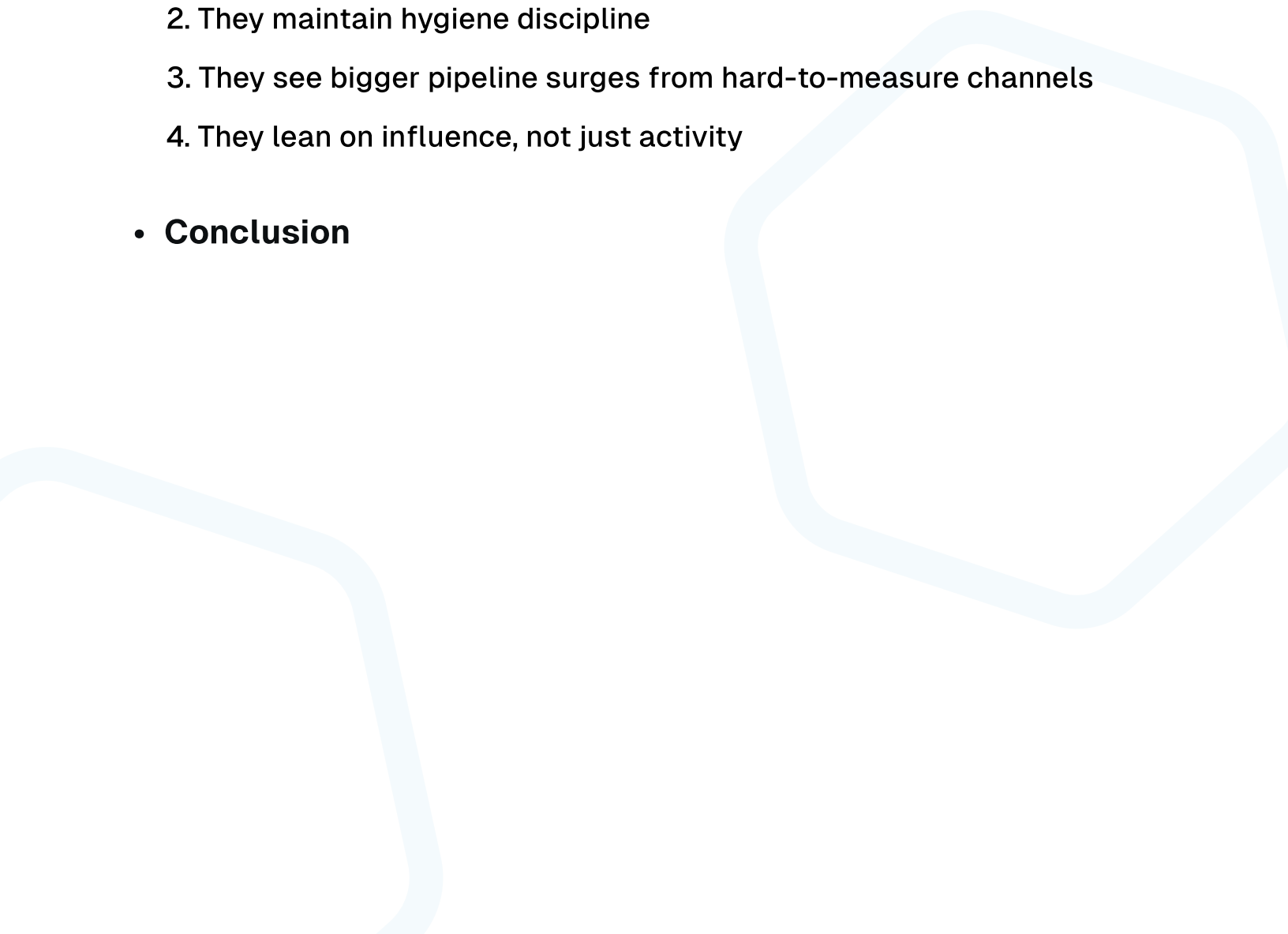




Beyond Attribution: The Disappearing Buyer Trail

What Go-To-Market Leaders at High-Growth Companies Are
Doing (& Measuring) Differently

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Executive Summary

The buyer journey is increasingly invisible to the systems we've relied on for decades.

Third-party cookies, click paths, and UTMs no longer tell a complete story. In fact, in many cases, they tell a distorted one. As more of the journey happens in channels we can't measure – community chatter, word of mouth, dark social – the buyer trail is fragmenting.

For executives and go-to-market (GTM) leaders, the challenge is twofold.

- Externally, buyer signals are harder to capture.
- Internally, the signals that do exist aren't always trusted, because teams frequently disagree on which metrics actually matter.

The result is a confidence gap: leaders can't clearly see what's happening in the market, and they can't get their own teams on the same page.

The fastest-growing companies aren't waiting for the old trail to come back – they're rebuilding their measurement system around what buyers actually tell them, team alignment, and influencing pipeline.

Attribution gaps are unavoidable, but how companies respond to them is a determining factor in their growth.

High-growth companies don't close every blind spot. Instead, they compensate for them with measurement discipline and investing in the channels where influence is real, even when attribution is messy.

This report shares insights from 300+ GTM leaders, highlighting the behaviors that distinguish the fastest-growing teams from the rest.



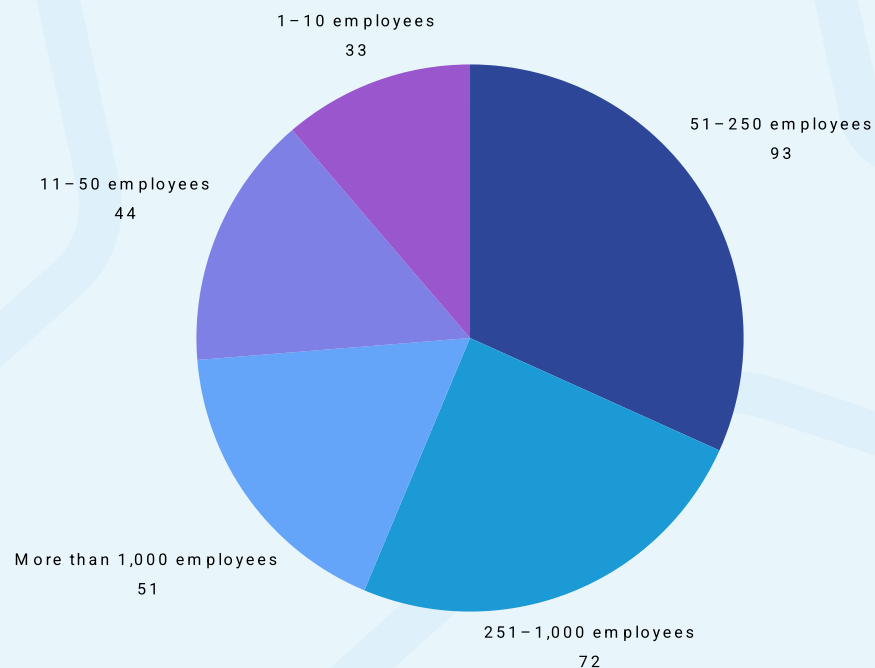
About the Research

This research is based on responses from 310 GTM leaders.

Respondents represent a wide range of company sizes:

- 93 from companies with 51–250 employees
- 72 from firms with 251–1,000
- 51 from enterprises with more than 1,000
- 44 from small businesses with 11–50 employees, and
- 33 from very small firms with 1–10 employees.

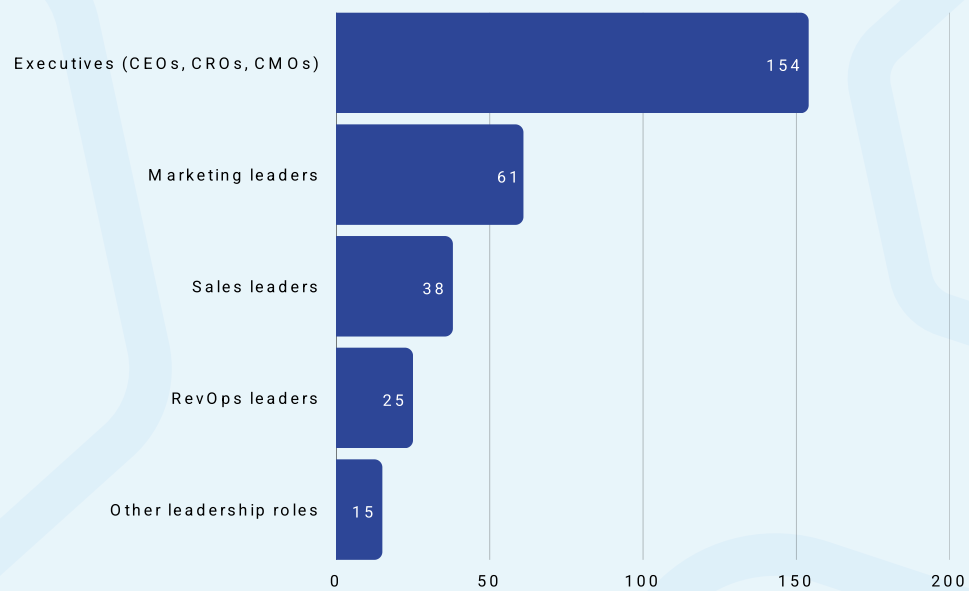
Respondent Company Size



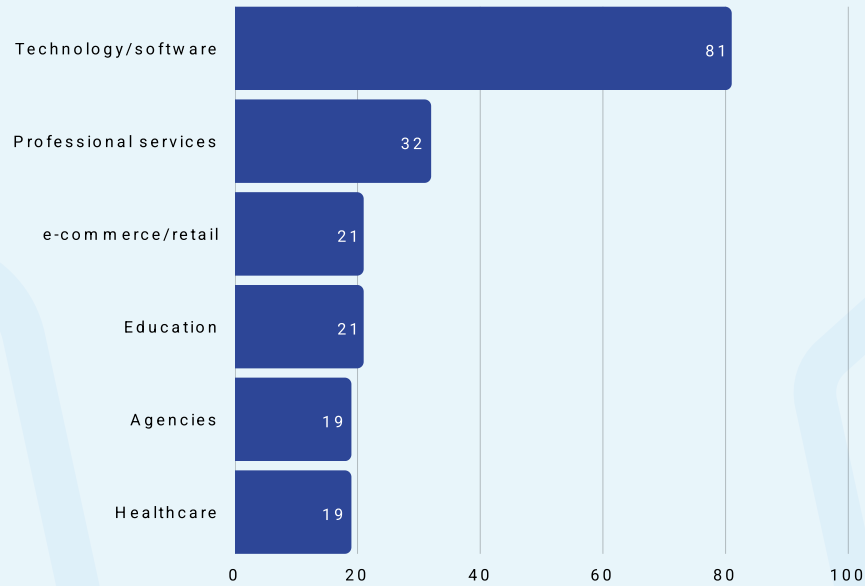
Leadership roles were well represented, including

- 154 executives (CEOs, CROs, CMOs)
- 61 Marketing leaders
- 38 Sales leaders
- 25 RevOps leaders, and
- 15 in other leadership roles.

Respondents by Role



Industries with Highest Representation



Respondents spanned diverse industries, including technology/software (81), professional services (32), e-commerce/retail (21), education (21), agencies (19), and healthcare (19), with smaller representation from consumer goods, automotive, and food & beverage. This mix provides a broad and balanced view of go-to-market practices across sectors and growth stages.

The research was conducted in September 2025.



Chapter 1: The Disappearing Buyer Trail

Why GTM Teams Can't See What's Actually Working

Organic search is down. Click-throughs are harder to track. AI tools are rewriting buyers research, discover and evaluate products and services. Meanwhile, the best buying conversations are happening in untrackable channels.

“A lot of our competition was completely wiped out by organic search traffic declining... We are actively moving away from depending on SEO as much as before.”

— Jordie van Rijn, Emailmonday

These shifts aren't just anecdotes — they're systemic.

Across our dataset:

- 80% of GTM leaders report monitoring dark social
- 68% monitor community conversations (e.g., Reddit, Quora)
- 71% track influencer mentions

But attribution often fails to connect those signals to pipeline. The trail goes cold where influence begins.

As measurement gaps grow, some GTM teams default to the most trackable channels — not necessarily the most effective.

- 67% of companies increased paid ad budgets this year
- 46% said they did so specifically because **organic/inbound pipeline declined and had to be backfilled with paid**
- Less than half of companies (46%) ask “How did you hear about us?” of most of their leads — missing a direct buyer signal that could close the loop

These behaviors reflect a deeper shift: teams are flying blind, so they optimize for what they can see — even when they know it isn't the full picture.

The question is no longer: *Can we track everything?*

The better question is: *How do we invest with confidence anyway?*



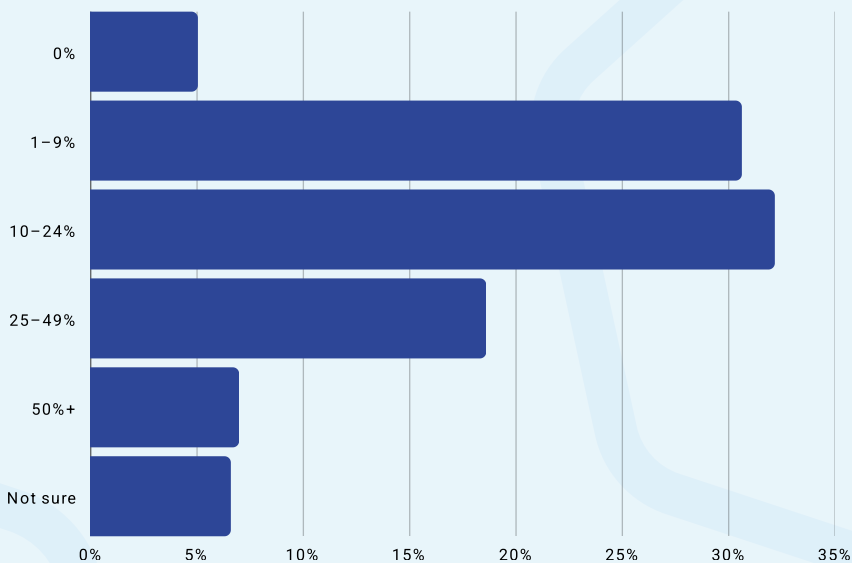
Chapter 2: A Measurement System Breaking Under Pressure

Attribution Gaps, Misplaced Spend, and the Confidence Crisis

Measurement breakdown starts with attribution and ends with misinformed budgets.

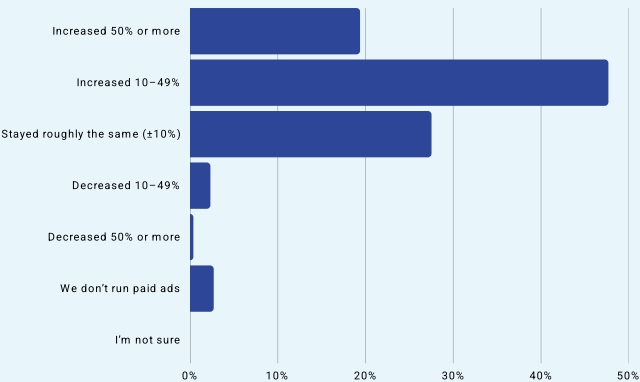
1 in 4 leaders say that **at least a quarter of pipeline was misattributed** last quarter due to missing or wrong click data. Nearly 7% say the error rate was **50% or more**.

In your best estimate, what share of last quarter's pipeline was mis-attributed because click data was missing or wrong?



To compensate for that gap, companies are falling back on the most trackable channel: paid media. In fact, **67% of companies increased paid ad budgets this year.**

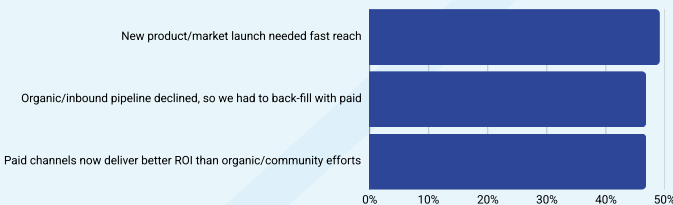
How has your paid digital-ad budget changed in the last 12 months, if at all?



Why the increase in paid spend?

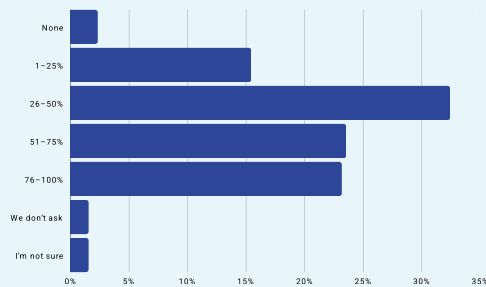
- 46% said organic pipeline declined, so they had to backfill with paid.
- 46% also said paid channels now deliver better ROI than organic/community.

What were the primary reasons for that budget change?



Yet only **23% of companies systematically ask** leads how they heard about them.

**Approximately what % of your leads each month do you ask,
"How did you hear about us?" (on a website form or on a sales call)?**



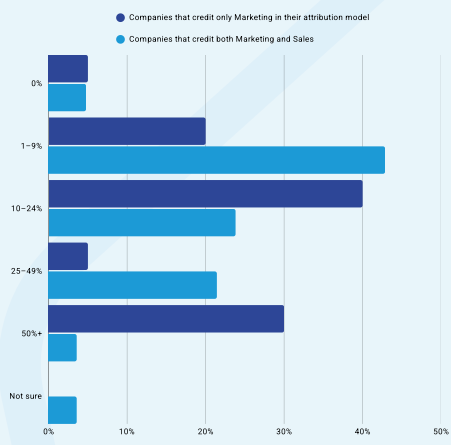
Attribution gaps aren't just technical. They're strategic, and they're expensive.

These problems are magnified by attribution models themselves:

Companies that credit "Marketing only" in their attribution model when a deal closes are far more likely to report high error rates: 30% say their attribution error is at least 50%.

In contrast, those that credit both Marketing and Sales — or the full GTM team — report significantly fewer attribution errors.

**In your best estimate, what share of last quarter's pipeline was
mis-attributed because click data was missing or wrong?**



Chapter 3: Measurement Misalignment Inside the Org

When Metrics Divide, Not Align

Even when data exists, teams often fail to agree on what matters.

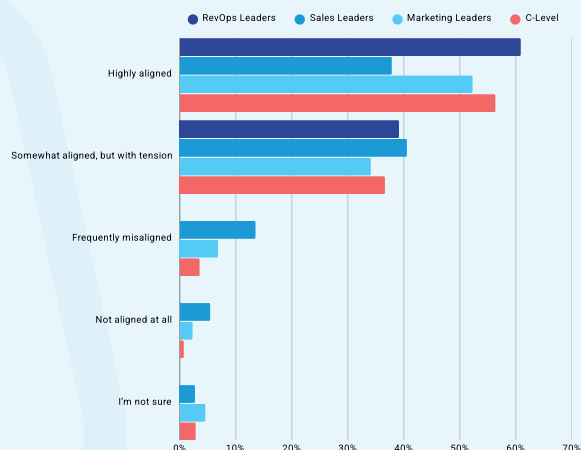
Although the majority of our respondents were C-level and marketing leaders, how RevOps teams and sales leaders reported misalignment was pronounced.

61% of RevOps leaders say their company is highly aligned on key metrics, which is low considering that part of a RevOps leader's role is to help align the team on which metrics matter most.

C-level execs and marketing leaders were less likely to say that their teams are highly aligned on the metrics that matter and more likely to say that their teams were frequently misaligned or not aligned at all.

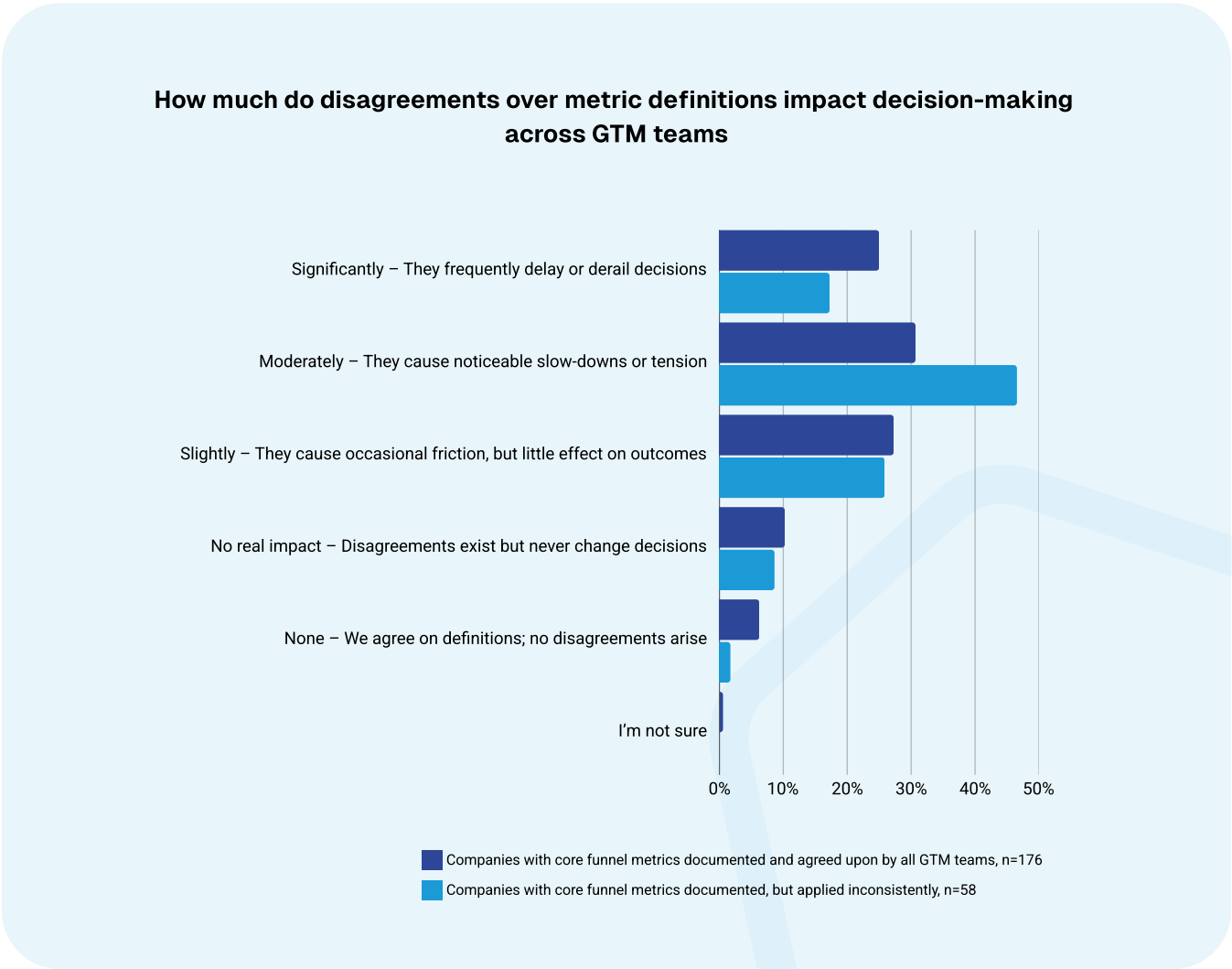
When looking at how sales leaders answered this question, however, the picture is worse. Only **38% of Sales leaders** say that their teams are highly aligned. Plus, almost 18% of sales leaders report frequent misalignment or not alignment at all.

How aligned would you say your Marketing, Sales, RevOps/Finance and Customer Success teams are on which metrics matter most?



Even where metrics are well-defined, friction doesn't disappear.

More than half of respondents with documented, agreed-upon definitions still report moderate or significant decision-making challenges. When definitions exist but are applied inconsistently, the share experiencing misalignment jumps to nearly two-thirds.



Misalignment shows up clearly in the dashboards that reach the executive level.

Companies that elevate traffic to the executive deck report lower confidence in their ability to measure what drives growth.

The gap isn't massive, but it is consistent, and the growth breakdown sharpens the picture. Low-growth companies (0–10% YoY, n=29) are more than twice as likely to feature traffic at the executive level compared to high-growth peers (50%+ YoY, n=75): 76% vs 32%. While the low-growth sample is smaller and should be read directionally, the contrast aligns with the confidence data.

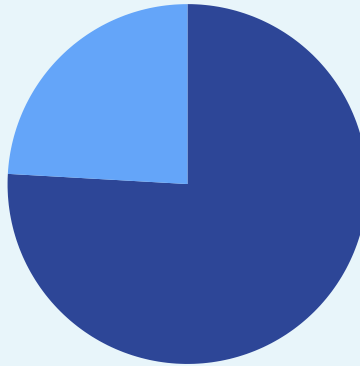


Low-growth firms are 2.4x more likely to feature traffic at the executive level:

- **76%** of 0–10% growth orgs include it, versus
- **32%** of 50%+ growth orgs

Companies reporting 0–10% YoY revenue growth

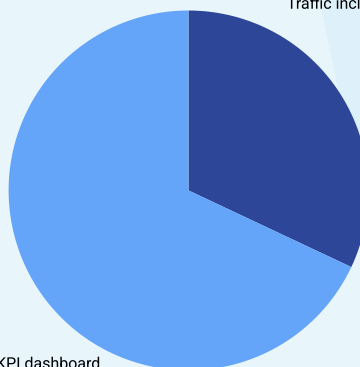
Traffic NOT included in primary executive KPI dashboard
24.1%



Traffic included in primary executive KPI dashboard
75.9%

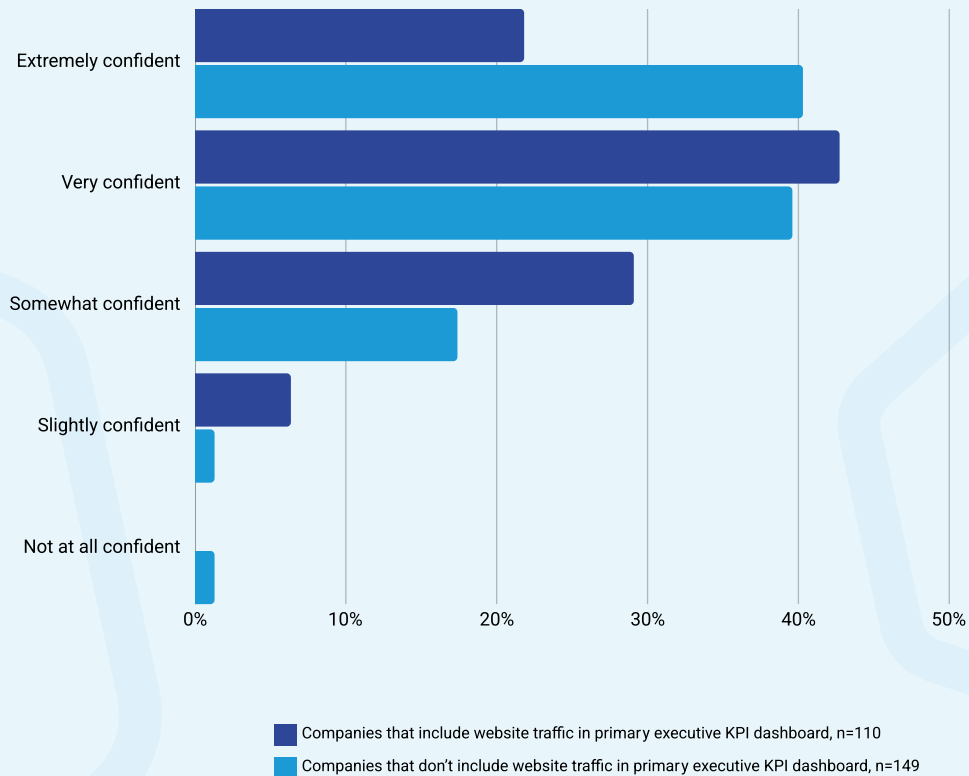
Companies reporting over 50% YoY revenue growth

Traffic included in primary executive KPI dashboard
32%



Traffic NOT included in primary executive KPI dashboard
68%

How confident are you that your current GTM metrics accurately reflect what's driving pipeline growth?



This doesn't mean traffic is inherently bad. It means something's often off when traffic becomes a headline KPI.

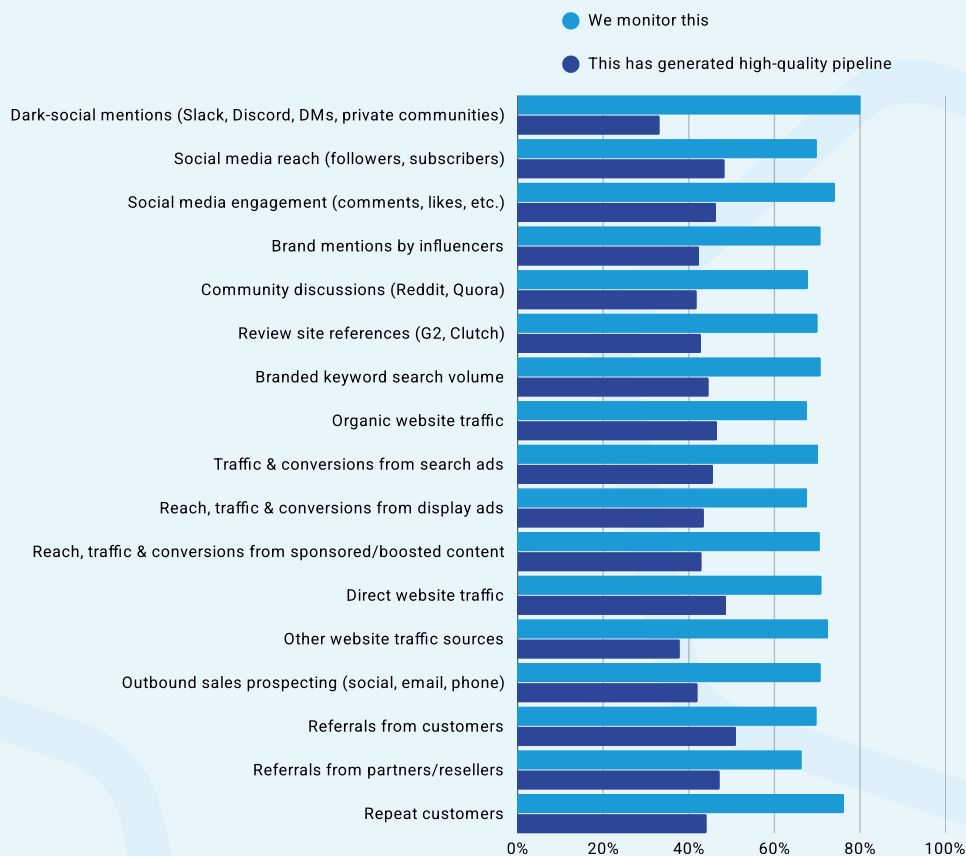


Chapter 4: Influence Without Attribution

Where Pipeline Really Comes From (Even If Your CRM Says Otherwise)

Dark social, communities, and influencer mentions are widely monitored but less often viewed as directly connected to pipeline. Leaders know that these are the places where buyers are active, but attribution struggles to connect the dots.

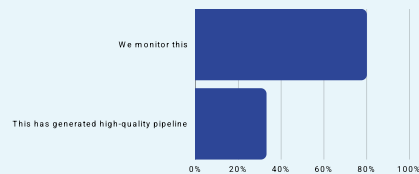
For each metric / source below, tick whether you actively monitor it and if you have seen it generate high-quality pipeline in the past 12 months



Let's take dark social:

- **80% of GTM leaders monitor it**
- But only **33% credit it with high-quality pipeline**

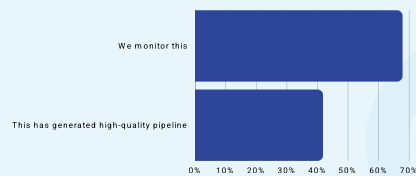
Dark-social mentions (Slack, Discord, DMs, private communities)



Communities?

- 68% monitor Reddit/Quora/etc.
- 42% credit them with real pipeline

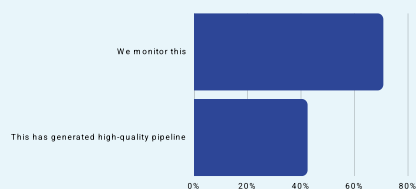
Community discussions (Reddit, Quora)



Influencers?

- 71% track mentions
- 42% tie them to pipeline impact

Brand mentions by influencers



The gap is expected when you consider that many of these moments are simply not captured or tracked by traditional marketing or sales systems.

Additionally, not many companies consistently collect self-reported attribution data, which could help fill in those blind spots.

However, a number of respondents shared that these channels are working very well, even when attribution can't perfectly capture the impact.

"I leaned in most heavily this year into interacting with niche online communities where my target audience was already congregated, such as industry-specific Slack channels and LinkedIn comment threads. Instead of pushing hard-sell messages aggressively, I responded to questions, provided relevant case studies, and introduced individuals to valuable resources. I wasn't able to monitor every interaction entirely, but I saw a spectacular rise in inbound demo requests and direct mention of my name or brand on sales calls. I credited results primarily through self-reported attribution on forms and through sales team feedback.

"It worked so well because it built trust and credibility in spaces where buyers were already seeking assistance rather than scrolling past ads." — Adam Watson from Hollywood Mirrors

Directional confidence, not pixel-perfect tracking, is how leaders invest in these channels.

Chapter 5: What High-Growth Teams Actually Do Differently

New Habits for a Post-Attribution World

Our research identified a subset of companies growing **100%+ year-over-year**.

We define “high growth” as 100%+ annual revenue growth, doubling or more within a single year. While this group is smaller in count (28 respondents), the patterns they exhibit are consistent and directional. Comparing them with the 0–10% growth cohort (~58 companies) highlights the practices that separate the fastest-growing teams from the slowest.

When it comes to size, most of the companies in this dataset are mid-sized or larger:

- 51–250 employees (32%)
- 251–1,000 employees (27%)
- 1,000+ employees (20%)

Smaller firms are represented too (11–50 employees (13%) and 1–10 employees (8%)) but the sample skews toward organizations with more complex go-to-market functions.

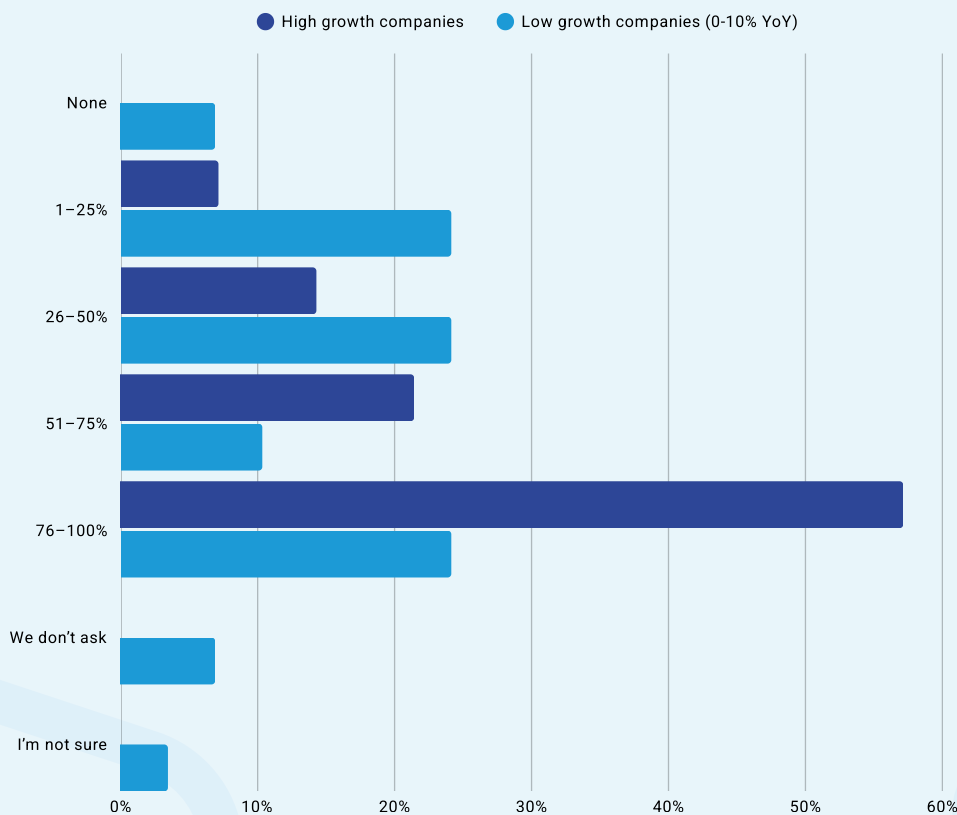
The survey data indicate that high-growth teams don’t eliminate attribution gaps, they out-execute on how they handle them.



1. They capture first-party attribution at scale

57% of high-growth companies consistently ask "How did you hear about us?" (HYHAU) – this is almost double the rate of low-growth firms that do the same (just 24%)

Approximately what % of your leads each month do you ask, "How did you hear about us?" (on a website form or on a sales call)?



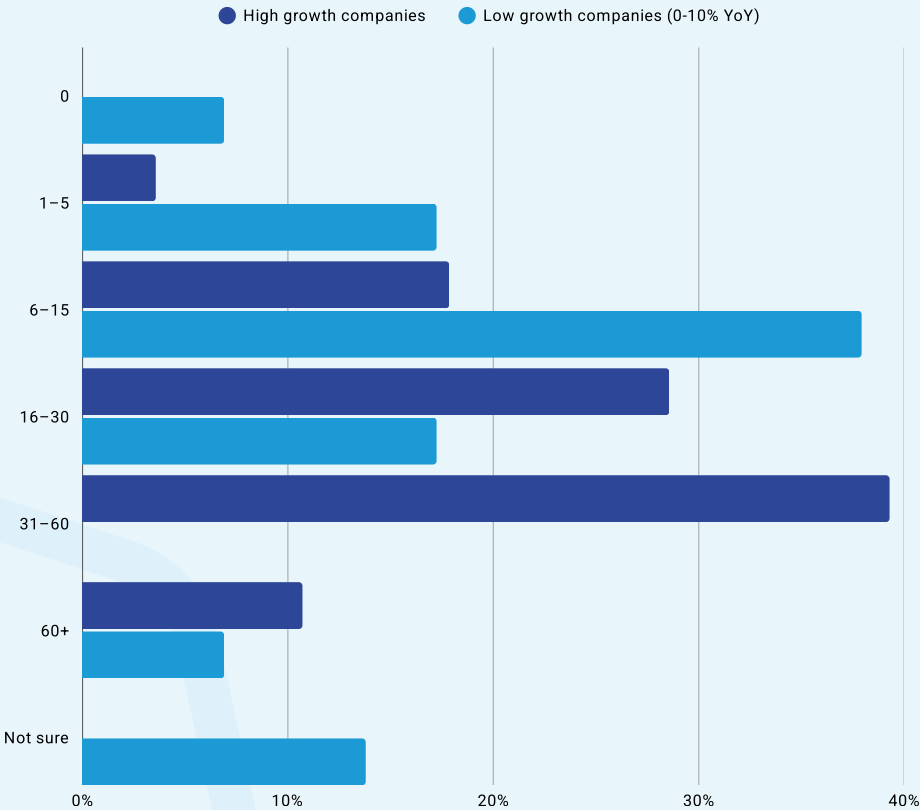
For these teams, buyer-reported attribution isn't an experiment. It's a system input they treat with the same weight as click-path data.

2. They maintain hygiene discipline

Confidence in GTM metrics rises once teams invest at least 16 hours per month on data hygiene.

Among high-growth companies, 78% report spending 15+ hours/month cleaning and reconciling data, compared with just 24% of low-growth companies. Interestingly, confidence climbs with cleanup (up to ~86%) but plateaus beyond 30 hours/month

About how many hours per month does your team spend cleaning or reconciling attribution data (e.g., deduping contacts, matching CRM opportunities to billing)?



This consistency — not brute force — sustains trust in the operating system.

3. They see bigger pipeline surges from hard-to-measure channels

High-growth companies are much more likely to report significant pipeline increases from the channels that direct attribution struggles to capture:

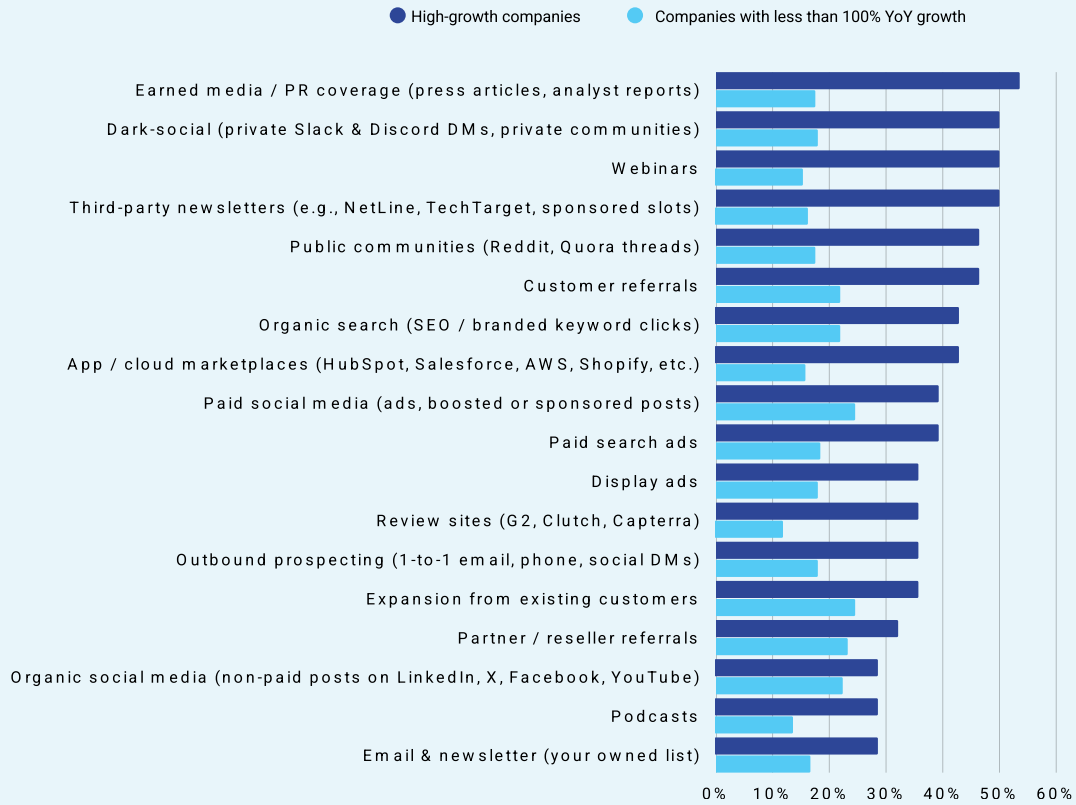
- Dark social/private communities: 50% of high-growth vs 18% of others
- Public communities (Reddit, Quora): 46% vs 17%
- Organic search (SEO): 43% vs 22%

They also lead in referrals and display ads, but the sharpest contrasts are in dark social and communities — places where buying conversations are harder to measure but increasingly decisive.

“One of the best things I have ever done was, in 2025, building a private LinkedIn group for decision-makers... Click tracking was low, but we attributed results by tracking new deal discussions with member lists and post-event follow-up.” — Robert Grunnah, Austin House Buyer

This isn't accidental. They've built systems to validate signal without attribution.

Share of Respondents Seeing Significant Pipeline Increases by Channel (Last Year)

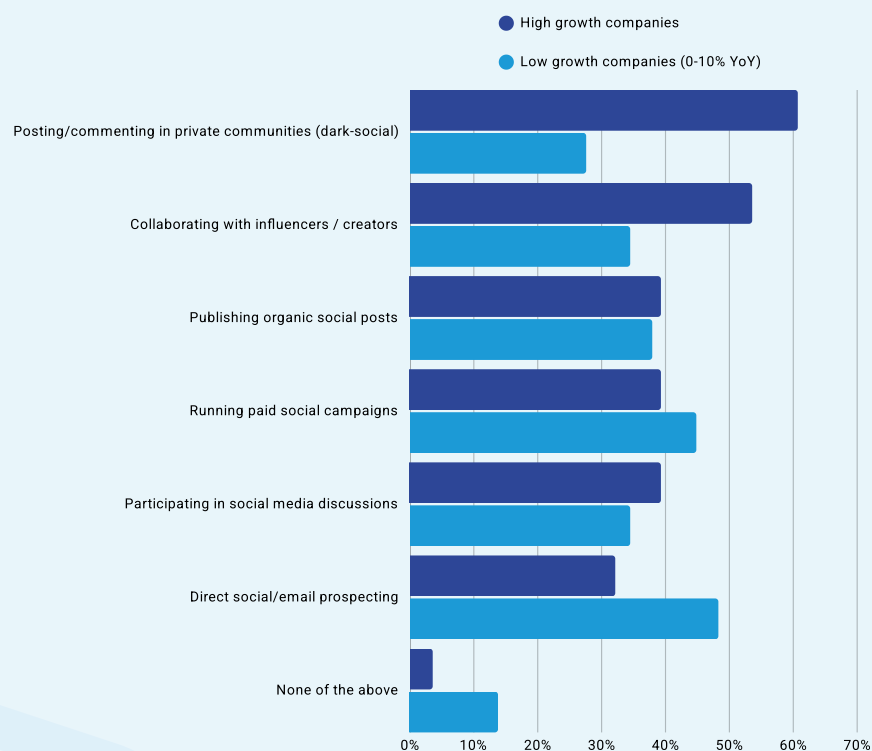


4. They lean on influence, not just activity

When asked which activities generated high-quality pipeline in the past 12 months, high-growth teams were most likely to cite:

- Posting/commenting in private communities (60% vs 27%) and
- Collaborating with influencers (54% vs 34%)

Which of the following, if any, marketing & sales activities generated high-quality pipeline for your team in the past 12 months?



By contrast, slower-growing companies (0-10% YoY) were more likely to emphasize traditional, trackable activities:

- Direct prospecting (48% vs 32%) and
- Running paid campaigns (45% vs 39%)

High-growth teams aren't just measuring differently — they're investing in fundamentally different activities that build trust and influence where buyers actually are.

Conclusion

The disappearing buyer trail is not a temporary setback — it is the new reality. The systems that once promised clarity now create blind spots, and the pursuit of perfect attribution only widens the gap between what companies can measure and what truly drives growth.

The difference between stalled and scaling companies is not whether they can track every click. It's whether they build confidence in their decisions despite imperfect data. High-growth teams have shown that this confidence comes from a disciplined mix of self-reported attribution, data hygiene, and a willingness to invest in influence where buyers actually are — even when attribution can't keep up.

The lesson is clear: GTM leaders cannot wait for the trail to reappear. They must replace outdated habits with practices that align teams, capture buyer signals directly, and validate impact through directional confidence rather than false precision.

Growth in the post-attribution era will belong to those who adapt fastest — not by chasing the illusion of certainty, but by building systems resilient to uncertainty.

Go-to-market alignment starts with a single source of truth.

If your marketing, sales, and RevOps teams can't align on go-to-market metrics, they'll never agree on results. Databox unifies GTM metrics across teams so your entire go-to-market strategy runs on shared, real-time data.

We used these research findings to develop 4 tailor-made dashboards that you can try for free.

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