

The Focus Gap

Why Marketers Believe in Focus but Struggle to Practice It

September 2026

BENSIMON BYRNE



Executive Summary

Marketers overwhelmingly agree focus drives stronger business results. They recognize the value of concentrating investment behind fewer priorities and express confidence in making strategic trade-offs.

Yet the reality of execution tells a different story. Significant activity and investment remain disconnected from strategic priorities, and plans are frequently reshaped by competing demands.

When difficult trade-offs must be made, many look for stronger evidence, clearer priorities, and greater organizational alignment before feeling empowered to say no.



**Focus is not merely
a strategic choice. It
is an organizational
capability.**

Marketers are clear on what matters, but lack the organizational alignment, conviction, and data infrastructure to say no as new priorities emerge.

Purpose, Scope, and Methodology

This study, commissioned by **Bensimon Byrne** and conducted by Ipsos in partnership with marketers across North America, set out to examine a critical question facing modern marketing organizations: **Are marketers sacrificing focus in pursuit of growth?**

The study was built on the hypothesis that growing pressure to deliver revenue, growth, and business impact is causing many organizations to pursue more objectives, more audiences, and more activity rather than making sharper strategic choices. While this "more is more" approach may appear to support growth ambitions, it may ultimately dilute effectiveness and make sustained focus more difficult.

To explore this question, **Bensimon Byrne and Ipsos partnered on a quantitative study of more than 200 marketing decision-makers across the United States and Canada.** In each market, more than 100 marketers with responsibility for strategic marketing decisions participated. The sample was designed to reflect a broad cross-section of organizations, industries, levels of experience, company sizes, and audience types.

North American Marketers



C-Suite	VP	Director	Manager
80	40	66	26

Survey questions included, growth assumptions, focus versus business performance, strategic clarity, budget alignment, beliefs, impact of priority, trade-offs/decision making, comfort with trade-offs, evidence of Impact and the regional nuances in decision-making.



The Marketing Reality

Marketers have never had more opportunities to pursue growth. More audiences to reach. More channels to activate. More trends to respond to. More demand from the business. Every day presents a new opportunity that feels too important to ignore.

In this environment, growth can easily become synonymous with expansion. More objectives. More initiatives. More investment spreads across more priorities. Yet marketers know this approach comes at a cost.

The findings reveal near universal agreement that focus drives stronger business results. Most marketers believe concentrating resources behind fewer priorities improves performance and recognize the importance of making deliberate trade-offs.

But belief and behaviour are often disconnected.

As new opportunities emerge and priorities compete for attention, plans become crowded, investment becomes fragmented, and existing objectives are rarely deprioritized. While marketers understand the value of focus, sustaining it proves far more difficult than defining it.

The challenge is not strategic clarity. Organizations are largely aligned on their audiences, objectives, and growth ambitions. The challenge is maintaining that clarity as competing pressures, new opportunities, and organizational realities make saying no increasingly difficult.

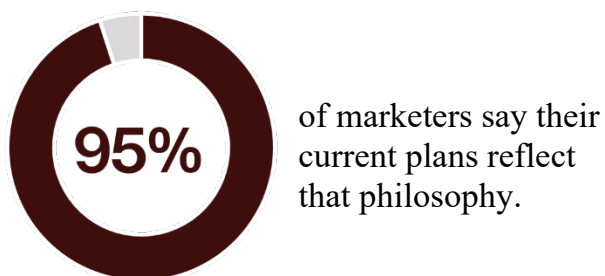
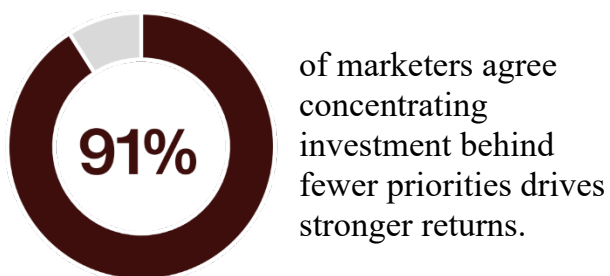
The four realities that follow explore where this gap emerges, why focus breaks down, and what marketers say they need to maintain it.

REALITY 1

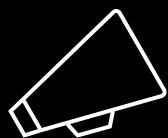
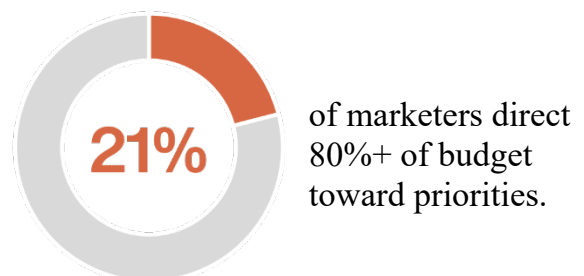
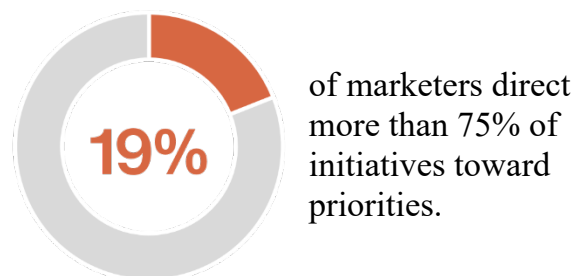
Marketers Believe in Focus — But It's Lost in Execution

The belief in focus is almost universal. The execution isn't.

Marketer's Belief



Marketer's Reality



BOTTOM LINE

81% of marketers have at least one quarter of activity outside strategic priorities; 79% have at least one fifth of budget outside them. Belief in focus is strong and nearly universal; it just isn't translating into how plans get executed.

REALITY 2A

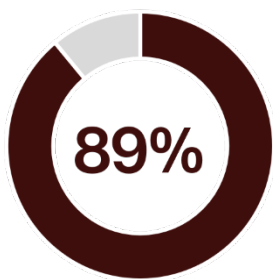
When Pressure Hits, Marketers' Good Intentions Around Focus Are Tested.

When growth pressure emerges, their ability to remain focused is threatened.

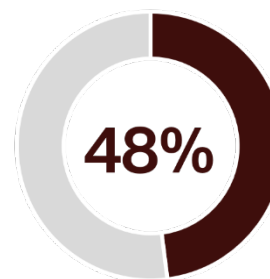
79%

of marketers say they're actively focusing on all or most of their defined objectives simultaneously, rather than concentrating effort behind a smaller number of priorities

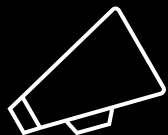
However, increasing pressure and headwinds mean staying focused can be a struggle, resulting in the tendency to look for growth in different places.



of marketers say there's issues standing in the way of their team focusing their priorities.



of marketers say rapidly changing market conditions are the biggest barriers to developing a clear marketing strategy.



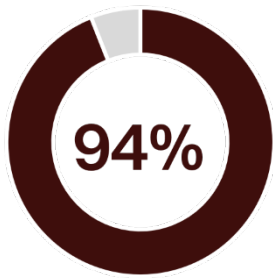
BOTTOM LINE

Marketers believe concentrating behind fewer priorities drives stronger returns — but when growth pressure emerges, it's hard to stick to the plan.

REALITY 2B

Even Though They Believe Focusing on a Core Audience Improves Effectiveness, it's the First-Place Marketers Drop Focus.

Clarity on the primary audience is nearly universal. Discipline to stick with it isn't.

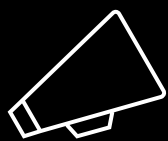
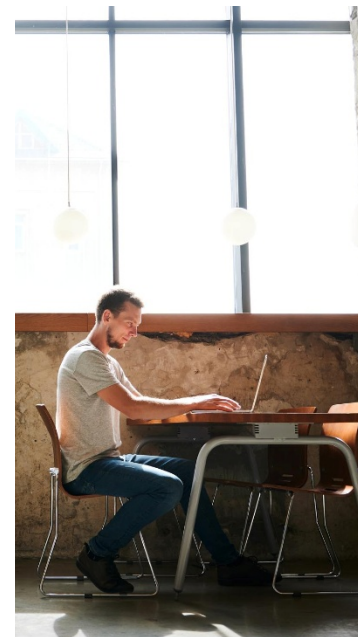


of marketers agree that concentrating on a primary target audience improves effectiveness.

But when growth pressure hits, their first instincts are to reach more people — not deepening the one audience they already have:

#1: Increase media spend/reach.

#2: Expand into new audiences/segments.



BOTTOM LINE

Marketers are nearly unanimous that a defined primary audience drives results, but when trying to unlock growth, their first instincts are both about reaching more people, not the one audience they already have.

REALITY 3

Marketers need evidence, not conviction to make trade-offs.

Marketers say they're comfortable making trade-offs, but priorities still pile up.

93% of marketers say they're comfortable saying no to lower priority opportunities in favour of higher-impact priorities.

Yet, 60% say existing priorities are only sometimes, rarely, or never deprioritized when new ones are introduced.

What would give marketers greater confidence to deprioritize an initiative:

Stronger performance data linking focus to results.

45%

Greater confidence in strategic positioning.

39%

Clearer success metrics.

38%

What would help leadership support a more focused investment strategy?

Clear evidence linking focus to performance.

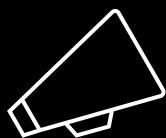
50%

Defined measurement framework.

36%

Confidence that short-term results won't suffer.

36%



BOTTOM LINE

Adding priorities is easy; eliminating them is hard. The gap isn't conviction, it's evidence. **91%** marketers know focus works and **96%** agree reallocating underperforming spend would help, but without data to prove it, saying no feels risky.

REALITY 4

Focus Is a Strategic Choice — Sustaining It Is an Organizational Challenge

Organizations are clear on what matters. Maintaining that clarity as priorities move through the organization is harder.

Marketers have clarity:

- **96%** say their organization is clear on its primary audience.
- **91%** agree their organization is clear on its most important objective.

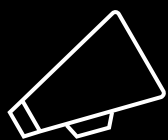
Yet, priorities keep multiplying and discipline doesn't hold because:

- **48%** say rapidly changing market conditions as a top strategic barrier.
- **41%** say multiple growth opportunities competing for attention.
- **41%** say evolving consumer expectations.
- **28%** say some form of priority overload as the biggest obstacle to narrowing focus.

Group	Very Comfortable Saying No (Top Box%)
Total	51%
C-Suite	43%
VP	70%
Director	52%

And discipline erodes as it moves down the organization:

The ability to make trade-offs varies across the organization. VPs are the most comfortable saying no. Directors are more likely to seek leadership alignment before making trade-offs, while C-suite leaders are somewhat less comfortable, highlighting how competing business pressures can make focus harder to sustain throughout the levels of an organization.



BOTTOM LINE

Strategy isn't the challenge, sustaining it is. Marketers know what matters, but without the governance, alignment, and measurement to reinforce trade-offs, focus often breaks down between planning and execution.

Inside The Marketer Mindset: Focus, Growth & Strategic Priorities



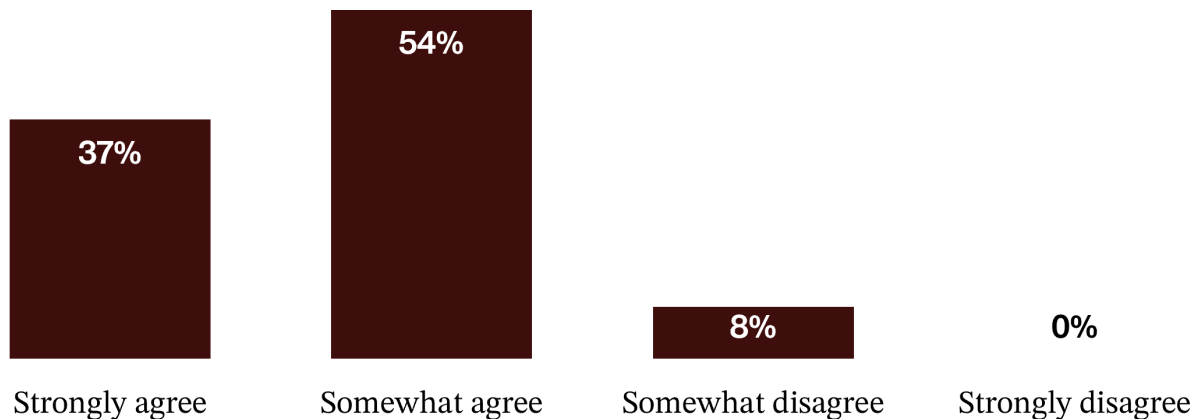
The debate is over. Marketers believe focus works.

Belief in Concentrated Investment

Agreement levels are overwhelming. There is a strong agreement that concentrating investment behind fewer priorities improves business returns.



The challenge uncovered by the study is not belief. It is execution.



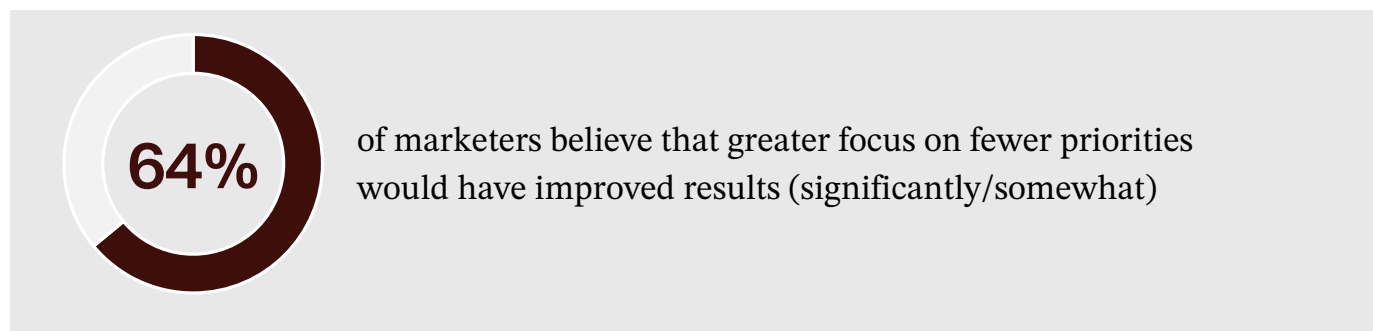
Most marketers believe they would have been better off doing less.

Impact of focus on results

When asked about how the focus on priorities impacted results given the marketing team's approach over the past three years, majority of the marketers say greater focus on fewer priorities would have improved business results.

This is perhaps the most direct evidence supporting the central study hypothesis.

Many marketers appear to recognize, in hindsight, that spreading effort across too many priorities may have diluted effectiveness.



36%



22%

Canadian marketers believe that greater focus would have improved results significantly, compared with the US.

Focused organizations are the minority.

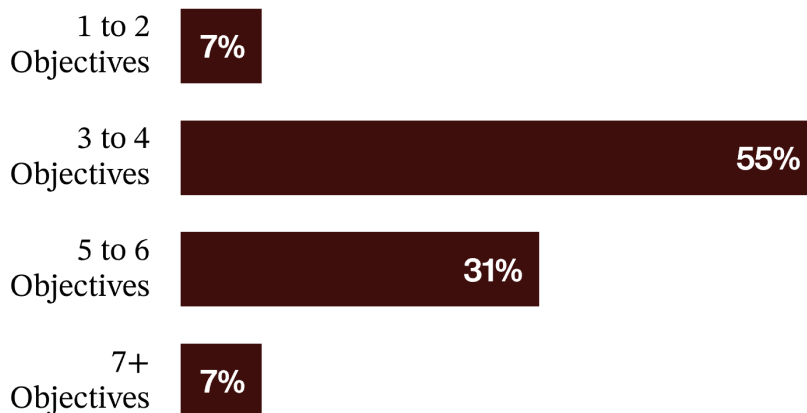
Number of Business Objectives

Most teams operate with 3-6 objectives and relatively few operate with just 1-2 objectives. (Fig 2)

The implication is that modern marketing organizations are structured around balancing multiple priorities simultaneously, creating natural pressure toward resource fragmentation and competing demands.

Number of Business Objectives Managed

Fig. 2



When growth pressure hits, marketers still reach for "more" before they reach for "focus."

Growth Levers Most Likely to Be Prioritized

Growth instincts prioritize scale first: increase media spend and reach, then pursue new audiences, while strengthening engagement with core audiences is often a secondary consideration.

:



Increase media spend/reach

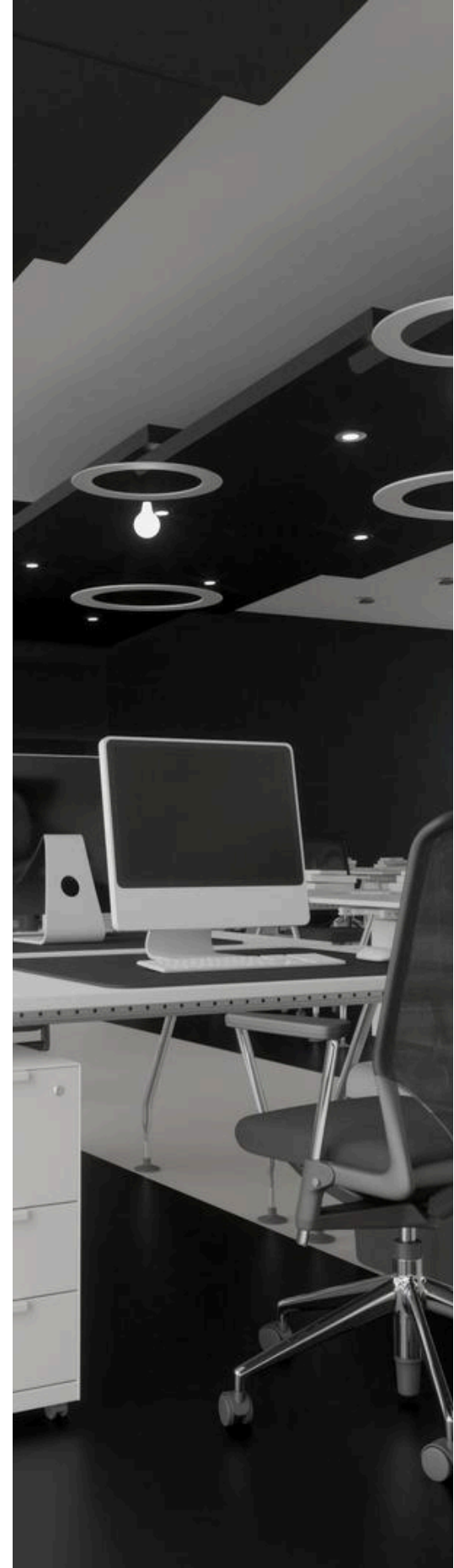


Expand into new audiences



Go deeper with core audiences

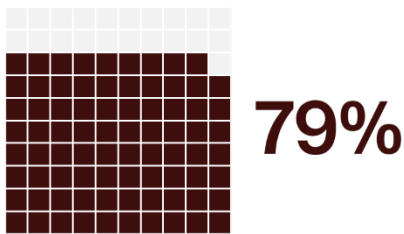
Actions such as refining positioning or strengthening relevance rank lower. This suggests marketers intellectually understand focus, but operationally default to scale, reach and activity when growth pressure emerges. The behavior directly supports the study's central hypothesis that growth is often pursued through addition rather than concentration.



Marketers rarely choose. They try to support everything.

Number of Objectives Actively Prioritized

Nearly 8-in-10 marketers say they actively focus on all or most objectives.



Only 1% say they focus on a few of their stated objectives.

While this sounds positive initially, it suggests that prioritization often means broad support rather than difficult selection. If nearly every objective receives attention, true concentration becomes harder to achieve.



The Real Enemy of Focus Is an Environment That Demands More of Everything.

Barriers to Creating a Clear Marketing Strategy

The biggest obstacles are external:



Changing market conditions



Multiple growth opportunities



Evolving customer expectations

The challenge does not appear to be a lack of ambition or opportunity.

Rather, it is deciding which opportunities deserve attention.

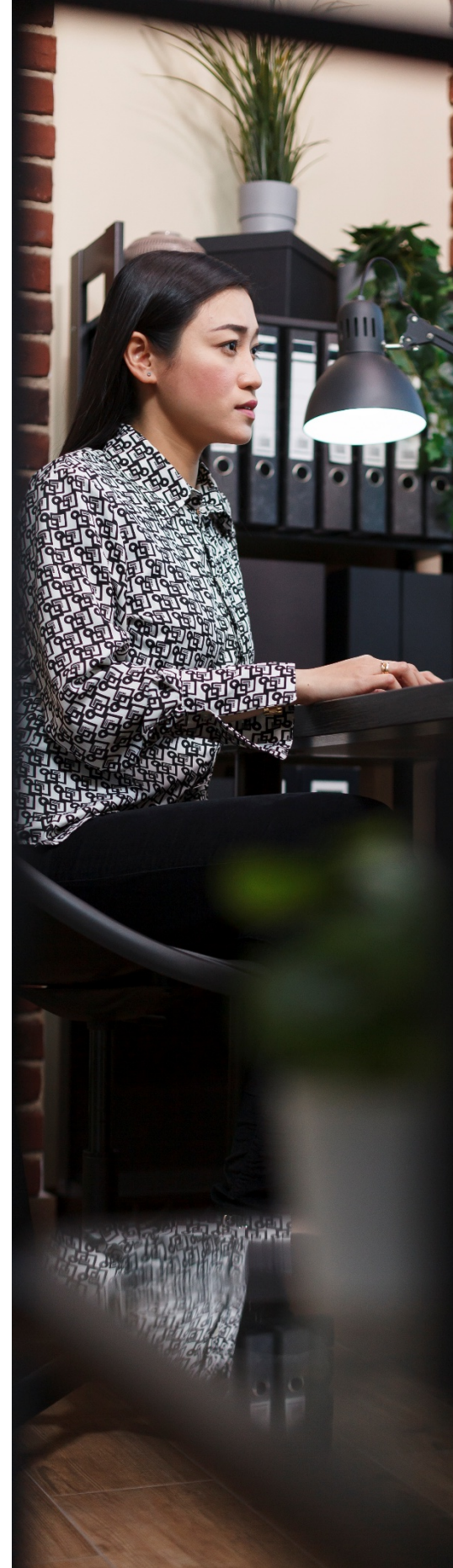


Clear signs of strategic sprawl, regardless of how focused organizations perceive themselves to be.

Adding vs. Stopping Priorities

Organizations are much better at adding priorities than removing them.

60% of marketers report priorities are only sometimes, rarely, or never deprioritized when new ones emerge. This is one of the clearest signs.



Most marketing initiatives support strategic priorities, but few are fully anchored to them.

Share of Initiatives Aligned to Strategic Priorities

Marketing efforts largely concentrated on strategic priorities.

- **56%** marketers say that at least half of the initiatives were directed toward strategic priorities.

But alignment is broad, not deep:

- **19%** marketers say more than 75% of initiatives supported strategic priorities.

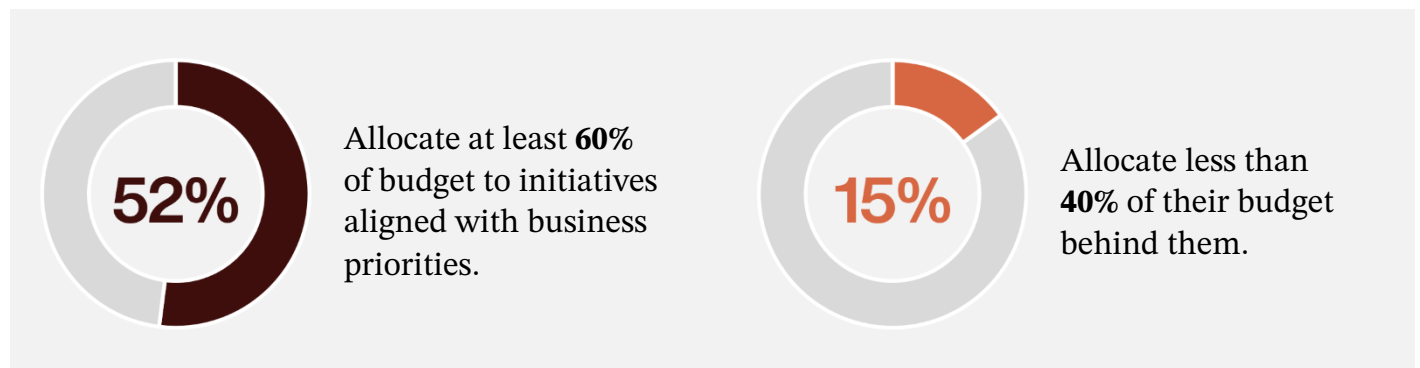
The result is a meaningful portion of activity operating outside stated priorities. This represents one of the clearest examples of the "execution gap" seen throughout the study.



Money follows priorities only some of the time.

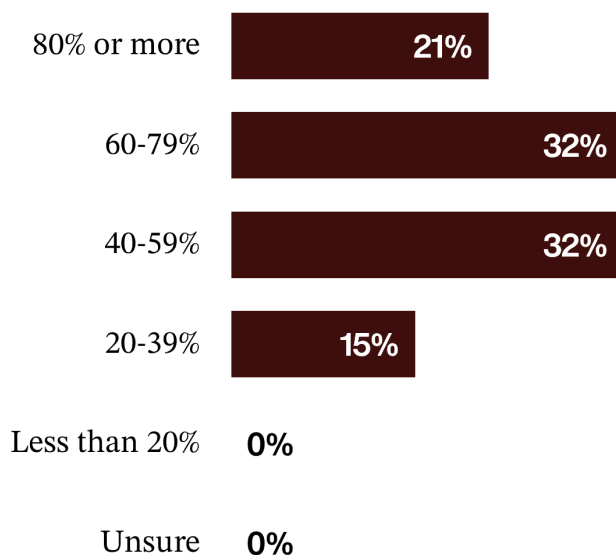
Budget Alignment to Priorities

While marketers generally believe investment should be concentrated, only about half report allocating the majority of their budget toward priority-driven initiatives.



This reinforces a recurring theme: organizations talk about focus more consistently than they fund it.

Proportion of Budget Aligned to Business Priorities

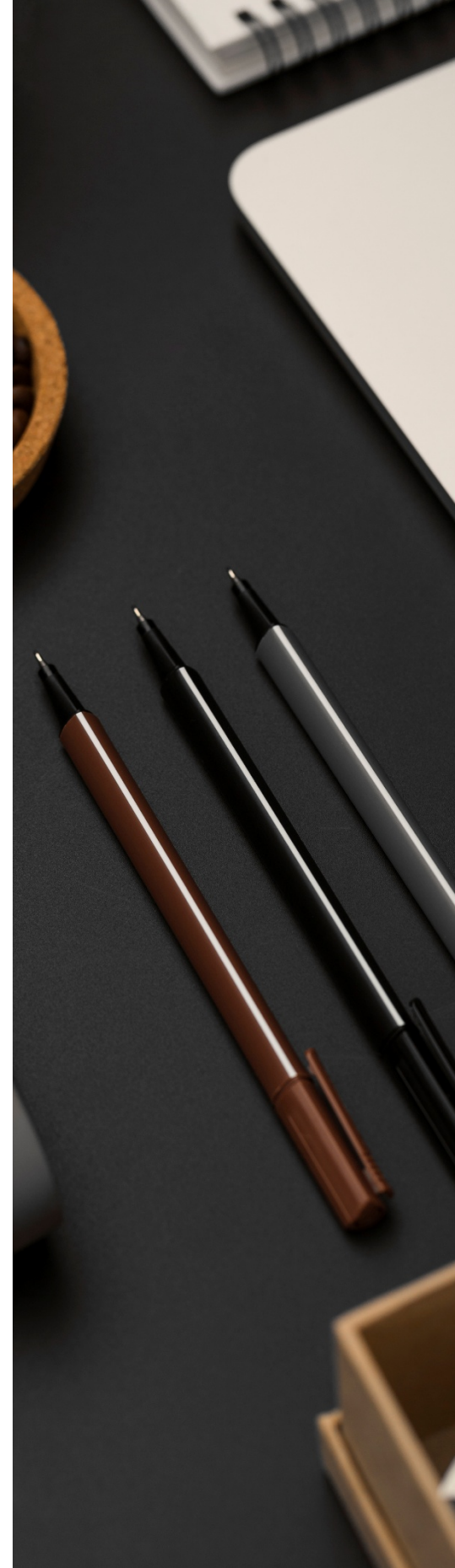


Conviction to make tough trade-offs comes from clear evidence.

What Unlocks Confident Trade-Offs?

The missing ingredient is proof.

Performance data, stronger metrics and increased confidence in strategic positioning rank highest. The findings suggest organizations do not need more conviction around focus. They need more proof that focus works.



Leadership wants evidence, not inspiration.

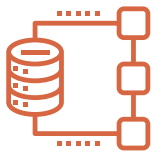
Leadership Requirements for Concentrated Spend

Marketers indicate that measurable proof and accountability are central to building support for concentrated investment strategies.

The strongest requirements for concentrated investment are:



Clear proof of performance impact



Measurement frameworks



Confidence short-term results won't suffer



A notable US - Canada difference is the role of cross-functional alignment: **40%** of US marketers cite agreement across teams on shared priorities as a key factor, compared with **25%** in Canada.

This reinforces a major study theme: concentrated marketing strategies are not being blocked by ideology. They are being constrained by risk, accountability, and insufficient evidence.



Teams and Contact Information:



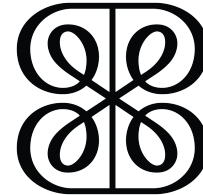
SAMANTHA BANTING
samantha.banting@ipsos.com



DAVID TRAN
david.tran@ipsos.com



RITU FOTEDAR
ritu.fotedar@ipsos.com



LAURA ROBINSON
laura.robinson@bensimonbyrne.com



TATIANA ISAZA
tatiana.isaza@benimonbyrne.com

