A talk for founders

Marketing by an Engineer.

How to market your startup — twelve campaigns that moved real numbers, the growth engines underneath them, and the patterns you can actually reuse.

32 slides | 12 campaigns · 6 growth engines | 1996 – 2026 | Use ← → to move · G for the grid

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Hi, I'm Doron.

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I run the ordering platform behind **2,000+ coffee shops and restaurants** — approaching a million orders a month, live across the US, Canada, Australia, the UK, France and Spain. Y Combinator-backed.

Before this: Director of Platform at Saildrone, and engineering at OpenTable, Apple, Beats Music and Siemens. UC Berkeley, Haas.

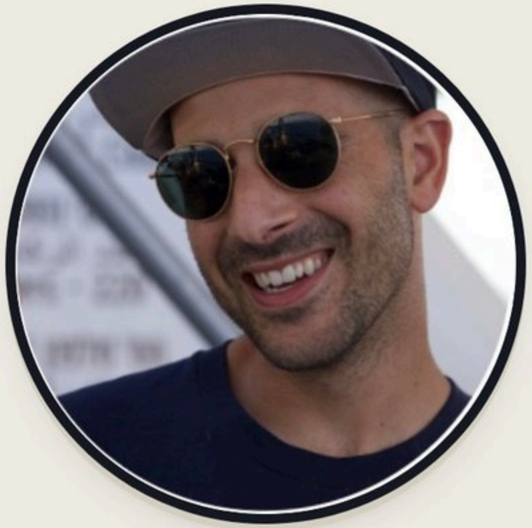
Today we're the **CTO and CMO as a service, run by AI** — an AI website, web ordering, a native mobile app, and a fully autonomous customer-engagement platform, for owners who have neither.

Per Diem · YC W21

2,000+ businesses

~1M orders / month

US · CA · AU · UK · FR · ES



HELLO, MY NAME IS

Doron

Why this deck exists

I'm an engineer, not a marketer. This is the swipe file I wish someone had handed me — and every number in it is checked against a published source.

Sourced, not remembered.

Every number on the campaign slides came from a published account and is attributed on the last slide. Where a widely-repeated figure could not be verified, it is described rather than counted.

Part one

Where they publish

Ten marketing sites ranked by an outside index, plus six the founders in this deck actually read.

Part two

Twelve plays

One campaign per slide: what they did, what it returned, and the single line worth stealing.

Part three

How they grew fast

The loops underneath: Robinhood's queue, PayPal's taper, Uber's city, Tinder's campus — and the arithmetic that decides whether yours compounds.

Part four

Your move

The five patterns underneath all of them, a table for picking one, and the first 90 days.

who gets the most traffic.

01	**Search Engine Land**	The paper of record for search. If an algorithm changed, it is written up here first and correctly.
02	**Search Engine Roundtable**	Barry Schwartz's daily log of ranking volatility. Granular to the point of obsessive, which is the value.
03	**HubSpot Blog**	The widest free library in marketing — and, as slide 10 shows, a case study in its own right.
04	**Seth's Blog**	Daily short essays on positioning and permission. The only entry on this list about strategy rather than tactics.
05	**Social Media Examiner**	Platform-by-platform mechanics. Read it when you have picked a channel, not while choosing one.
06	**Search Engine Journal**	Fastest reporting on Google, Meta and TikTok ad changes. Useful if you are spending money weekly.
07	**Moz**	Technical SEO fundamentals, taught patiently. Whiteboard Friday still teaches the concepts better than anything.
08	**Semrush Blog**	Data studies run against their own index — original numbers instead of recycled opinion.

Six more the founders actually read.

That ranking skews toward search and social practitioners. If you are marketing a startup rather than an agency, these six carry more per hour.

Marketing Examples

Harry Dry's teardowns of real landing pages and copy. Short, concrete, and the closest thing to a swipe file on the open web.

Lenny's Newsletter

Growth and product operators writing up what they actually ran, including the parts that failed.

First Round Review

Long-form interviews with operators at the stage you are at now. The growth-hacking glossary is a good entry point.

Demand Curve

Playbooks for paid acquisition and landing pages, written for companies with a small budget and no growth team.

a16z

Category and market structure thinking. Read it for how to frame what you sell, not for tactics.

Reforge

The most rigorous public writing on growth loops and retention mechanics. Dense, and worth the effort.

12

plays worth stealing.

They span thirty years, from the email footer that invented viral marketing to the annual data drop that ate December. Each one names the **motion** it belongs to — that is the part that transfers, not the tactic.

- Hotmail
- Dropbox
- Airbnb
- Dollar Shave Club
- HubSpot
- Slack
- Zapier & Canva
- Superhuman
- Morning Brew
- Duolingo
- Liquid Death
- Spotify

Motion — Product as channel / Hotmail / 1996

The footer that invented viral marketing.

Tim Draper pushed Sabeer Bhatia and Jack Smith to append one line to the bottom of every message a Hotmail user sent: *"PS: I love you. Get your free email at Hotmail."* The founders resisted — it felt like hijacking their users' mail.

It worked because of who it reached. The ad appeared in front of a person who had just received email from someone they knew, at the exact moment they were reading email. Perfect targeting, zero media spend.

Steal this

Your product already sends something into the world — an email, a link, an export, a shared file. Put your name on the artifact, not in an ad.

Hotmail

0 → 12M

users in 18 months

~17%

of everyone on the internet at the time

$500K

total spend over two years. A competitor spent $20M for under half the users.

$400M

acquisition by Microsoft

Motion — Two-sided referral / Dropbox / 2008

Paying referrals in something that isn't money.

Dropbox gave 500MB of free storage to the person who referred and 500MB to the person who joined. Both sides won, so the ask stopped feeling like a favour.

The reward cost Dropbox marginal storage rather than cash, and it made the product *more* useful for both parties — so the incentive deepened retention instead of buying a hollow signup. Paid search for "online storage" was costing them far more per customer than the product was worth.

Steal this

Pay referral rewards in your own currency, and pay both sides. **Cash attracts people who want cash; product attracts people who want the product.**

Dropbox

100K → 4M

users in 15 months

500MB

to each side of every successful referral

~$0

marginal media cost per acquired user

Motion — Borrowed audience / Airbnb / 2010

Plugging into someone else's marketplace.

Airbnb had supply and no demand. Craigslist had millions of people already searching for somewhere to stay. So Airbnb built a one-click cross-post: list once on Airbnb, appear on Craigslist automatically.

Hosts got double the exposure for no extra work, and Airbnb's inventory landed in front of an enormous audience at the moment of intent — without buying a single ad.

Steal this

Before building an audience, ask where your customer already is at the moment they need you — a marketplace, an app store, a subreddit, a POS integration directory — and go stand there.

Airbnb

60K → 300K

listings in roughly one year

1 click

for a host to syndicate to a site with orders of magnitude more traffic

Closed

the specific loophole no longer exists — the principle does

Motion — Entertainment, not advertising / Dollar Shave Club / 2012

$4,500 of production, $1B of outcome.

Michael Dubin wrote a 90-second script, shot it in a single day in his own warehouse with a friend from his improv troupe directing, and put it on YouTube. Total budget: $4,500. A comparably polished ad would have run $50,000 or more.

The video does not explain the razor. It is funny first, and the product is the punchline. Within two days the site had collapsed under 12,000 orders.

Steal this

Budget buys production value; it does not buy a point of view. Write the script before you price the shoot — and if the script isn't good, more money makes a more expensive bad ad.

Dollar Shave Club

$4,500
total production cost, shot in one day

12,000
orders in the first 48 hours — the site crashed

$1B
acquisition by Unilever, 2016

Motion — Free tool + category creation / HubSpot / 2007

Name the category, then hand out the scoreboard.

HubSpot did two things at once. It named what it sold — "inbound marketing" — so that every article about the idea was an article about them. Then it shipped Website Grader: paste a URL, get a score out of 100 for how your site is performing.

The score was free. The full report cost an email address, so every use produced a qualified lead. And because people shared their scores, the tool pulled in roughly 40,000 backlinks that lifted the entire domain.

Steal this

A free tool that returns a personalised number beats a blog post forever — it earns links, it qualifies the lead, and it never goes stale.

HubSpot

4M+
websites graded between 2006 and 2011

10M+
leads generated by that single free tool

~40K
backlinks earned, lifting domain authority sitewide

Motion — Built-in invitation / Slack / 2014

The invite is step one, not a marketing ask.

Slack is useless with one person in it. So inviting your team wasn't a growth feature bolted on later — it was the first thing setup asked you to do. Every new workspace dragged in a dozen colleagues by necessity.

Alongside it, Slack ran a public "Wall of Love": a feed of unprompted praise from real users. No production budget, and far more persuasive than a testimonial page.

Steal this

If your product gets better with more people in it, make inviting them part of setup. And publish what customers already say about you instead of writing your own version.

Slack

15K → 500K

daily active users in roughly a year

Step 1

invite your team — positioned as onboarding, not as a referral program

Wall of Love

unpaid, unprompted, public

One template, every combination.

Zapier already knew which apps it connected. So it built a single page template and generated one page for every app and every meaningful pair of apps: "Send Slack messages from Gmail." Someone searching that exact phrase lands on a page that answers it and offers the fix.

Canva ran the identical play against design intent — a page for "resume templates," another for "Instagram story templates," thirty thousand of them.

Steal this

If you hold structured data about combinations people search for, every row in that table is a landing page. Only build it where each page genuinely answers a distinct question.

Zapier & Canva

25,000+
programmatic pages at Zapier (Canva: 30,000+)

3.6M
organic keywords ranked

5.8M
organic sessions per month

Motion — Scarcity + concierge / Superhuman / 2017

No signup button, on purpose.

Superhuman charged $30 a month for an email client and refused to let you buy it. You joined a waitlist, filled in a survey, and waited for a one-to-one onboarding call before you were allowed to pay.

Two things happened. The queue itself became the story people posted about, and every single customer was hand-activated — so nobody churned out of confusion. Existing users could pull people they knew up the line, which turned the waitlist into a referral graph.

Steal this

Scarcity only works when the thing behind the door is genuinely worth waiting for. A queue in front of a mediocre product is just friction.

Superhuman

180,000
people on the waitlist

$30/mo
for an email client, before anyone had used it

1:1
human onboarding call required before purchase

Motion — Habit-embedded referral / Morning Brew / 2015 →

Put the ask inside the habit.

Morning Brew's referral CTA sat in the footer of a free newsletter that hundreds of thousands of people opened every single weekday. No campaign, no launch — just a daily impression on an audience already in the habit of reading.

The rewards laddered up in physical goods: mug, then t-shirt, then sweatshirt. People were already forwarding the newsletter before the program existed; the ladder just gave the behaviour a scoreboard.

Steal this

A daily product earns a daily impression for free. Referrals amplify a habit — they cannot manufacture one. Fix retention first, then bolt on the ladder.

Morning Brew

100K → 2.5M

subscribers

~30%

of total growth attributable to referrals

$75M

reported sale to Business Insider

Motion — Native creator, not advertiser / Duolingo / 2021 →

Stop advertising on the platform. Post on it.

Duolingo handed its TikTok account to a small team who ignored the product entirely and made Duo the owl a character — chaotic, needy, chasing trends the same day they broke. The videos rarely mention learning a language.

Duo then started appearing in *other brands'* videos, which put Duolingo in front of audiences it never had to buy. TikTok viewers famously refuse to be sold to; entertaining them was the only way in.

Steal this

On a social platform the winning format is the platform's native format. Don't run ads there — be a creator there, and accept that most posts won't mention what you sell.

Duolingo

9M+
TikTok followers

20–50M
views on a routine video

$0
traditional ad spend behind the mascot's rise

The product is water. The product is the brand.

Mike Cessario put mountain spring water in a tallboy can, wrapped it in heavy-metal artwork, and wrote "Murder Your Thirst" on it. There is no functional difference between this water and any other water. That is the entire point.

Every activation — concert tie-ins, absurd merch, jokes at the category's expense — is built to be entertainment people pass along, not an ad people tolerate. The identity does the work the formulation cannot.

Steal this

In a commodity category, brand is the only real product difference. Pick a personality specific enough that a chunk of the market finds it too much — that is what makes the rest care.

Liquid Death

Zero

functional differentiation. It is canned water.

Tallboy

packaging borrowed from beer, so it reads as something else on a shelf

"Murder Your Thirst"

a tagline no committee would have approved

The users run the campaign, because it's about them.

Every December, Spotify hands each listener a personalised story assembled from data it already had. Nobody shares an ad for Spotify. Millions of people share a slide about their own taste that happens to be branded Spotify.

It also arrives on a fixed date, which turned it into a recurring cultural event competitors now have to react to rather than pre-empt.

Steal this

Ask what your product knows about a customer that they would be proud to post. Ship it once a year on the same date, so it compounds into an event.

Spotify

156M

users engaged with Wrapped in 2023

1.5B

social impressions worldwide that year

400M

TikTok views in three days (2024); 2.1M mentions in 48 hours

How they actually grew fast.

A campaign buys a spike. An **engine** compounds. Everything from here on is about the second kind — the loops that made Dropbox, Robinhood, PayPal, Uber and Tinder grow while their founders slept.

Two numbers decide everything.

$k = i \times c$. Each new user sends *i* invitations; *c* of them convert. If k is above 1, every user brings in more than one user and growth sustains itself with no spend. Below 1, the loop decays and you are renting growth from an ad account forever.

The half everyone forgets is **cycle time** — how long from someone joining to their invitees converting. It compounds as an exponent, so it dominates.

Take 1,000 users at k = 1.2 over 30 days. On a two-day cycle that is fifteen generations and roughly 87,000 users. On a thirty-day cycle it is one generation and 2,200. Same k. Same month. Forty times the outcome.

Steal this

Shorten the cycle before you chase a bigger k. Cutting the time between signup and invitation is usually a product change you can ship this month.

$k > 1$

self-sustaining — the loop pays for itself

$k < 1$

decaying — every user must be bought

87,000 vs 2,200

same k, same 30 days, 2-day cycle vs 30-day cycle.
Idealised: no churn, constant k.

Engine — Incentive loop, paid in status / Robinhood / 2013

A million users before the product existed.

Robinhood put up a landing page with one field: your email. The thank-you page immediately showed *your position in line* — number 43,812 — and one way to move up: refer people.

There was no discount, no free month, no swag. The reward was purely position. For a product with obvious pent-up demand — commission-free trading, when everyone else charged $7 a trade — a place in the queue was enough. 10,000 signups on day one, over 50,000 in the first week, and each user brought in roughly three more.

Steal this

If demand is genuinely pent up, position in line is a free currency. Show the number, make it move, and keep the signup to a single field.

Robinhood

~1M
on the waitlist before launch

10K / 50K
signups on day one / in week one

~3x
additional signups per user referred

1 field
email address. Nothing to download.

Engine — Incentive loop, paid in cash / PayPal / 1999 → 2002

Pay for the loop until it runs itself.

PayPal literally gave money away: $20 to open an account, $20 more for each person you brought. It was, by design, unprofitable per user. They spent tens of millions in the first year.

The bet was that money would buy *density* on eBay, and that once enough buyers and sellers were on PayPal the network would hold without incentives. So they tapered — $20 to $10, then $5, then nothing. By Q1 2002 their filings show $109,000 of promotional bonuses against 2.6 million new accounts: four cents each. The loop had taken over.

Steal this

Paying above LTV is defensible only with a taper planned before you start, and only if density is what makes your product work. Otherwise you are buying users who leave when the money does.

PayPal

7–10%

daily growth at the peak of the program

$20 → $10 → $0

the deliberate taper as the network took hold

$0.04

promotional cost per account by Q1 2002 (SEC filing: $109K / 2.6M accounts)

1M → 5M

users in a few months on the referral structure

Engine — Density, then repeat / Uber / 2010 →

Never launch nationally. Launch a city.

A marketplace with no drivers is worthless to riders and vice versa. Uber solved it locally: enter one city, guarantee drivers a minimum hourly wage so supply took no risk, give riders free first trips, and run a local ops team whose only job was keeping both sides in balance.

Once wait times in that city dropped below the threshold where people stop calling taxis, the market held on its own — and the whole thing was written down as a playbook and re-run in the next city.

Steal this

For anything two-sided, subsidise the short side and shrink the map. Total users is a vanity number; liquidity inside one segment is the only thing that compounds.

Uber

1 city
the unit of launch — never a country

Guaranteed
minimum driver earnings removed all supply-side risk

Both sides
riders and drivers each earned credit for referrals

A playbook
written once, executed by local teams in every new market

Fill one room before you open the building.

Tinder didn't launch to the internet. Whitney Wolfe walked into a sorority chapter meeting, presented, and had every woman in the room install the app. Then she walked across campus to the brother fraternity, where the men opened it and saw women they actually knew.

The chicken-and-egg problem disappears when the network is a single campus. After the first trip the app had roughly 15,000 users, and they hired campus reps to re-run the same party-with-a-download-at-the-door trick school by school.

Steal this

Pick a network small enough to saturate in a week. A product that is dense in one dorm beats one that is thin in a country. Expand only after the first one holds without you.

Tinder

1 campus
the initial addressable market, on purpose

~15,000
users after the first round of chapter visits

50M+
users reached largely through word of mouth

Using it and marketing it are the same action.

You cannot use Calendly alone. Booking a meeting means sending your link to someone else, who then experiences the entire product — and its value — before they have any account. Same with a Loom: you record it *in order to send it*, and the recipient watches it on Loom's player. Same with a Zoom link.

There is no referral program here and no reward, because there is no separate marketing act to reward. The invitation is a byproduct of the job the user came to do, so the loop never needs a budget line.

Steal this

Ask which of your features a user cannot complete without involving another person, and make that the shortest, prettiest path in the product. That feature is your growth team.

Calendly · Loom · Zoom

2

people minimum to get any value — the loop is structural

$0

incentive cost: the invite is the work, not an extra ask

2x

the fastest-growing SaaS companies get roughly double the signups from product referrals (OpenView benchmarks)

Engine — None. Read this one carefully. / ChatGPT / 2022

The uncomfortable one.

ChatGPT reached 100 million monthly users in about 60 days — TikTok took nine months, Instagram over two years. There was no referral program, no waitlist game, no campaign. It was free, it took one click, and the output was screenshot-able, so people posted it for the same reason they post anything: it was interesting.

It belongs in this deck as a warning, not a template. Every retrospective that credits a clever growth tactic here is reverse-engineering a story onto a product that was simply a step change.

Steal this

Take away only the removable parts: free, no signup wall, and an output worth screenshotting. Do not plan on being a step change — that is not a strategy, it is an outcome.

ChatGPT

60 days
to 100M monthly active users

9 months
TikTok, for the same milestone

2+ years
Instagram, for the same milestone

$0
incentives, referrals or campaign spend behind it

Four engines. Pick the one your product can actually run.

Every company in this deck is running one of these. Most are running exactly one.

Engine	What powers it	Who runs it	What kills it
Invitation	The product is worthless with one user in it	Slack, Zoom, Calendly, Loom	A product people use alone
Incentive	You pay one or both sides to close the loop	Dropbox, PayPal, Uber, Robinhood	Reward cost above LTV with no taper
Artifact	Every output the user creates carries you with it	Hotmail, Loom, Canva, Spotify Wrapped	Output nobody wants to share
Density	Saturating one small network, then copying the playbook	Tinder, Facebook, Uber	Expanding before the first market holds

If none of these fit, you do not have a growth problem — you have a product that nobody has a reason to mention.

Five patterns underneath the twelve.

The tactics are era-specific and mostly closed. The patterns are not.

Pattern 01

Distribution lives inside the product

Not in a campaign next to it. Hotmail's footer, Slack's invite step, Dropbox's storage reward and Spotify Wrapped are all features, not ads. Marketing that ships in the product runs forever and costs nothing per impression.

Pattern 02

Borrow an audience before building one

Airbnb took Craigslist's. Duolingo took TikTok's. Building an audience takes years; renting attention from a place your customer already stands takes weeks.

Pattern 03

Pay in your own currency

Storage, swag, queue position, early access. Rewards denominated in your product select for people who want your product, and cost you margin rather than cash.

Pattern 04

One asset, infinite surface area

Zapier's page template, Canva's, HubSpot's grader. Build the machine once; it produces thousands of entry points that keep working while you sleep.

Pattern 05

A point of view beats a budget

$4,500 of Dollar Shave Club outperformed Gillette's media spend. Duolingo's owl outperformed the ad account. Liquid Death out-marketed

Pick one motion. Not three.

Find the row that describes your business. Run that one until it works or clearly doesn't.

If this is you	Run this motion	Proof
Self-serve, used with colleagues	**Invitation built into setup**	Slack, Dropbox
Customers search for a specific combination or template	**Programmatic pages + a free tool**	Zapier, Canva, HubSpot
Commodity category, consumer-facing	**Brand and entertainment**	Dollar Shave Club, Liquid Death
High price, small addressable market	**Scarcity plus concierge onboarding**	Superhuman
Two-sided marketplace, one side is short	**Borrow an existing audience for that side**	Airbnb
Daily-use product with a loyal base	**Habit-embedded ask + an annual data moment**	Morning Brew, Spotify
Young audience living on one platform	**Post natively as a creator**	Duolingo

What not to copy.

Every play on the preceding slides has a popular, useless imitation.

- **Copying the tactic instead of the condition.** Airbnb's Craigslist hack worked because of a loophole that has been closed for a decade. What transfers is "go where intent already is," not "scrape a classifieds site."
- **A referral program on a product nobody loves.** Referrals amplify retention; they do not create it. If week-four retention is flat, a mug will not fix it.
- **A waitlist with nothing behind the door.** Superhuman's queue worked because the product justified it and every user was onboarded by hand. Without both halves it is just a signup form that says no.
- **Borrowed "unhinged" voice.** Duolingo earned a persona over years of consistent posting. A brand with nothing else to say sounds like a committee doing an impression of a teenager.
- **Thin programmatic pages.** Ten thousand near-identical pages is now a liability rather than an asset. Each page needs a distinct question it genuinely answers.
- **Treating a viral video as a strategy.** Underneath Dollar Shave Club's video sat a subscription business with working unit economics. The video was the top of a funnel that already converted.

Your first 90 days.

One motion, shipped and measured, beats four half-built ones.

Days 1–14

Find the shareable moment

Write down the one moment your product creates that a customer would voluntarily show someone else. If you cannot name one, you have found your roadmap, not your marketing plan.

Days 15–30

Choose exactly one motion

Use the table on the previous slide. Write down the number that will tell you it worked and the date you will check it. Commit before you start, so you cannot rationalise afterwards.

Days 31–60

Ship the smallest version

One free tool. Or one referral reward. Or one invite step in onboarding. Instrument it properly on day one — an uninstrumented launch teaches you nothing.

Days 61–90

Measure the loop, not the launch

Invites sent per new user. Share of invitees who activate. Time to second use. A launch spike is noise; a loop that returns more than one new user per user is the business.

If one user brings in more than one user, everything else is optimisation. If they don't,

Sources.

Site ranking

detailed.com — The 50 Best Marketing Blogs, ranked algorithmically

thecmo.com — Best Marketing Blogs

Hotmail

Workweek — How Hotmail grew to 12 million users in 1.5 years

Growth Hackers — “PS: I love you”

Dropbox, Airbnb, Slack

First Round Review — Growth Hacking

Integritas — 10 wildly successful startup marketing campaigns

Dollar Shave Club

Inc. — How a $4,500 YouTube video turned into a $1B company

NBC News — How a Dollar Shave Club ad went viral

HubSpot

Outgrow — Website Grader: from idea to a hit tool

GrowthHackers — How HubSpot grew a billion-dollar engine

Zapier & Canva

Practical Programmatic — Zapier case study

Salt Agency — How Zapier quadrupled organic growth

Superhuman & Morning Brew

Waitlister — Superhuman: 180K users at $30/month

GrowSurf — How Morning Brew’s referral program grew to 2.5M

Growth engines

Viral Loops — How Robinhood’s referral built a 1M-user waitlist

GrowSurf — Inside the infamous PayPal referral program

SEC — PayPal Form 424B1 (promotional bonus cost per account)

Viral Loops — Uber’s referral program and city playbook

Entrepreneur — Tinder’s sorority-first campus strategy

OpenView — SaaS products with viral loops

TIME — Why ChatGPT is the fastest-growing platform ever

Duolingo, Liquid Death, Spotify

Digiday — Duolingo’s unhinged content with Duo the owl

Digital Shelf Institute — Liquid Death’s brand strategy

The Brand Hopper — Spotify Wrapped case study