

OuterBox[®]



Navigating Growth in 2026:

Business & Digital Marketing Insights from 1,000 Companies

How are 1,000 businesses navigating the market in 2026? Find out here.

OuterBox's 2026 Market Pulse Survey shows that businesses are concerned about market volatility but remain cautiously optimistic about growth. Across the data, a clear pattern emerges: organizations pursuing growth in 2026 are shifting marketing away from volume-driven tactics toward strategies built on intent, trust, and operational alignment.



Uncertainty Is the Baseline—Not the Barrier

External headwinds, such as economic uncertainty, government policy, talent constraints, and rapid technological change continue to define the market. Yet the dominant sentiment is not fear. It's resolve.

Rather than waiting for external forces to stabilize, **business leaders are focusing on what they can control**: operational efficiency, marketing effectiveness, and alignment with buyer behavior.

For marketing leaders, this shift changes the role of strategy. As uncertainty persists and buyer behavior evolves, growth depends less on reacting to external forces and more on being visible at moments of intent, credible throughout longer buying cycles, and aligned with what the organization can realistically support.

About the Survey

The purpose of OuterBox's yearly Market Pulse Survey is to understand market trends through the lens of our clients, gathering ground-floor insights from >1,000 businesses. Industries include industrial manufacturing, healthcare, construction, and professional services, among a smattering of others.

While this survey helps our agency understand our clients' needs, these insights can also help business leaders understand how their peers are responding to economic pressure, shifting buyer behavior, and rapidly evolving digital channels.

By pairing survey data with real-world client experience, readers from any organization can gain insights and move forward with the confidence to sustain growth despite uncertainty.

Contents:

- 3 Who Responded and How They Performed in 2025
- 4 2025 Outcomes: What Separated Growth Leaders
- 5 Readiness Now Outranks Disruption as the Primary Concern
- 6 Why Buyer Behavior is Now a Marketing Constraint
- 7 Optimism in 2026
- 8 Operational Readiness is the New Growth Filter
- 10 From Traffic to Trust: 2026 Digital Priorities
- 11 Marketing in 2026: Fewer Bets, Better Execution
- 12 What Market Volatility Taught Us About Growth

Who Responded and How They Performed in 2025

Why B2B Businesses Signal What's Next

The majority of survey respondents (88%) identified their company as B2B, with industries including aerospace, construction, distribution, healthcare, manufacturing, packaging, and professional services.

B2B organizations have long sales cycles, and many of these industries sit at the intersection of supply, demand, and macroeconomic pressure, making them among the first to experience shifts in market conditions. Additionally, many of these businesses were significantly affected by tariffs enacted last year, with some benefiting substantially while others had to rethink their supply chains.

As a result, their responses often foreshadow trends that emerge across the broader business landscape. This industry mix provides important context for how respondents classified their performance last year.

The Performance Gap Widens

In our survey, 67% of respondents reported meeting or exceeding expectations in 2025, including 8% who said they far exceeded expectations. Conversely, 33% did not meet expectations. Not sure if this is the appropriate time to shamelessly plug that more than 2/3 of OuterBox clients met/exceeded expectations or not, but maybe we'll just leave this here.

Looking at this same survey we ran a year ago for 2024 results, business performance was split down the middle. A combined 54% of respondents said they met or exceeded expectations in 2024, while 46% fell short.

This year's results suggest a market that has become more polarized, with businesses no longer experiencing market conditions uniformly. Instead, organizations appear to be responding differently to ongoing uncertainty.

Examining the challenges faced by underperforming businesses helps clarify which pressures continue to obstruct growth and which can be tackled by specific strategies.

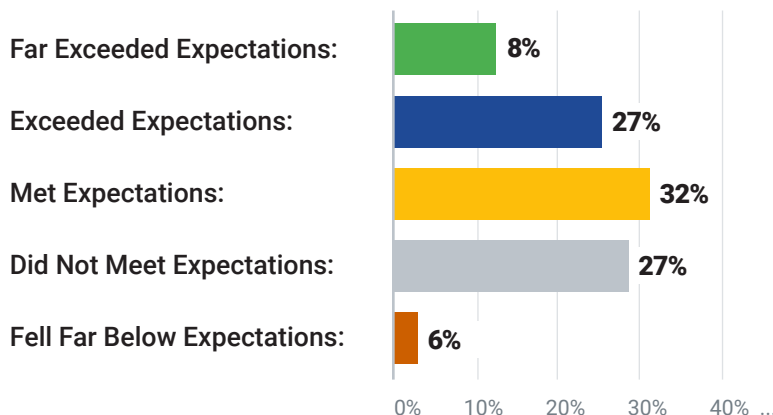


"B2B doesn't have the luxury of optimism—it has to adjust fast. When the market shifts, these businesses are often in the middle of long buying cycles they can't afford to do over or sit on while conditions cool. These higher deal risk force B2B organizations to confront reality sooner, which is why their performance often signals what's coming next."

— Jeff Allen, OuterBox CEO

OuterBox Client Research

How would you classify business performance in 2025?



2025 Outcomes: What Separated Growth Leaders

Why Some Businesses Fell Behind

Among respondents who did not meet expectations last year, economic conditions were the most frequently cited factor (30%). This response included inflation, tariffs, rising costs, and downward pricing pressure. Secondary contributors were shifts in customer behavior and sales and marketing execution (both at ~7%).

This is significantly lower than last year, with 86% of businesses that underperformed citing economic conditions, reflecting a market reacting to sudden economic change. Businesses are now struggling to adapt to sustained pressure affecting operations and more cautious consumers.

So, what are the businesses meeting expectations doing differently?

What Top Performers Did Differently

Among respondents who met or exceeded expectations, there was no clear-cut tactic. The most frequently cited success contributors were sales and marketing strategy (19%), with operational improvements and increased customer demand close behind (17%). A few businesses commented specifically on domestic production (Made in America) bringing in more buyers due to tariffs and website investments.

Minus customer demand, these were all internal investments.

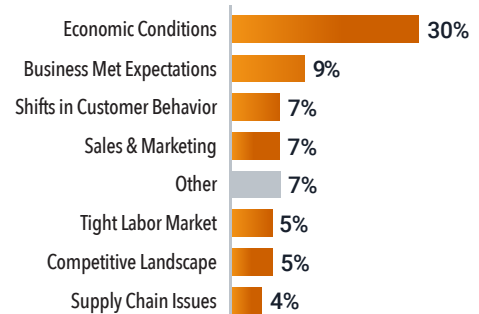
In the 2024 survey, sales and marketing strategy emerged as the dominant driver of success (59%).

Operational improvements and strategic partnerships were present, but less prominent. The 2026 results show a clear shift.

Sales and marketing are no longer acting alone, indicating that **systems working together** drive growth rather than marketing in isolation. This means marketing must adapt to this maturing growth mindset, working more closely with operations to align with operational readiness. All teams are rowing the boat in the same direction to ensure growth initiatives can be supported, delivered, and sustained.

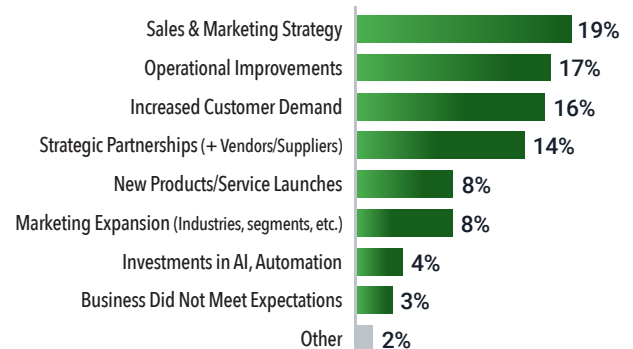
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If 2025 business performance did not meet expectations, what were the contributing factors?



OuterBox Client Research

If 2025 business performance met or exceeded expectations, what were the contributing factors?



Readiness Now Outranks Disruption as the Primary Concern

Concern Has Shifted Inward

At the start of the new year, respondents identified market volatility and economic uncertainty as the leading concerns (21%), followed by hiring and retaining talent (15%), scaling operational capacity (15%), and maintaining profitability (14.5%).

The 2025 outlook was dominated by economic uncertainty at 94%. What does this decrease tell us?

While market volatility remains the top concern, the relative emphasis has shifted away from policy shock and toward **internal readiness and sustainability**. Talent retention, operational scalability, and profitability now rank higher than inventory or trade-related issues. This means marketing is facing greater scrutiny.

Looking inward means budgets are judged less by reach and more by predictability and ROI. Volume alone is no longer a reliable growth lever. That's because qualified demand consistently outperforms broad exposure. As consumers, we can all see the effects of inflation and are evaluating risk more carefully, and expecting clearer proof of value given economic circumstances.

Understanding how buyer behavior is changing is now essential to marketing effectiveness.



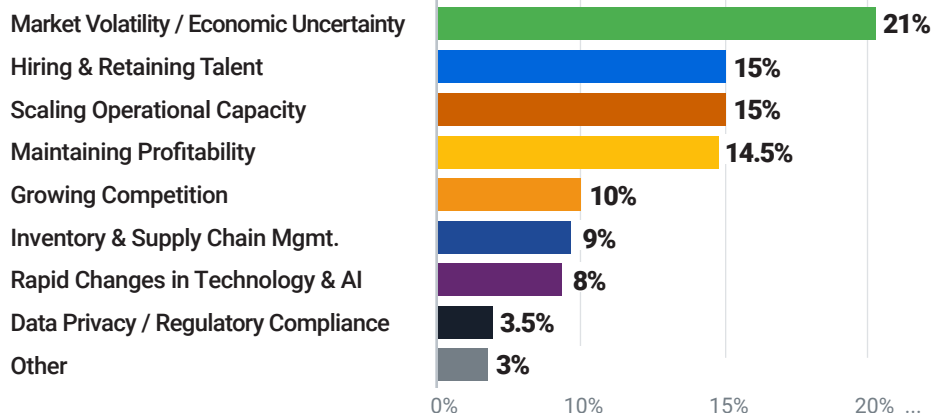
"The best performers we saw in

2025 didn't obsess over market swings. They invested in readiness—better systems, cleaner data, and teams built to execute efficiently. That focus on operational sustainability is what separated consistent growth from reactive decision-making."

— Jeff Hirz, OuterBox EVP

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What are your biggest concerns for your business in 2026? *(select all that apply)*





Comments From Real Respondents

"We saw cautious behavior due to changes in policy from the government that impact communities and healthcare."

- Marketing Director,
Health Consulting Company

"Many capital construction projects were shelved due to cost inflation resulting from tariffs."

- President, Industrial
Manufacturing Company

"Domestic business met expectations; however, International sales fell far below expectations due to tariffs."

- Executive, Industrial
Pumping Solutions Company

"Where possible, customers shifted to USA-made products, creating an artificial shortage."

- COO, Metals Distributor

"Customers and vendors, due to the volatility and uncertainty of the tariffs and material costs, were looking for the most economical pricing, which forced average retail prices down across the industry."

- General Manager, Industrial
Manufacturing Company

Why Buyer Behavior Is Now a Marketing Constraint

Last year's buyers were largely reactive, responding to economic policy and pricing instability. We asked our clients to provide more details about what they observed in their customers' behavior.

While the buyer journey is increasingly self-directed and digital-first on the B2C side, that isn't reflected in the speed of purchase decisions for many of the B2B companies surveyed. Respondents reported longer decision timelines, greater price sensitivity, and more extensive research before sales engagement.

Given the economic climate, buyers are more **risk-averse**. They are expecting clearer proof of value before committing.

Raising the bar for clarity, credibility, and consistency across digital touchpoints goes beyond AI-search visibility:

- Longer cycles reward early credibility.
- Risk-averse buyers penalize vague brand positioning.
- Digital experiences increasingly act as sales validation.

These shifts help explain why digital priorities in 2026 are moving beyond traffic toward experience, trust, and conversion quality.



"It's worth separating those who are cautiously optimistic versus planning for growth. Are businesses genuinely optimistic, or are they just maintaining a brave face for stakeholders? Is "planning for growth" actually an investment in expansion, or is it defensive positioning to avoid losing ground?"

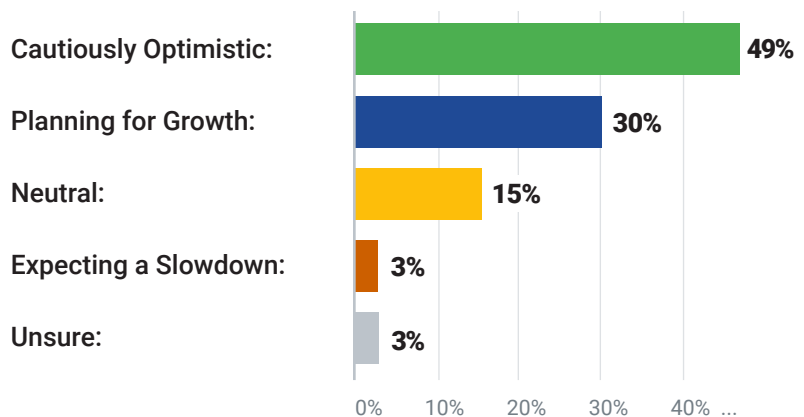
Regardless, there are some tailwinds from the COVID-era volatility finally calming, including improved supply chain conditions, but not enough to truly accelerate. Then there's the hype around AI; companies may be banking on AI productivity gains they haven't actually realized yet. Companies might be optimistic because they have something to point to (supply chains) while also having something to hope for (AI)."

– Matt Prater
OuterBox
EVP of Innovation

Optimism Remains— But It Is More Measured

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How would you describe your business outlook for 2026?



Business Outlook for 2026

Despite sustained economic concern and changes in buyer behavior, more than three-quarters of respondents (79%) described their outlook as either planning for growth (30%) or cautiously optimistic (49%). Only 3% indicated they were expecting a slowdown, and 14% were unsure.

In last year's survey, overall sentiment was similarly optimistic. 84% of respondents expressed either confidence in growth (39%) or cautious optimism (45%). At first glance, sustained optimism may seem surprising given continued volatility. However, the nature of that optimism has changed.

Compared to 2025, fewer organizations express outright growth expectations, and more describe their outlook as cautious or neutral. This suggests that leaders are not ignoring uncertainty—**they are planning around it.**

Businesses are not retreating from growth, but they are recalibrating how they pursue it, prioritizing investments that offer measurable impact. As a result, digital channels have become one of the first places leaders are adjusting strategy, reflecting how buyers now research, evaluate, and reduce risk before engaging.

Operational Readiness Is the New Growth Filter

Efficiency Before Expansion

Continuing the trend of looking inward, improving operational efficiencies is the top priority for this year (39%), followed by scaling marketing and sales efforts (28%). Many businesses commented that moving projects out of the development stage into production was a major priority as they look to stabilize or rebound from last year.

Last year, scaling marketing and sales efforts ranked as the single most prominent operational priority (27%), while improving operational efficiency ranked lower at 20%. We're seeing a clear reordering of priorities. While scaling marketing remains important, it has been overtaken by a stronger emphasis on efficiency and internal readiness.

This shift has direct implications for sales and marketing alignment. Organizations are no longer simply asking how to generate more demand—they are asking whether they can support and sustain the demand they capture. Generating demand without the systems to convert and fulfill it creates friction: slower response times, inconsistent customer experiences, stalled pipelines, and internal strain.

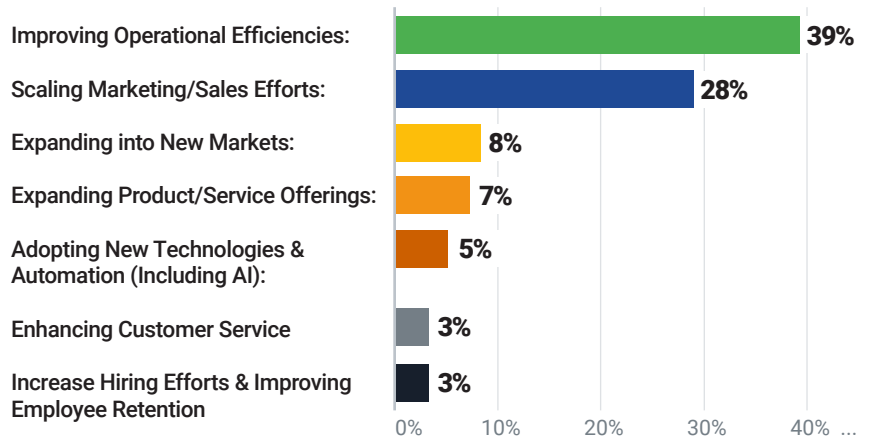
Operational readiness now sets the ceiling for marketing performance. Sustainable growth requires tighter coordination across sales, marketing, and operations—prioritizing qualified demand, scalable segments, and strategies that drive measurable impact without overextending teams or infrastructure.

Alignment isn't just a best practice. It's a growth requirement.



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What is your biggest operational priority for 2026?



AI Readiness: Interest Ahead of Capability

Most respondents reported being early in their AI journey. A combined 77% described themselves as either minimally prepared (34%) or moderately prepared (43%). 15% reported having no plans or allocated resources for AI.

Only 8% indicated they were well-prepared or highly prepared. The result reflects our majority of B2B respondents, but also shows a clear increase in awareness and experimentation.

In last year's survey, AI did not emerge as a primary operational or marketing focus. Only 6% of respondents cited adopting new technologies and automation as a top priority. While readiness remains limited, significantly more organizations have begun identifying use cases and testing applications—indicating a shift from passive awareness to early-stage adoption.

The gap between interest and preparedness represents both a challenge and an opportunity for organizations willing to adopt AI in focused, outcome-driven ways. Given the data here, AI will be a supporter of efficiency versus a stand-alone growth driver. Scaling demand without scalable systems increases risk rather than confidence.

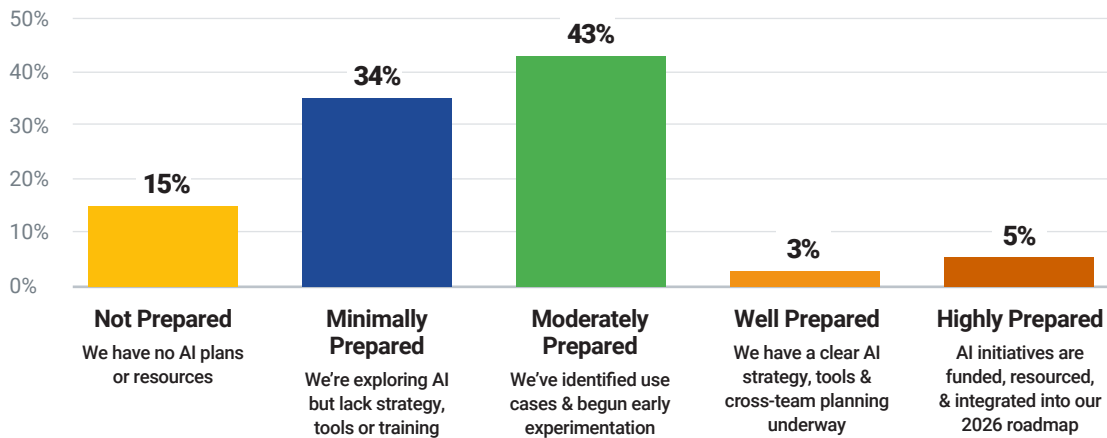
Comments From Real Respondents

"Looking to continue our current digital marketing strategies, while closely monitoring emerging technologies—particularly AI's impact on our digital footprint—and adjusting our approach accordingly to maximize ROI. We want to develop and maintain a flexible plan of action that can be updated as new tools and insights become available, ensuring our digital marketing efforts remain effective and growth-focused."

- General Manager, Industrial Manufacturing Company

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How prepared do you feel your organization is to adopt AI and automation in 2026





From Traffic to Trust: 2026 Digital Priorities

This year's priorities are not trend-driven—they are a direct response to how buyers evaluate risk in volatile markets.

Respondents cited expanding presence across key digital channels (37%) as their top website or digital priority, with improving customer experience and UX (23%) in the second spot. In last year's survey, digital priorities were more heavily weighted toward traffic growth, with 50% of respondents citing increased traffic as their primary focus.

The shift reflects how AI-driven search and LLM-influenced discovery are reshaping where and how buyers encounter information—reducing the value of raw traffic while increasing the importance of visibility, credibility, and context where and when buyers engage.

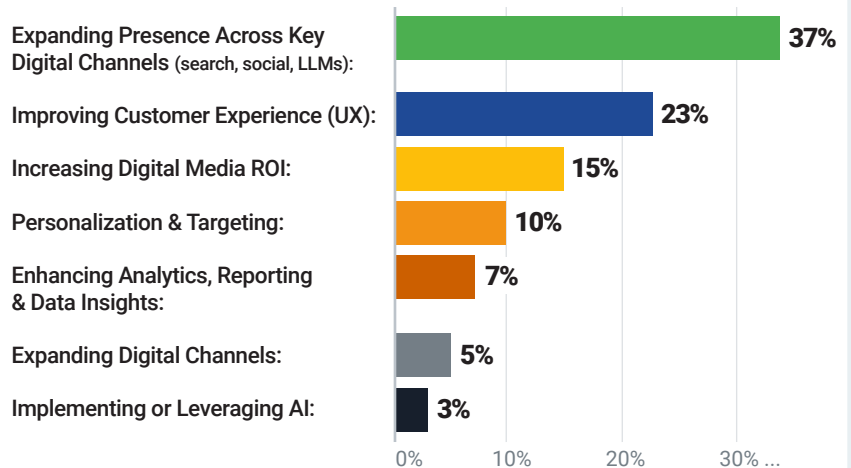
Demand generation remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient on its own. As AI surfaces more synthesized options earlier in the buyer journey, organizations are placing greater emphasis on their visibility at the right stage of the journey and their ability to convert and close the demand they can capture. Digital strategies now support evaluation and guide buyers toward confident decisions—and what happens once users arrive on-site.

Analysis of the 2026 Market Pulse Survey reveals clear differences in how organizations are responding to uncertainty.

Growth leaders are adjusting marketing strategies toward intent, efficiency, and conversion quality.

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What is your biggest priority within your website and/or digital business in 2026?





Marketing in 2026: Fewer Bets, Better Execution

Recommendations reflecting the strongest, most actionable signals in the data.

1. Focus on Demand Capture, Not Demand Creation

Demand exists, but buyers are more selective and research longer before engaging. Growth depends less on broad awareness and more on being visible at moments of intent across search, industry platforms, and AI-influenced discovery.

First step: Identify and optimize for your top high-intent queries by industry or use case.

2. Treat SEO as the Foundation of Digital Growth

With traffic growth deprioritized in favor of channel presence and UX, SEO now underpins both visibility and credibility across longer buying cycles.

First step: Map priority services to core topics and assess depth, clarity, and expertise signals through trust markers. Try posting top content on LinkedIn and encourage reviews on industry sites to boost trust and reputation.

3. Optimize UX for Risk-Aware Buyers

Longer evaluation cycles and greater scrutiny make UX a critical lever for trust and conversion—poor experiences slow already cautious buyers.

First step: Audit top pages to ensure clarity of value proof points and action-oriented CTAs. Consider conversion rate optimization to help identify and test opportunities.

4. Use Paid Media Selectively and Strategically

As efficiency outweighs aggressive scaling, paid media performs best when focused on qualified, mid- to bottom-funnel demand tied to revenue outcomes.

First step: Reallocate spend toward intent-driven campaigns and measure beyond clicks—consider visibility as a value metric.

5. Strengthen Analytics and Attribution

Growing interest in analytics reflects the need for predictability and confidence in marketing investment decisions. As AIOs and LLMs increasingly change how buyers search, traditional attribution models capture less of the full journey. Visibility now occurs across more touchpoints, often before a click or direct site visit ever happens.

First step: Audit current reporting to identify where AI-influenced discovery, assisted conversions, and long buying cycles are being undercounted or missed entirely.

6. Prepare for AI-Influenced Marketing—Pragmatically

Buyers are adopting AI faster than organizations internally. Content must perform for both humans and AI-driven discovery, while internal use cases should remain focused and outcome-driven.

First step: Pilot one AI use case with defined success metrics before scaling. *(Note: OuterBox can help with this!)*

These recommendations point to a larger story emerging across the data—one that extends beyond individual tactics to reveal how growth is being redefined.

What Market Volatility Taught Us About Growth

The 2026 Market Pulse Survey shows a market that remains optimistic and has learned from the volatility of 2025. Success is increasingly defined by execution quality rather than external factors.

Outcomes are becoming more polarized as organizations respond differently to sustained uncertainty. Leaders are focusing on what they can control—efficiency, readiness, and alignment—while buyers take longer, evaluate more carefully, and expect greater clarity and credibility.

The conclusion is clear: growth in 2026 is achievable for organizations that act with intention. In a volatile market, alignment—not optimism—is what determines who pulls ahead.

How OuterBox Helps Businesses Move Forward with Confidence

OuterBox meets organizations where they are at in their marketing maturity and builds momentum. We create digital strategies that align marketing with operational readiness—prioritizing efficiency, scalability, and buyer intent so growth initiatives are supported, measurable, and sustainable. By grounding every strategy in data, execution realities, and real buyer behavior, we help teams grow with confidence—even in uncertain markets.

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