



Digital Marketing Is Dead.

Long Live Digital Marketing.

How the Network Grows the Business

Why the old channel priority stopped working, and what to run instead

Fifteen years of paid programs that produced no deals, the arithmetic that finally killed cold spray, and a reassessment of every channel — LinkedIn, email, phone, SMS, Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, YouTube — by the only question that matters: what does it do for the network?

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I. Fifteen Years of Buying Leads

Fifteen years, every program in the playbook, and one lesson that survived all of it.

I spent more than fifteen years helping Monolith Software grow into a \$10M-plus ARR business. Over those years I tried everything the playbook said to try. I hired a social media manager. I hired an email expert. I ran a handful of outsourced lead-generation outfits. I refreshed the website more times than I can count. I engaged the best analyst firms in the industry and paid what they asked. I bought booth space at the shows.

Here is the accounting. Not a single closed deal traced back to the analyst engagements. Not one. The social programs produced impressions. The email programs produced open rates. The outsourced outfits produced lists and meetings that went nowhere. The shows produced badge scans.

What grew the business was hiring salespeople who arrived with a Rolodex. Every time we added someone who already knew the buyers, revenue moved. Every time we added a program aimed at strangers, it didn't.

It took me longer than it should have to say the lesson plainly:

The network is what grows deals. So grow the network, and you grow the business.

That sentence is the whole paper. Everything below is about what it means for how a small team should spend its time and money in 2026, when the tools have changed but the lesson hasn't.

II. What Actually Died

No channel died. The order most companies still run them in did.

Let me be precise, because the title invites imprecision. No channel died. Email works. Phone works. Social works. What died is the priority — the order most companies still run their channels in — and the model underneath it, which I'll call cold spray: buy a list, write one message, blast it across whichever channels are cheapest, and call the trickle a pipeline.

The legacy priority put paid programs, analysts, website campaigns, and shows at the top, and the network at the bottom, as something salespeople did on their own time. That order was always backwards. Three things have made it fatal.

Buyers stopped waiting to be found. Gartner's 2026 survey of B2B buyers found 67% prefer a rep-free experience [1]. 6sense's 2025 buyer study found buyers put four or five vendors on a shortlist on day one and buy from that shortlist 95% of the time [2]. Edelman and LinkedIn found 73% of decision-makers trust a company's thought leadership more than its marketing materials when judging its capabilities [3]. Read those together: the buyer decides who is in the running before you know they are buying, and they decide from what they already know of you. If you are not already in the network, you are not in the deal.

Cold volume stopped converting. Across more than 20 million cold emails, the average reply rate fell from 5.1% in 2024 to 3.43% in 2026 [4]. Under strict reply-of-sent accounting across 7.5 million emails, it is 0.45% [5]. Meetings land at or below one per hundred sends. On the phone, a study of 175,000 dials found a 9.9% connect rate per dial and roughly one meeting per 370 dials [6]. These are not failures of craft. They are the arithmetic of a channel everyone is using the same way at once.

The buyer pool thinned. Middle managers were 32% of layoffs in 2023, up from 20% in 2019, and manager headcount at public companies fell about 6% between 2022 and 2025 [7]. Fewer mid-level buyers means fewer people whose job is to take the meeting. The people left are more senior, busier, and harder to reach cold — which favors the peer they already know over the stranger with a list.

Then the AI SDR tools arrived promising to fix cold spray by doing more of it, faster. They burned sending domains, ran zero-meeting campaigns, and taught a generation of buyers to delete anything that smells generated. The fix made it worse.

None of this is “email is dead.” It is the end of the order of operations that treated the network as an afterthought.

III. Reprioritizing the Mix

Every channel re-graded on one question: what job does it do for the network?

If the network is the asset, every channel has to be re-graded on one question: what job does it do for the network? Some channels build it. Some nurture it. Some close inside it. Some keep you visible so the network remembers you at the moment that matters. Below is each channel's reassessed job and the verticals where it earns its place, drawn from the published benchmarks and from my own campaigns. Every channel gets the same treatment. None is the hero and none is torched.

LinkedIn — where the network is built. Its job is the opener and the peer-signal builder for B2B. Cold connection acceptance averages 26–29% across tens of millions of requests [8]; a study of 16,492 invitations found 37% accepted, 15% replied, and 5% became qualified meetings [9]. A personalized note barely changes acceptance but lifts replies from 5.4% to 9.4% [8]. Warm, signal-anchored requests clear 60%. Organic reach on the platform is down roughly half year over year and company-page reach is down 60–66%, so the founder’s own profile, not the company page, carries the weight [10]. Earns its place: telecom, technology, media, finance, retail. Moderate in industrial, healthcare, government, energy, and nonprofit, where buyers are present but quieter.

Email — the warm nurture and the closer. This is email’s row, not a special case. Its reassessed job is to nurture relationships that already exist and to close deals that are already in motion. Opt-in email — people who asked to hear from you — opens at 35–45% across industries [11], even discounting the inflation Apple’s mail privacy features add. Cold email keeps one narrow job: a trigger-driven opener when a specific event justifies the intrusion, run alongside LinkedIn rather than alone, on a domain that clears the 2024–2025 bulk-sender rules from Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft. Warm email earns its place nearly everywhere. Cold email is weakest exactly where inboxes are most flooded — technology, finance, healthcare — and moderate in industrial, retail, and government, where inboxes are quieter.

Phone — the trigger and the callback. Its job is no longer volume. It is the call you make when a signal justifies it — an expansion, a hire, an outage — and the callback you return when someone in the network raises a hand. Phone still answers in phone-culture industries: telecom operations, industrial, energy, finance. It is weakest in technology, where the desk phone is gone, and in clinical healthcare, where it is gatekept. Every wireless dial carries TCPA exposure, so the trigger has to be real.

SMS — logistics, after consent. Its job is the meeting confirmation, the event reminder, the post-demo follow-up with someone who said yes to texts. It is never a cold opener in B2B. The famous “98% open rate” is a device-level statistic with no reliable primary source. Registration and consent rules gate it. Earns a narrow place with field teams in industrial and energy, and in retail as a business-to-business-to-consumer tool.

Facebook — presence and community, not outreach. No credible benchmark exists for cold B2B messaging on Facebook because it is not a B2B outreach channel. Its job is community presence and, where the buyer actually lives there, groups: agricultural and equipment communities, local and franchise operators, small-organization communities. For nonprofits it is a donor channel, which is a different thing from where a nonprofit’s leaders evaluate vendors.

Instagram — brand, culture, and the buyer's own storefront. Its job is presence. It earns its place for retail and e-commerce brands as their own channel, for media, and for donor-facing nonprofit work. It does not earn a place as a way to reach a B2B decision-maker.

X — listening and pockets of presence. Engagement on the platform fell roughly 48% in 2025 [12]. Its remaining B2B job is listening and presence in the communities that still live there: developers, fintech, journalists, government communications, energy policy. Outreach benchmarks for it do not exist, which tells you something.

TikTok — discovery, not outreach. Its job is paid and organic discovery for younger buyers in retail, e-commerce, media, and recruiting. It has no path to a professional buyer's inbox and no place in regulated verticals. The platform's US ownership was restructured in January 2026, so it also carries platform risk.

YouTube — proof, and the memory that outlasts the campaign. Its job is the inbound magnet: the demo, the explanation, the evidence a buyer finds when they go looking. Roughly 70% of B2B buyers watch video during the buying journey, and 72% say vendor video influences their shortlist [13]. It earns a place almost everywhere and matters most where long-form technical proof decides deals: telecom, industrial, energy, healthcare, government, and technology demos.

The picture that emerges is not a ranking. It is a division of labor.

Channel	Reassessed job	Where it earns its place
LinkedIn	Builds the network; opener and peer-signal builder	Telecom, technology, media, finance, retail; moderate elsewhere
Email	Warm nurture and closer; cold only on a trigger	Warm: nearly everywhere. Cold: industrial, retail, government
Phone	Trigger call and callback	Telecom ops, industrial, energy, finance
SMS	Logistics after consent	Field teams in industrial and energy; retail B2B2C
Facebook	Community presence; groups	Agriculture and equipment, local and franchise, small-org communities
Instagram	Brand and culture presence	Retail and e-commerce, media, donor-facing nonprofit
X	Listening; pockets of presence	Developers, fintech, journalism, government comms, energy policy
TikTok	Paid and organic discovery	Retail and e-commerce, media, recruiting

Channel	Reassessed job	Where it earns its place
YouTube	Proof and inbound magnet	Nearly everywhere; strongest where technical proof decides deals

LinkedIn builds the network. Email nurtures and closes inside it. Phone and cold email fire on triggers. SMS handles logistics. Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok are presence where your buyer's world happens to live. YouTube is the proof the buyer finds when they finally look.

IV. Four Principles That Cross Every Channel

The rules that hold whether the message goes out on LinkedIn, email, phone, or video.

1. Cut the imagination tax

Every generic message asks the reader to imagine why it might apply to them. Most won't. Personalization is the refund. The Belkins data above is the cleanest demonstration: a note doesn't get you in the door, but it nearly doubles the replies once you're in. Across 20 million emails, messages built on the reader's own situation — a trigger, a recent statement, a specific pain — replied at 17–18% against 7–9% for the generic version [4]. In my own campaigns, hyper-personalized notes roughly quadrupled engagement over blank connects; my sample is small, so treat the direction as proven and the multiplier as mine.

Personalization has to be real, which means it has to be sourced. I grade signals in three tiers: something the person said in their own words within the last month; something true about their role, like a new title; something true about their company, like a raise or a hire. The best notes fuse a person-level signal with a company-level trigger. A stale signal — a nine-month-old post — is worse than none, because it reveals the automation behind the note. And relevance beats personalization: a well-timed company trigger that names the buyer's real problem outperforms a flattering reference to an off-topic post.

2. Run on data, and iterate fast

Measure acceptance, reply, and meetings. Ignore open rates; privacy features broke them. Don't draw conclusions from five accepted connections; you need on the order of thirty-five per segment before the difference between a 6% and a 30% acceptance rate means anything. And don't judge a channel on a thirty-day close rate when the deal cycle at a mid-market price point

runs sixty to a hundred and twenty days [14]. Small teams over-learn from small samples. I have done it myself.

3. Be patient, because it is a numbers game on a long clock

B2B buyers move on budget cycles and renewal dates, not on your send date. LinkedIn caps invitations at roughly a hundred a week, which is a feature: it forces you to research a hundred people well rather than spray a thousand badly. A hundred well-chosen connections a week, kept warm, compounds. The network you build this quarter is the one that closes next year's deals — which is the reason the salesperson with the Rolodex always won.

4. Build the magnet

If buyers choose from a day-one shortlist, your job is to be on it before the day. That means consistent presence from a real person, not a company page; proof they can find on their own, which is what YouTube and a case study with real numbers are for; and attention to the highest-intent list you already own — the people who viewed your profile, engaged with your posts, opened what you sent. Those are not leads to spray. They are the network raising its hand.

V. Validation

My own numbers first, the caveats they need, and where the research brackets them.

Start with the number that matters most, and the caveat that matters just as much.

When I launched Kinetic Tricks, I went to my own network first — people who already knew me. Roughly eight in ten responded. Nearly half took a meeting. Ten brands were under contract inside four months. Those conversations happened over email. They are not evidence that email converts. They are evidence that relationships convert, delivered through email. My own cold email, over the years, ran between three percent and zero. The published range for cold email is 0.45% to 3.43% [4][5].

Same channel. Same sender. The only variable was whether the reader already knew me. That is the warm-versus-cold gap, and it is the entire argument for putting the network first.

The LinkedIn campaigns tell the same story by vertical. Into telecom, where my profile reads as a peer, 115 contacts produced 70-plus accepted connections and 10 meetings. At one telecom conference, a list of 1,000 attendees was researched overnight, 28 targets were chosen, each

received one unique note referencing their company, their role, and their recent activity, and 21 of 28 accepted — 75% against a 26–29% norm — at a total cost of about \$2.40 in model tokens [15]. Into managed security providers, 175 requests produced 55 acceptances, 20 replies, and 10 meetings in thirty days, with nothing closed yet — which, on a hundred-day cycle, is exactly what thirty days should look like.

Into nonprofits, 75 requests produced 5 connections and no replies. Into private equity and venture, 50 produced 3. I want to be careful here, because the honest reading is not “those channels don’t work for those buyers.” The samples are too small to conclude anything, and the likelier explanation is that my profile reads as a telecom founder, so those readers didn’t see a peer. That is the first principle in this paper working against me, which is a better proof of the principle than any success would be.

Then there is the tool I built to run all of this, and I have to label it correctly: the results are dogfood. Kinetic Tricks runs go-to-market for seven brands across three of my own organizations. For Rapax, my telecom software company, three weeks of running the platform solo produced a \$10M pipeline with three deals actively closing, 24 hours a week returned to selling, a 683% rise in LinkedIn impressions over ninety days, more than a hundred new connections a week, more than twenty qualified meetings a month, and five unsolicited inbound requests from outside the network [15]. Those are my companies and my numbers. They prove the motion works for a founder running it on his own brands. They do not yet prove it in a vertical I don’t live in, and I won’t pretend otherwise.

The research brackets all of it. Warm outreach in the literature runs several multiples of cold; the one peer-reviewed study on referred customers found them about 16% more valuable over time, in a single bank, which is why I cite it narrowly [16]. The widely quoted warm-outreach statistics — 84% of deals start with a referral, referral leads convert at 11% — I could not trace to a primary source, so they are not in this paper.

VI. What This Means for a Small Team

The prescription, short enough to run.

Put your own profile, not your company’s page, at the front. The peer signal is the product.

Find buyers through public sources — team pages, filings, registries, conference agendas, press releases — and verify every title before you reach out, because AI search tools were

wrong on more than 60% of citation checks in the one rigorous test of them [17], and a fabricated detail in a note costs you the relationship.

Reach a hundred people a week, each with one real signal, on LinkedIn. Nurture the ones who respond over email. Call when a trigger justifies it. Text only when they've asked. Be present where your buyer's world lives, and put your proof on YouTube where they will find it.

Approve every message a machine drafts. The buyer can tell.

Then keep going, because the network you build this quarter is next year's revenue.

VII. Where Kinetic Tricks Fits

Not a pitch — but it would be dishonest not to say what I built to live by this.

Kinetic Tricks is a sales and marketing platform for small teams. Sage does the research, drafts the outreach, and keeps the CRM honest. Aria keeps the content cadence you never have time for. Neither sends anything you haven't approved. It runs on your own infrastructure with the language model you choose, so your prospect and client data never leaves your server.

It does not make a bad idea better. Marketing drives awareness, not lead generation. The founder still does the thinking, the strategy, and the calls. There is no manager dashboard yet. What it does is the work between the calls — the research, the drafting, the hygiene, the consistency — so the network gets built while you sell.

The only question that matters on a first call: what will you be able to stop doing?

If the answer is nothing, we are not the right fit. If the answer is the twenty hours a week you spend feeding systems instead of building relationships, book fifteen minutes at cal.com/shawn-ennis.

Grow the network. Grow the business.

Sources

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Kinetic Tricks — Revenue in motion.