

The Q1 CMO Pulse: What Marketing Leaders Actually Think About Their 2026 Goals



WHAT'S INSIDE

- 01 Ownership and Goal Clarity
- 02 Progress Against Goals
- 03 What Leaders Forecast for Year End
- 04 Resources: The Real Fault Line
- 05 What's Working (and What Isn't)
- 06 The Administration Factor
- 07 Vertical Breakdown
- 08 What This Means Heading into Q2

Executive Summary

207 tech marketing leaders told us the truth about their 2026 goals, and the picture is more complicated than the confidence numbers suggest. Most leaders own their agenda and say their goals are clearly defined.

But fewer than a quarter rate their resourcing as excellent, one in three is already behind heading into Q2, and nearly one in five expects to miss their goals by year end.

The leaders who are ahead of plan share two things in common: realistic goals and adequate resources. That's less a finding than a diagnosis. And for the majority working hard inside constrained plans, it's at least a useful benchmark for where things stand.

INTRODUCTION

We spent the last few weeks of Q1 asking a simple but loaded question to over 200 marketing leaders across tech:

How's it going, really?

Not the polished answer you'd give on a panel. The actual answer — the one you share with your team after a hard planning cycle, or whisper to a peer at a conference when no one's recording.

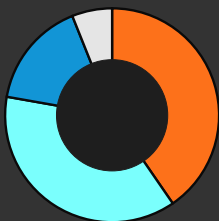
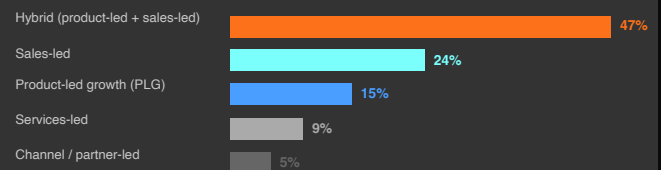
What we got back was candid, sometimes contradictory, and, if you work in marketing, probably pretty relatable.

Methodology

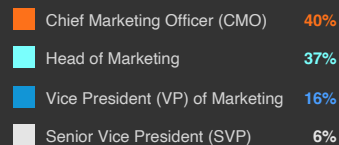
Kickstand surveyed 207 CMOs, VPs/SVPs of Marketing, and Heads of Marketing working in cybersecurity, mobility/transportation technology, sales and marketing technology, robotics and automation, education/edtech, and workplace and productivity technology.

The survey was fielded in Q1 2026. Respondents were located in the United States and United Kingdom.

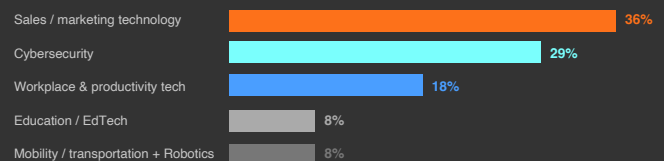
Which best describes your company's primary go-to-market (GTM) motion?



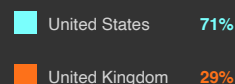
Which of the following most closely matches your job title?



Which of the following best describes your company's primary industry/vertical?



Where do you currently reside?



What is the total number of employees in your organization?



01 OWNERSHIP AND GOAL CLARITY

Most leaders own their goals. But ownership doesn't guarantee realism.

52%

Led or co-led goal setting
for marketing this year

98%

Say goals are
clearly defined

94%

Say success metrics
are clear and agreed upon

More than half of leaders led or co-led their own goal-setting this year, a meaningful shift from the old model where targets got handed down from the CFO and marketing was expected to reverse engineer a plan.

Confidence in goal clarity is high. But when we asked leaders to *rate* those goals, not just confirm they exist, the picture got a bit more complicated.

Only about **21%** rated the realism of their 2026 goals as excellent. Only **30%** said the same about achievability. And when it comes to resourcing (how well-funded and staffed they actually are to execute) just **22%** gave themselves an excellent rating. Nearly a quarter (**24%**) described their resourcing as only "fair."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Having clear goals and having realistic ones aren't the same thing. For a meaningful segment of marketing leaders, there's a gap between the plan on paper and what they actually believe they can deliver.

02 PROGRESS AGAINST GOALS

Two-thirds are on track. But one in three is already behind.

67%

On track or ahead of plan
as of end of Q1

1 in 3

Already behind
heading into April

About **11%** are significantly ahead, and **26%** are slightly ahead. But **17%** say they're slightly behind, and a small but notable group say they're significantly behind. Look at it another way: roughly one in three marketing leaders is already behind heading into April.

Where are the gaps showing up?

Of the nine performance areas we asked about, new customer acquisition had the highest share of respondents reporting they're behind (**29%**), followed by customer advocacy/reviews/referrals (**26%**) and brand awareness/share of voice (**25%**). Website and organic performance was the bright spot, with **74%** on track or ahead.

The "behind" numbers may feel tolerable in isolation, but they become more meaningful when you consider the forecasts leaders gave us for year end.

New customer acquisition		29%
Customer advocacy / referrals		26%
Brand awareness / share of voice		25%

Most expect to hit their goals. A meaningful minority doesn't.

61%

Expect to hit goals
by year end

20%

Predict they'll
exceed them

18%

Forecast they'll miss
nearly 1 in 5

Roughly **61%** say they expect to hit their goals by end of year, and another **20%** predict they'll exceed them. That's a fairly confident majority.

But **18%** (nearly one in five) forecast they'll miss. And when asked to bet on the biggest story of their marketing year, the answers revealed a community that's under pressure. About **26%** said their story will be *"We did more with less and it worked,"* the resourcefulness narrative that's become almost a coping mechanism in marketing. A slightly larger group (**29%**) said their story will be *"We focused hard and finally got leverage."* Those two narratives together paint a picture of teams that are heads down, executing against constraints, and hoping discipline pays off.

About **14%** selected the more sobering option: *"Pipeline targets were aggressive and we're adjusting expectations."*

29% *"We focused hard and finally got leverage."*

26% *"We did more with less — and it worked."*

14% *"Pipeline targets were aggressive and we're adjusting expectations."*

04 RESOURCES: THE REAL FAULT LINE

Resources are the real fault line.

Of the 70 respondents who told us they don't feel well-resourced to achieve their 2026 goals, the causes were consistent:



Those aren't surprising answers. But when you layer the performance data on top of the resourcing data, a clear pattern emerges:



For leaders navigating constrained plans: this data is yours to use. If you're in the 'fair' resourcing camp, you're not alone, and you're probably not the problem.

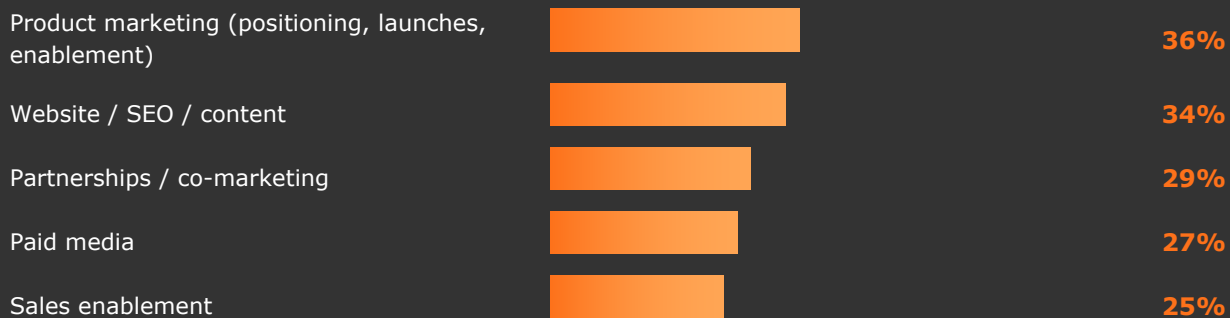
Whether it's a conversation with your CFO, a scope reset with your team, or just validation that the math was never going to work, you now have the receipts.

05 WHAT'S WORKING (AND WHAT ISN'T)

Performance is uneven. Here's where leaders are winning.

Top-performing channels:

We asked leaders to name up to three things working best right now. Product marketing (positioning, launches, enablement) came in first at **36%**, followed by website/SEO/content at **34%** and partnerships/co-marketing at **29%**. Paid media and sales enablement rounded out the top five.



Biggest pain points:

What's working least well? Webinars and virtual events were the top pain point (**22%**), followed closely by paid media (**21%**) and email/lifecycle/nurture (**20%**). Notably, some of the channels appearing on both lists (paid media, email) suggest that performance is highly variable, and that execution quality matters as much as channel selection.



PR, earned media, and thought leadership ranked as a top-three performing channel for **17%** of respondents overall, jumping to **21%** in cybersecurity and **33%** in robotics and automation.

For those verticals, credibility-building through earned coverage isn't just a brand play, it's contributing directly to the pipeline momentum.

**Paid media appears on both lists.
That's not a contradiction.**

**It's a signal that execution quality
matters as much as channel selection.
The same tool can drive results
or drain budget depending on
how it's deployed.**

The current U.S. administration is a material factor for many.

65% of respondents said the current U.S. administration is impacting their business. Among those feeling the impact:



Education / EdTech

93% more likely to say the administration is negatively impacting their business

Hypergrowth companies

78% more likely to describe the impact as positive

Admin-impacted leaders

110% more likely to report being behind plan

Macroeconomic disruption tends to create opportunities as well as obstacles. Which camp you're in often depends on your category and competitive position.

A few verticals worth watching closely.

Cybersecurity

Running hot, with pressure underneath.

Cyber leaders were **82%** more likely than average to say they're significantly ahead of plan. But they're also **50%** more likely to predict that pipeline pressure will be their year's defining story. Performing, but managing real tension.

Education / EdTech

In a tough spot.

Leaders there were **140%** more likely than average to report being informed of targets after they were already set, cut out of planning entirely. They were **500%** more likely to rate goal realism as 'very poor' and **94%** more likely to predict missing goals by year end.

In the context of the administration's impact on education funding and policy, this cohort is navigating real structural headwinds.

Robotics and Automation

An outlier in interesting ways.

These leaders were **50%** more likely than average to rate their resourcing as excellent, and **94%** more likely to name PR/earned media/thought leadership as a top-performing channel. A vertical investing in credibility and benefiting from it.

What this means heading into Q2.

If there's a through line in this data, it's that the gap between having goals and executing against them comes down to two things marketing leaders often can't fully control: budget reality and goal-setting involvement.

The leaders who are ahead of plan didn't just get lucky. They rated their resourcing as excellent and their goals as realistic and achievable. Those ratings don't happen by accident, they're the result of fighting for a seat at the planning table and making the case for what it actually takes to deliver.

For everyone else (the majority working hard inside constrained plans, doing more with less, betting on focus and discipline) Q2 is a good time to revisit what "on track" actually means, and whether it's time to surface an honest conversation about expectations.

**The data gives you cover to have that conversation.
If nothing else, it's a benchmark.
And sometimes that's exactly what you need.**

About Kickstand

Kickstand is a global marketing agency for high-growth technology brands. With a data-first approach to PR, media and analyst relations, research, content, crisis communications, and influencer marketing, we help build well-defended market leaders across mobility, robotics, AI, cybersecurity, fintech/insurtech, supply chain and logistics, sales and marketing tech, and eCommerce.

meetkickstand.com