multi-stakeholder decision-making processes that define B2B. Meanwhile, B2C companies lean into influencer marketing to drive consumer engagement and amplify brand awareness—an approach tailored to their fast-moving, customer-centric markets.

2025 Budgeting Priorities

B2B vs B2C Focus



As CMOs plan their 2025 strategies, they're redefining what it means to lead the marketing function in a challenging climate. Yet, balancing competing priorities often means reconciling their own vision with the perspectives of those around them.

When you call for support, but “suggestions” show up instead

For today’s marketing leaders, driving impactful strategy under the aforementioned constraints is only part of the challenge. They must also navigate a steady stream of input from fellow executives who, despite good intentions, often don’t understand the full scope of what marketing requires.

In fact, despite their extensive expertise, over a third **(39%)** of CMOs field suggestions on how to do their jobs from other c-suite executives at least once a week, with a likely frustrated **12%** saying this happens daily. The most common sources, aside from CEOs? According to our panel, this advice most often originates with the CRO **(38%)**, COO **(37%)**, or CFO **(32%)**. And while these insights can be helpful, **59%** feel there’s a fundamental disconnect between the skills needed to lead marketing and how the role is perceived by other executives.

WTF FACT

Female marketing leaders were

475%

more likely than their male counterparts to say they field suggestions from other company executives about how to do their job on a daily basis

NOPE.

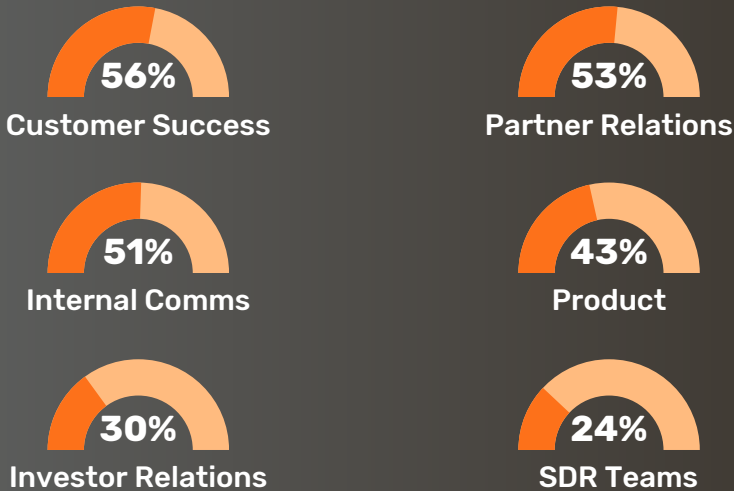
This misperception has a price. Nearly a quarter of CMOs feel that their role **(23%)** or even their entire department **(25%)** is seen as a cost center, rather than delivering value to the organization. And when marketing drives sales results, almost half **(41%)** say that marketing doesn't get equal recognition for their impact. This value minimization doesn't just stifle marketing's potential; it sets the whole organization back. Only **15%** of marketing leaders reported full alignment with their executive team; and of those dealing with misalignment, **90%** say these circumstances have resulted in reactive marketing strategies, leaving little room for innovation and turning marketing into a support function rather than a strategic driver for the business.



This is occurring even as CMOs are increasingly asked to own functions outside of traditional marketing, such as customer success **(56%)**, partnerships **(53%)**, internal communications **(51%)**, and more:

Ownership of Duties

outside “traditional” marketing



This expansion of duties often means CMOs are managing teams that fall outside of their historical purview. In fact, three-quarters have experience directly managing sales reps or account executives (AEs), demonstrating the growing need for alignment between marketing and sales. This convergence, while necessary for go-to-market success, adds another layer of complexity to an already demanding role.

If companies want marketing to drive growth, CMOs need support, not “suggestions”—and yet over one-third say they lack the onboarding **(37%)** and/or internal support **(36%)** to effectively execute their vision. This mismatch comes with real impacts to business potential: nearly half **(46%)** of CMOs say that misalignment between sales and marketing has caused significant bottlenecks in sustainable company growth, and over three-quarters **(78%)** believe better integration between their company’s sales and marketing functions would improve their performance against revenue targets.

The Enablement Gap

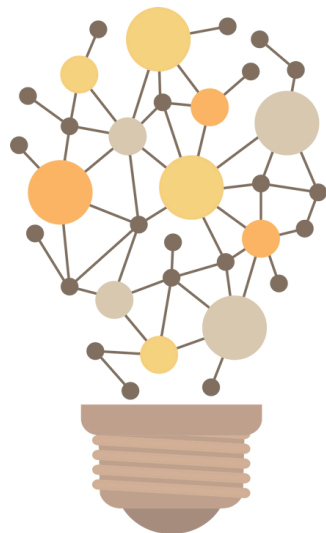
Marketing leaders were **85%** more likely to have heard the term “sales enablement” used within their company than they were to have heard the term “marketing enablement.”

The changing role of the CMO

The modern CMO sits at the intersection of AI innovation and economic uncertainty, navigating a role that is shifting faster than ever before. As these forces reshape the landscape, marketing leaders face evolving demands that fundamentally redefine their influence and impact.

AI: Needless innovation

AI tools are everywhere, but they don't always add real value. While the potential for optimization can't be denied, **38%** of CMOs feel that AI solutions are being pushed onto their teams in ways that diminish the strategic value of marketing leadership (i.e. thinking it can do their job). **43%** of CMOs feel pressured to adopt new AI tools without clear proof of their impact. Adding to the frustration, **37%** say that AI's hype has made it harder to justify hiring additional talent, leaving marketing teams stretched thin.



Despite the relentless insistence to adopt AI, **62%** of marketing leaders say these tools are often presented as quick fixes rather than long-term solutions, leaving marketing teams once again feeling reactive rather than strategic.



The rise of the Fractional CMO

The trend toward hiring fractional CMOs—executives working part-time, interim, or on a project basis—is also reshaping the role. The upside of this arrangement is increased flexibility on both sides; the downside is that these execs are often expected to work miracles with limited time and resources. **79%** of fractional CMOs report that companies expect them to deliver full-time results despite working a part-time schedule, an attitude that overlooks the complexity of the CMO's responsibilities. Fractional CMOs aren't just responsible for strategy, but often also budgeting (**75%**), execution (**70%**), and team management (**55%**). This can lead to unsustainable workloads, with nearly two-thirds (**63%**) of fractional CMOs stating that expectations for their role regularly exceed the time and resources available.

But according to many, the practical limitations of working fractionally are just symptoms of a larger problem. **71%** of all CMOs surveyed agreed that the trend toward hiring fractionally signals a broader devaluation of the marketing function, signaling that companies widely believe they can get by with a part-timer in a critical c-suite role.

Reporting lines, redefined

For CMOs, reporting structure isn't just an organizational choice—it can determine how marketing is valued within the company and shape the priorities CMOs are forced to juggle. Reporting into roles outside the CEO, such as the Chief Revenue Officer (CRO) or Chief Operating Officer (COO), introduces different sets of priorities and challenges, sometimes at the expense of the long-term priorities that CMOs say are essential.

Those reporting to the CRO experience a stronger focus on brand than other structures. In fact, **57%** of CMOs reporting to the CRO say that their focus on brand is better under this reporting structure vs. reporting into a CEO. However, while brand focus may benefit, marketing can be seen as a sales support function; CMOs in this structure are **46%** more likely than average to anticipate budget reductions in 2025 and **16%** more likely to feel that 2025 goals are set under unrealistic expectations. The focus on immediate revenue also means AI is often seen as a quick fix—these CMOs are **126%** more likely to feel pressured into adopting AI without clear alignment to strategy, a move they feel undermines marketing's breadth and depth.



But for CMOs who report into the COO or President, operational efficiency often takes precedence over creative initiatives and brand-building; **31%** feel their focus on brand suffers under this structure compared to CMOs reporting to the CEO. These CMOs were **21%** more likely than average to say they're spending more time on short-term revenue generation than they are on long-term brand building. Job security also feels more tenuous for this firmographic set; these marketing leaders were **51%** more likely than average to say they feel less secure in their role than they did last year.

As companies continue experimenting with reporting structures, it's clear that where a CMO reports plays a critical role in how marketing is valued and for those aiming to empower their marketing teams, the right structure can make all the difference.



CMOs at a crossroads

For many CMOs, the path forward may extend beyond their current role. Nearly half (**47%**) of CMOs express aspirations to step into a CEO (**29%**) or CRO (**18%**) position, signaling a desire to move beyond marketing and play a larger role in the company. This ambition speaks to the evolving nature of the position, as leaders seek to translate their marketing expertise into broader organizational leadership. And they feel well-equipped to take it on, with **76%** of those who want to transition feeling confident they can make the jump.

DISPARITY IN DREAMS

Men were **215%** more likely than women to express interest in stepping into a CEO role, highlighting a gender gap in executive ambition

Looking ahead, CMOs are cautiously optimistic. With the Federal Reserve cutting interest rates late in 2024 and signaling potential for further cuts headed into the new year, **83%** of CMOs believe the job market will improve in 2025. This optimism translates into career considerations, as it's not uncommon for senior talent to remain with an employer they aren't happy with solely due to a lack of job opportunities – in fact, the majority (**59%**) say they have done this at least once.

“Sometimes you are in a situation where you want to show some longevity in a tight market as companies are extremely picky on finding an ‘exact match’ with minimal risk. It’s an employer market right now for senior level roles.”

– B2B CMO, 11-19 years experience



As it is, a whopping **70%** say they would consider leaving their current role if new opportunities arise, and **56%** indicate they might not remain in their current position if the economic climate were better. However, those in companies where marketing receives equal recognition when a new customer is won were **29%** less likely to consider leaving, emphasizing the importance of recognition in retaining top talent.

Now is the moment



As companies move into 2025, it will be more important than ever to acknowledge that the success of the CMO is inextricably linked to the success of the entire executive team. Now is the moment to recognize marketing not just as a revenue enabler, but as the voice of the market and the steward of a brand's reputation and long-term value.

CMOs are uniquely equipped to turn market insights into long-term strategy, but they need empowerment—**not limitations.**

It's time to recognize the CMO's role as essential for enduring market relevance and brand resilience.

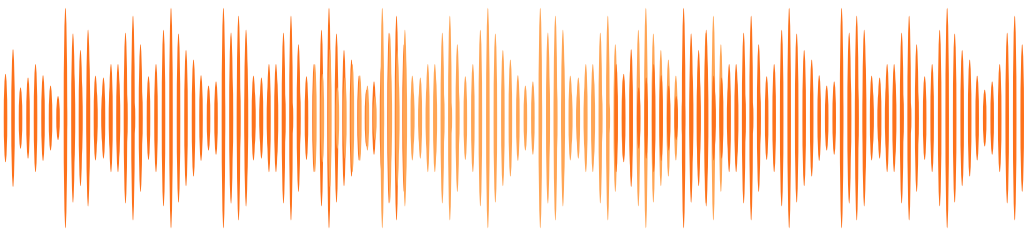
About Kickstand



Kickstand is a global marketing agency specializing in support of high growth technology brands. Offering a data first approach to PR and services that include media and analyst relations, research, content, crisis communications, and influencer marketing, Kickstand helps build well-defended market leaders in some of today's most innovative industries including mobility, robotics, AI, cybersecurity, fintech, insurtech, supply chain and logistics, sales and marketing tech, and eCommerce. For more information about our approach and how we help brands scale and successfully exit, visit www.meetkickstand.com.

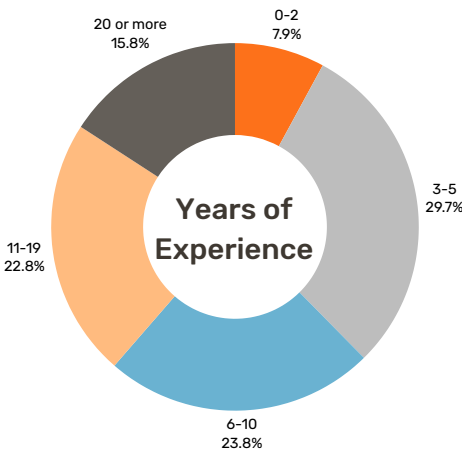
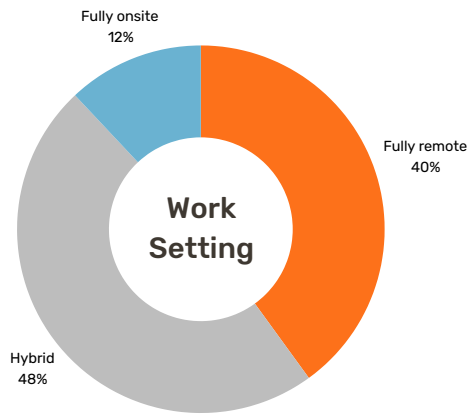
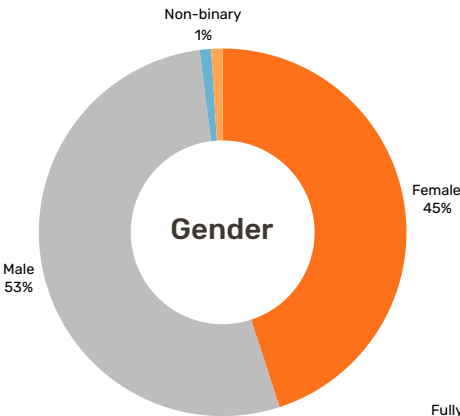
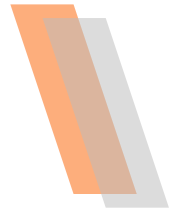
Survey Methodology

Kickstand surveyed an audience of 104 CMOs and VPs/SVPs of Marketing. The survey was conducted online between October 10 - 29, 2024 at 95% confidence, +/- 9.6% margin of error.



APPENDIX:

Demographic + Firmographic Breakdown



APPENDIX:

Demographic + Firmographic Breakdown (continued)

