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# The 2026

# Founder Readiness Report

The 9 Go-To-Market Predictions Every B2B SaaS Founder Must Prepare for Now



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# The GTM Playbook You're Running Is Already Obsolete

In 2023, founders who scaled past \$5M ARR had a working formula: hire quota-carrying sellers, run high-volume outbound, gate content for lead capture, and track everything in a CRM.

In 2024, that playbook started breaking. Win rates dropped. Sales cycles stretched. Buyers stopped responding to traditional outreach.

In 2026, companies still running last year's playbook won't just struggle, they'll disappear.

Here's why: The era of sales-led education is over. Buyers self-educate and engage sellers only when they add context, confidence, and decision support. Gartner reports that 61% of B2B buyers prefer an overall rep-free buying experience.

Meanwhile, sales teams are shrinking, marketing is being held accountable for pipeline, and traditional CRMs are becoming systems of record instead of revenue engines.

This report breaks down **what's changing, why it matters, and what you need to do now** if you want to scale beyond \$5M ARR.

These aren't predictions I made up in a vacuum. They're patterns I've watched emerge across dozens of B2B SaaS founders in the \$1M-\$5M range, the companies that adapted early are pulling ahead, and the ones that waited are scrambling to catch up.

*In 2026, companies still running last year's playbook won't just struggle, they'll disappear.*

# Prediction 1: Buyer-Led Growth Becomes the Default



## What this means

Buyers no longer need salespeople to educate them. They use AI to research problems, compare vendors, understand pricing models, and narrow their shortlist, all before engaging a human.

By the time they talk to sales, they already know:

- What problem they're solving
- Which vendors can help them
- What questions matter most

Sales is no longer the start of the journey. **It's the final validation step.**

The implication? If your content isn't optimized for AI consumption, you're invisible during the research phase. And if you're invisible then, you won't make the shortlist.

## What you should do now

**Ungate your content immediately.** Buyers won't trade their email for information anymore. They'll just ask ChatGPT or Perplexity and get their answer from a competitor who made their content accessible.

**Turn your website into a buyer enablement hub, not a brochure.** Stop hiding valuable information behind "Request Demo" buttons. Publish:

- Technical documentation and implementation guides
- Feature-specific product videos (3-5 minutes each, searchable)
- Detailed FAQs that address real objections
- Pricing logic (even if not exact numbers, explain what drives cost)
- ROI calculation frameworks

**Assume every page will be read by an AI before it's read by a human.**

## What founders get wrong about this

They think ungating content means losing leads. Wrong. You're not losing leads, you're losing people who were never going to buy anyway. The buyers who were going to buy want transparency, and they'll reward you for it by already being educated when they engage sales.

## Prediction 2: AEO Replaces SEO



### What this means

Buyers aren't "searching", they're **asking**. AI answer engines like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Claude decide which vendors exist and which don't.

Ranking #1 on Google for a keyword matters far less than being the source an AI cites when someone asks "What's the best CRM for early-stage SaaS companies?"

To get cited, your content needs to be:

- Clear (no jargon or marketing fluff)
- Structured (with proper headings and logical flow).
- Direct (answers the question in the first paragraph)
- Machine-readable (clean HTML, semantic markup)

If GPT can't understand what you do and who it's for, you won't show up in buyer conversations. 60% say that they use AI tools in their journey of purchasing business solutions or products.

### What you should do now

**Audit your website through this lens:** "Could an AI explain our value proposition accurately?" If not, rewrite it.

**Replace clever messaging with clarity.** "We help teams move faster" tells an AI nothing. "We're project management software for remote engineering teams of 10-50 people" tells an AI exactly what to say when someone asks for recommendations.

**Rewrite content using the questions buyers actually ask.** Not "Our platform enables seamless collaboration" but answers to "How does this tool handle task dependencies?" and "What integrations does it support?"

**Structure content so AI can extract clean answers.** Use Q&A formats, comparison tables, and clearly labeled sections. Make it easy for AI to quote you correctly.

### What founders get wrong about this

They think AEO is just "SEO for AI." It's not. SEO was about gaming algorithms to rank higher. AEO is about being genuinely useful and clear, so AI systems naturally choose to reference you. You can't trick your way in; you have to earn it through quality.

## Prediction 3: **GTM Engineers Become Non-Negotiable**



### What this means

The days of duct-taping Salesforce, HubSpot, Outreach, ZoomInfo, and six other tools together with Zapier are over.

Modern GTM requires someone who understands:

- Data architecture and modeling
- Workflow automation and orchestration
- AI agent design and deployment
- System integration at scale

A GTM Engineer isn't an ops admin who updates fields in the CRM. They're the **architect of your revenue engine**, sitting between Sales, Marketing, RevOps, and Product to design how information flows, how decisions get made, and how work gets executed.

Companies that invest here early will move 3-5X faster than competitors still trying to manually coordinate across siloed tools.

### What you should do now

**Stop defaulting to hiring another AE or SDR.**

Before you add headcount, ask: "Is our bottleneck people or infrastructure?"

If deals are stalling because your team can't get clean data, or prospects fall through cracks because routing is manual, or reps waste 50% of their time on admin work, you don't need more reps. You need better systems.

**Evaluate whether you need a GTM Engineer before your next sales hire.** One skilled GTM Engineer can unlock more revenue capacity than three mediocre AEs.

**Shift budget from sales headcount to GTM architecture.** This might mean hiring one fewer AE and using that budget to hire someone who can design workflows, build automation, and orchestrate AI agents.

### What founders get wrong about this

They think GTM Engineering is a "nice to have" for later-stage companies. Wrong. The earlier you build proper infrastructure, the faster you scale. Founders who wait until they're at \$10M ARR spend 12-18 months untangling technical debt. Founders who invest at \$2-3M ARR just... scale smoothly.

## Prediction 4: Intent Signals Replace Volume-Based Outbound



### What this means

Activity metrics: calls per day, emails sent, sequences launched, are becoming meaningless. Buyers leave digital trails long before they talk to sales:

- Website visits and page engagement
- Content downloads and video views
- Product review site activity
- Social media interactions
- Job postings and hiring signals
- Technology stack changes

Outbound works when it's **precise and timely**, not loud and random.

The math: 1,000 cold emails at 2% response rate = 20 conversations, maybe 2 qualified opportunities. Or: 50 targeted emails to companies showing active buying intent = 15 conversations, 8 qualified opportunities.

Which motion scales more efficiently?

### What founders get wrong about this

They think intent data is expensive and only for enterprise companies. Wrong. Intent tools have become accessible for companies under \$5M ARR, and the ROI is clear: higher conversion rates, shorter sales cycles, better win rates.

### What you should do now

**Stop measuring success by volume of emails or calls.** Start measuring by qualification rate and conversion to closed-won.

**Invest in intent data and signal aggregation.** Tools like Common Room, Koala, or 6sense aggregate signals across multiple channels to identify buying readiness.

**Build workflows that trigger action based on intent, not guesswork.** When a prospect visits your pricing page 3 times in a week, that's a signal. When a director at a target account engages with your content, that's a signal. When a company posts a job for a role your product enables, that's a signal.

**Redesign outbound as a precision motion, not a numbers game.** Your best reps should spend their time on high-signal opportunities, not grinding through cold lists.

## Prediction 5:

# AI Agents Replace 60-80% of Top-of-Funnel Work



### What this means

Within 18 months, AI agents will handle:

- Lead research and enrichment
- Initial outreach and follow-up sequence
- Qualification and needs assessment
- Meeting scheduling and routine
- Objection handling for common questions

Gartner predicts by 2028, AI agents will outnumber human sellers by 10x. Humans will step in when judgment, nuance, relationship-building, and strategic thinking are required—not when data entry or pattern recognition would suffice.

The companies that figure out **human + agent workflows** first will have a 2–3 year competitive advantage.

### What you should do now

**Redesign the top of your funnel around outcomes, not roles.** Stop asking “How many SDRs do we need?” and start asking “What outcomes need to happen at top of funnel, and what’s the best way to achieve them?”

**Stop hiring SDRs to do work agents can do better.** The “new SDR” is less “dialer + calendar jockey,” and more:

- Signal triage + qualification + orchestration
- Handoff quality control (making sure pipeline isn’t full of garbage)

#### **Build complementary workflows.**

Agents excel at: research, pattern recognition, consistency, and speed.

Humans excel at: building trust, reading nuance, strategic judgment, handling edge cases.

**Prepare your sellers to work with AI, not compete against it.** Train them to leverage AI for research and admin so they can focus on conversations that matter.

### What founders get wrong about this

They think AI agents mean “fire all the SDRs and let robots do everything.” Wrong. It means redesigning how you generate pipeline so humans focus on high-value work and AI handles the repetitive, automatable tasks that eat 60-80% of an SDR’s time today.

## Prediction 6: Sales Teams Shrink; Skill Expectations Skyrocket



### What this means

You'll need **fewer sellers**, but they must be significantly more capable.

#### Average reps won't survive in a world where:

- Buyers are already educated before first contact
- AI handles all the basic qualification and admin work
- Every conversation needs to add genuine strategic value

The skill profile changes from “can execute a script and log activity” to “can diagnose complex business problems and design custom solutions in real-time.”

#### Today's reps will need:

- AI fluency + oversight discipline
- The ability to learn at a fast pace
- Continuous enablement and AI-augmented will be the norm.
- To be able to trust their data (because AI output quality depends on it).

### What you should do now

**Document your sales process end to end.** You can't scale with fewer, higher-performing reps unless you have a repeatable system they can execute.

**Hire for judgment, business acumen, and adaptability**—not just experience at brand-name companies. A B-player from Salesforce will struggle in your environment. An A-player from a scrappy startup will thrive.

**Redesign onboarding to focus on strategy, not scripts.** Teach them how to think, not just what to say. Equip them to handle edge cases and complex buying committees.

**Use AI to remove admin work so reps can focus on deals.** CRM updates, follow-up emails, meeting notes, research—automate all of it. Let your reps sell.

### What founders get wrong about this

They think they need to hire faster to scale faster. Wrong. Hiring mediocre reps who require constant management and produce inconsistent results slows you down. One great rep who can close \$1M ARR is worth five mediocre reps who collectively close \$800K and create chaos in the process.

## Prediction 7: Marketing Owns the First 70% of Pipeline



### What this means

Marketing is no longer a “support function” that runs campaigns and generates leads for sales to work.

Marketing is a **revenue engine** responsible for the first 70% of the buyer journey, from awareness through consideration and into evaluation. If marketing doesn’t enable buyers early and effectively, sales inherits:

- Poorly informed prospects who don’t understand the value prop
- Deals that stall because basic questions weren’t answered
- Objections that could have been addressed proactively

The shift: Marketing creates the conditions for buyers to self-educate and self-qualify. Sales validates decisions and closes.

### What you should do now

**Shift marketing from campaigns to buyer enablement.** Stop running “Top 10 Tips” webinars and start publishing content that directly answers buying questions.

**Align marketing content to real buyer questions and objections.** Talk to your sales team. What questions do prospects ask in discovery? What objections come up in late-stage deals? Marketing should address those upfront.

**Treat marketing as the first 2 stages of your sales cycle.** Map your buyer journey. Marketing owns awareness and early consideration. Sales owns late consideration and decision. Design content accordingly.

**Hold marketing accountable to pipeline contribution, not impressions.** Vanity metrics (page views, downloads, social followers) don’t matter. Pipeline created, influenced pipeline, and closed-won revenue do.

### What founders get wrong about this

They think “marketing owns pipeline” means “marketing generates MQLs that sales converts.” Wrong. It means marketing enables buyers to move through 70% of the journey independently, so when sales engages, the buyer is already qualified, educated, and ready for a strategic conversation.

## Prediction 8: Your CRM Stops Being Your Revenue Engine



### What this means

CRMs were built for humans to manually log activity: calls made, emails sent, meetings held, notes captured and future activities.

Over the years the CRM also became a system used for outreach, pipeline management, and data capture.

AI-driven GTM doesn't work that way. The new architecture:

- **CRM = System of Record** (stores deal status, customer data, reporting)
- **Revenue Operating System = System of Execution** (orchestrates workflows, triggers agents, aggregates signals, executes next actions)

Your CRM becomes a dashboard and data repository. The real work happens in orchestration layers that connect data, automation, AI agents, and humans into coordinated workflows.

### What you should do now

**Stop forcing the CRM to do what it wasn't designed for.** Salesforce can't orchestrate AI agents. HubSpot wasn't built for intent signal workflows. Accept the limits.

**Evaluate tools that orchestrate workflows, agents, and signals.** Look at platforms purpose-built for AI-era GTM: agent orchestration layers, signal aggregation platforms, workflow automation tools.

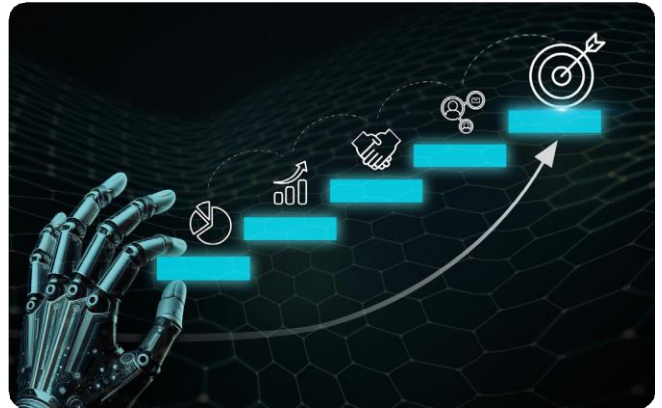
**Build clean data models that support automation.** If your CRM data is messy, inconsistent, or incomplete, automation will amplify the chaos. Clean it up first.

**Accept that the center of gravity has shifted.** Your CRM is still important, just not where the action happens anymore.

### What founders get wrong about this

They keep trying to make their CRM do everything because they've already paid for it and invested in customization. Meanwhile, competitors are building modern stacks that move 5X faster because they're not held back by legacy architecture.

## Prediction 9: Process Before AI Becomes Mandatory



### What this means

AI amplifies whatever already exists. If your sales process is:

- Unclear (reps wing it based on feel)
- Inconsistent (every rep does it differently)
- Undocumented (knowledge lives in your head)

Then AI will make those problems **visible and painful** faster than you can imagine.

AI can't fix a broken process. It can only expose it.

The companies that documented their processes, defined clear stage criteria, and built repeatable systems **before** layering on AI are scaling smoothly. The ones that tried to use AI as a band-aid for process chaos are struggling harder than before.

### What you should do now

**Document discovery, qualification, handoffs, and follow-up expectations.** Every rep should know exactly what "good" looks like at each stage.

**Define pipeline stages with real exit criteria.** "Qualified" isn't a stage. "Confirmed budget, identified decision-maker, validated timeline" is an exit criterion.

**Fix process gaps before layering on AI.** If your handoff from marketing to sales is broken, AI won't fix it, it will just route bad leads faster.

**Treat AI as a multiplier, not a crutch.** AI makes good processes great. It makes bad processes catastrophic.

### What founders get wrong about this

They think AI will solve their process problems automatically. "We'll just let the AI figure it out!" No. AI needs structure, clarity, and logic to work with. If you can't articulate your process to a human, you definitely can't articulate it to an AI.

# What This Means for You as a *Founder*

If your GTM still depends on:

- Hero sellers who carry the company on their backs
- Manual CRM updates and data entry
- Brute-force outbound with volume-based metrics
- Undocumented processes that live in people's heads
- Founder intuition instead of repeatable systems

**Then 2026 will be painful.**

You'll watch competitors with smaller teams close bigger deals faster. You'll struggle to hire great reps because great reps don't want to work in chaos. You'll miss your targets not because of market conditions, but because your infrastructure can't support the scale you're trying to achieve.

But if you **rebuild now**, if you invest the next 90 days addressing these nine predictions, you can scale faster with fewer people, less waste, and dramatically better unit economics.

The choice is simple: adapt proactively while you have breathing room, or scramble reactively when the market forces your hand.



**NEXT STEP**

## Next Steps

This isn't theoretical. I've worked with dozens of founders navigating exactly these transitions, from founder-led chaos to scalable GTM systems that work without constant intervention.

### **If you'd like help:**

Schedule a consultation to discuss where you're at and where you need to be by the end of 2026.

Either way, don't wait. The founders who adapted early to the 2020-2023 market shifts are the ones who thrived. The ones who waited are still playing catch-up.

Make 2026 the year you're ahead of the market, not reacting to it.



## About the Author

*Kristie K. Jones is a sales consultant, process expert, and author who specializes in helping B2B SaaS startup founders build scalable sales processes and transition from founder-led to team-led sales. She's a contributing writer for Top Sales World magazine and author of "Selling Your Way IN."*

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