TROLLEYGROUP

A GUIDE FROM THE TROLLEY GROUP

How Growth Actually Works

The four engines, and why we diagnose before we prescribe.



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This guide is the way of thinking we bring to every business we work with. It isn't a do-it-yourself diagnostic. It's meant to help you see your own business a little differently.

INTRODUCTION

One constraint holds the other nine in place.

Most established businesses don't have ten growth problems. They have one constraint holding the other nine in place.

That sounds too simple, and in a way it is. Every business has dozens of things that could be better. The website is dated. Follow-up is inconsistent. Reviews are thin. The sales team could close more. All true, and all worth fixing someday.

But growth doesn't move at the speed of your average weakness. It moves at the speed of your slowest point. Improve anything else and the business barely notices. Improve that one point and everything downstream starts working better, often without spending more.

This guide explains how we think about that point: where it hides, why it's so often misread, and why we refuse to recommend anything until we've found it.

WHO THIS IS FOR

Owners and leaders of established businesses, usually doing $5M or more in revenue, where growth has flattened or gotten harder than it should be. You have customers, a team, and a track record. What you don't have is a clear answer to why the next stage isn't coming easier.

WHAT THIS ISN'T

It isn't a list of tactics or a do-it-yourself diagnostic. It's the way of thinking we bring to every business we work with. Read it, and you'll know how we work before you ever talk to us. You'll also start seeing your own business a little differently.

CHAPTER 1

Why more marketing usually isn't the answer

When growth slows, the default response is to do more. More ads, more content, more leads, a new agency, a new website. It feels like action, and action feels like progress.

Sometimes it works. More often, it makes the real problem more expensive.

Picture a business with a strong flow of leads and a sales process that loses half of them in the first week because nobody follows up fast enough. Doubling the leads doubles the waste. Or picture a business that wins new customers easily but loses a third of them every year. A bigger marketing budget just refills a bucket with a hole in it, faster.

In both cases, the marketing works. The business still doesn't grow the way it should, because the constraint is somewhere else.

Why the default happens

Three things push owners toward more marketing:

- **It's the most visible lever.** You can see ads and websites. You can't see a slow follow-up process or a customer quietly deciding not to renew.
- **It's what most firms sell.** An ad agency diagnoses an ad problem. A web firm diagnoses a website problem. The recommendation tends to match the seller.
- **The symptom points there.** Fewer sales feels like a lead problem, even when the leads are fine.

The cost of guessing

Guessing wrong isn't free. It costs the money spent on the wrong fix. It costs the months before anyone notices it didn't work. And it costs trust: after two or three expensive guesses, many owners decide marketing doesn't work for their business at all.

> **The alternative is slower at the start and much faster after. Find the constraint first. Then decide what to do about it.**

CHAPTER 2

The four engines

Every business grows through four connected engines. Each one hands its output to the next, and the slowest one sets the pace for all of them.

1

Discovery

How the right buyers find you

Everything that puts you in front of the people you want as customers: search, referral partners, ads, trade shows, reputation. A healthy Discovery engine is one you can control. You know where your best customers come from, and you could turn the volume up on purpose.

When it's constrained, growth depends on word of mouth and timing instead of decisions you make.

2

Conversion

How interested buyers become customers

What happens after someone raises their hand: response time, follow-up, the sales conversation, the proposal, the close. A healthy Conversion engine runs on a written path with clear owners, and it works when the founder isn't in the room.

When it's constrained, leads stall between interest and signed, and closing depends on one person.

3

Expansion

How customers grow in value

What happens after the sale: retention, renewal, cross-sell, the next project. In most businesses, it's the cheapest growth available, because these customers already trust you.

When it's constrained, you keep winning new customers while existing ones quietly drift or stay flat.

4

Advocacy

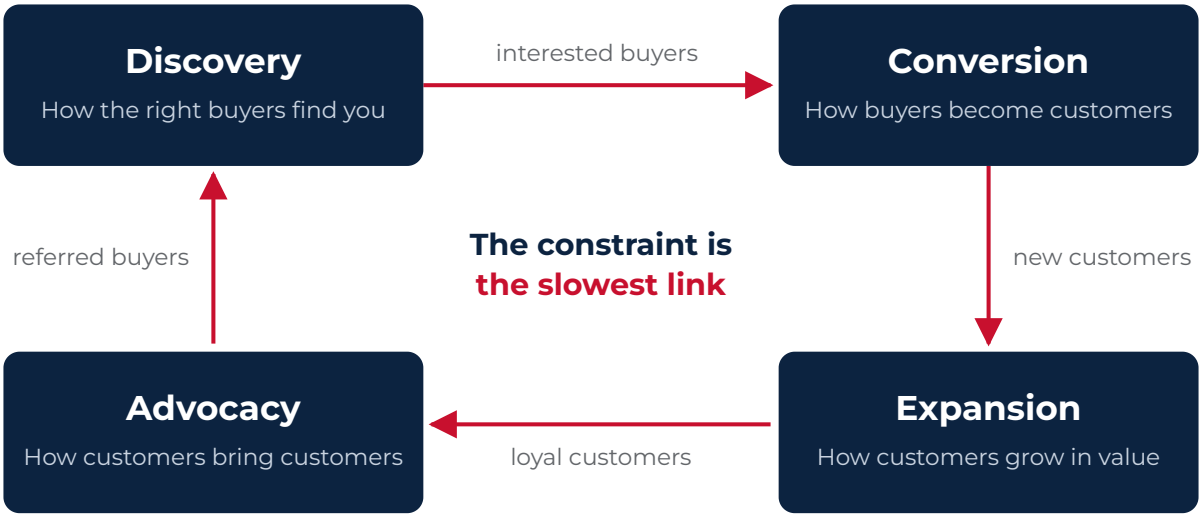
How customers bring you customers

Referrals, reviews, case studies, and introductions. It's the engine that lowers the cost of every other one, because a referred buyer arrives already half convinced.

When it's constrained, your happiest customers sit unused as a growth channel, and every sale starts from zero trust.

Why the slowest one sets the pace

The engines feed each other. Discovery feeds Conversion. Conversion creates customers for Expansion. Satisfied, growing customers feed Advocacy, and Advocacy feeds Discovery again with referred buyers.



Growth moves around the loop only as fast as its slowest engine lets it.

That loop is why a weak engine is so costly. It doesn't just underperform on its own. It starves everything downstream of it.

CHAPTER 3

The symptom is not the constraint

The problem you feel is usually downstream of the problem you have. That single idea explains most of the wasted money we see.

Symptoms show up where the pain is felt. Constraints sit upstream, where the flow first gets choked. A doctor treats the infection, not the fever. Growth works the same way.

A REAL ENGAGEMENT

A contractor who needed fewer leads

A residential contractor came to us after doubling in a single year, from about $5M to $10M. Their marketing was working. Leads were strong, and their ads were returning many times what they cost.

By every normal measure, they needed more marketing. That's what most firms would have sold them.

When we looked closer, the picture changed. The owner was personally closing every large deal. The sales team had no written process for big jobs, so reps who could sell a $200,000 project froze at $300,000. New work was piling up faster than the business could absorb it, and the owner was taking routine calls in the middle of strategy conversations.

The constraint wasn't Discovery. It was Conversion, and it lived inside the founder's calendar. More leads would have made it worse.

The fix wasn't a campaign. It was a sales path that didn't depend on one person: playbooks by deal size, lead routing, and a way for the owner to see the pipeline without being in every conversation.

A pattern we see often

Here's the reverse case, and it's common. A business says, "We need more leads." Its pipeline looks thin, so it hires someone to run ads.

But look at the customer list over three years and a different story appears. New customers arrive at a steady pace. They just don't stay. Every year, a large share of revenue walks out the back door and has to be replaced before the business can grow at all.

The symptom says Discovery. The constraint is Expansion. Fixing retention would grow the business faster, and for far less, than any ad budget.

How to tell them apart

> **Ask where the flow first breaks, not where the pain shows up.**

Follow a buyer from first contact to their third year as a customer, and find the step where the most value is lost. That step is usually the constraint, even if it's nowhere near what feels urgent.

CHAPTER 4

Every growth goal is a margin goal

A constraint only matters relative to where you're going. So before we look for one, we ask what the business is trying to become, and then we translate that goal into margin.

Ask most owners for a growth goal and you'll get a revenue number. But revenue is rarely the real goal. The real goal is what the revenue is supposed to buy: a business that pays better, runs with less strain, or gives its owner a life outside it.

What owners say	What it usually means underneath
More revenue	More revenue without adding people, hours, or risk at the same rate
Better margins	Stop paying for growth that doesn't fully arrive
Step back from the business	The business runs, sells, and decides without the owner in every room
Enter a new market	Carry what works into new territory without carrying the constraint with it
Sell or hand it off	Growth a buyer will pay for, because it doesn't depend on the owner

Why this changes the answer

The same business can have different constraints depending on the goal. A company that wants to double revenue may be constrained by Discovery. The same company, if the owner wants to work 30 hours a week, may be constrained by Conversion, because every big deal still runs through them.

This is also why we don't treat every weakness as urgent. Relying on one lead source, for example, isn't a problem in itself. It becomes one when it blocks the goal: when the goal needs twice the volume and that one source can't provide it.

Two kinds of margin

BUSINESS MARGIN

The money the business keeps.

OWNER MARGIN

The time, energy, and freedom the owner keeps.

A plan that grows the first by consuming the second isn't a good plan, even when the numbers look fine.

Well-run businesses should give their owners, teams, and customers more room to live. When we look for a constraint, we're looking for the thing standing between the business and both kinds of margin.

CHAPTER 5

You can't fix what you can't see

If you can't see where growth is leaking, any fix is a guess. So before we trust a diagnosis, ours included, we ask whether the business can actually see its own numbers.

We call this the Observability Test. It isn't tied to any one engine. It's a question about all of them: can you see what's happening clearly enough to make a decision?

Four questions that reveal blind spots

1. What does it cost you to win a new customer, and does that change by where they came from?
2. Of the people who contacted you last month, how many became customers, and how long did it take?

3. Which customers are likely to leave in the next six months?
4. Where did your last ten best customers first hear about you?

Most owners can answer one or two from memory. Few can answer all four from data. That's normal. But each question you can't answer is a place where a constraint can hide in plain sight.

Why visibility comes first

A business with poor visibility usually shows three patterns. Budget follows whoever argues best, not what works. Good channels get cut because their results aren't tracked. And the owner becomes the reporting system, carrying the real picture in their head.

> **When the only way to know how the business is doing is to ask the owner, the owner can never step away.**

Sometimes the most valuable first step isn't a growth campaign at all. It's making the business visible to itself: tracking that ties calls and forms to sources, a pipeline that shows where deals stall, and a simple view of which customers are growing and which are drifting. Once you can see, the constraint usually becomes obvious.

CHAPTER 6

Diagnosis before prescription

We don't recommend anything until we know what's actually constraining growth. Every engagement with us starts there, and it follows the same four steps.

1. **Strategy call**

   Thirty minutes. We start with where you want the business to be in twelve months. Then we walk through a marketing audit together, live, so you can see where the gap appears to be. You leave knowing more than you came in with, whether or not we work together.

2

Growth Diagnostic

If the gap is worth understanding, we find the cause. You connect your ad, analytics, and search accounts, answer about twenty minutes of questions on your goals and economics, and our specialists review the evidence. It's a paid engagement, credited toward setup if you work with us afterward.

3

Readout

We walk you through what's constraining growth, how confident we are in each finding, and what reaching your goal in your timeframe would actually take.

4

The plan

The recommendation follows the diagnosis. Sometimes that's a focused engagement on one engine. Sometimes it's a phased plan. Sometimes it's a deeper diagnostic. And sometimes marketing isn't the problem, and we'll tell you so.

What we promise, and what we don't

We promise to tell you what we find, including when it isn't what we sell. We promise that every recommendation traces back to the constraint and your goal. We promise to state how confident we are, and why.

We don't promise outcomes or dates before we've seen the evidence. Anyone who does is guessing.

How we measure ourselves

We hold every engagement to two standards: great results and a great experience. Results means your business grows because of the work. Experience means you understand what we're doing, you're never chasing us for answers, and by month three it's clear the work is working.

We use our own tools to make that visible, including call and form tracking that labels every lead by quality, so you can see which spending produces real customers and not just activity.

CLOSING

Questions to sit with

You don't need us to start thinking this way. These five questions are a good place to begin, and they're the same ones we'd ask on a first call.

1. Twelve months from now, if things went well, what would be different about your week? About your profit and loss?
2. Where does the flow first break: finding buyers, converting them, keeping them, or turning them into advocates?
3. Is the thing you've been trying to fix the symptom, or the constraint upstream of it?
4. Which of the four observability questions in Chapter 5 can you answer from data, not memory?
5. If you fixed only one thing this year, which fix would make the other three engines work better on their own?

If your answers point somewhere clear, act on it. Pick one thing, do it well, and measure it for 60 days.

If they don't, start with the Growth Constraint Check. It takes about 3 minutes and shows which of the four engines is holding the rest back. Results show on screen, and no email is required.

FIND YOUR CONSTRAINT

Take the 3-minute Growth Constraint Check

thetrolleygroup.com/growth-check

Prefer to talk it through? Book a free strategy call at thetrolleygroup.com/start. Includes a free marketing audit.

TROLLEYGROUP

Strategic marketing for strategic businesses.

The Trolley Group is a strategic marketing partner based in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. We help B2B businesses attract more of the right clients and keep them longer.

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