



Hinge®
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE

HIGH GROWTH STUDY 2026

Executive Summary





High Growth Study 2026 | Executive Summary

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About the High Growth Study

For over a decade and a half, the Hinge Research Institute has been studying the best performing professional services firms. In 2016, we released the first annual High Growth Study. This year's study represents the 11th installment of our signature research report.

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Introduction

The professional services marketplace is recalibrating. After a period of post-pandemic expansion, the median growth rate for firms has cooled to 9.9%, the lowest recorded since 2018. This contraction comes as the industry faces a new reality: The theoretical threat of technology has morphed into real operational disruption. For the first time, nearly one-third of firms report that artificial intelligence and automation are actively disrupting their business models. Combined with a surge in marketplace unpredictability, these forces may signal that this recent era of "easy growth" many firms enjoyed has ended.

**HIGH GROWTH
FIRMS GROW 4.2X
FASTER AND ARE 2X
MORE PROFITABLE.
LEARN HOW.**

Yet amidst this tightening landscape, a select group of firms is not merely surviving—they are accelerating. We call this elite cohort High Growth firms.



Introduction

HOW DOES YOUR FIRM'S USE OF AI COMPARE TO THE TOP PERFORMERS?

The High Growth Distinction

High Growth firms are in a league of their own. These organizations are growing more than four times faster than the average firm. In addition, they have mastered the mechanics of efficiency, achieving a median profitability of 39.5%—nearly double the margins of their no-growth competitors. While the broader market is relatively stagnant, these firms have found a way to deliver exceptional revenue and profit.

A Hybrid Strategy

What are these top performers doing differently? For one thing, High Growth firms spend more on marketing—120% more than their No Growth competitors. But they are also spending smarter. They have mastered a hybrid approach to business development that balances thought leadership, in-person networking, and sophisticated digital strategies. They are aggressively adopting AI, including creating content, conducting market research, and automating their workflows. Of course, these firms are not simply surrendering their thought leadership to AI. They use internal and outsourced expertise to help them produce thoughtful, strategic, and original insights in a new AI-powered environment. They also invest heavily in their people, and they are turning top talent into *Visible Experts*® who drive brand visibility and trust.

By examining High Growth firms' behaviors, strategies, and investments, we can help you not only cut through the confusion of 2026 but emulate the success of the most successful professional services organizations.

Let's get started!

Then & Now

Growth Rate of All Firms:

2024

14%

2026

9.9%

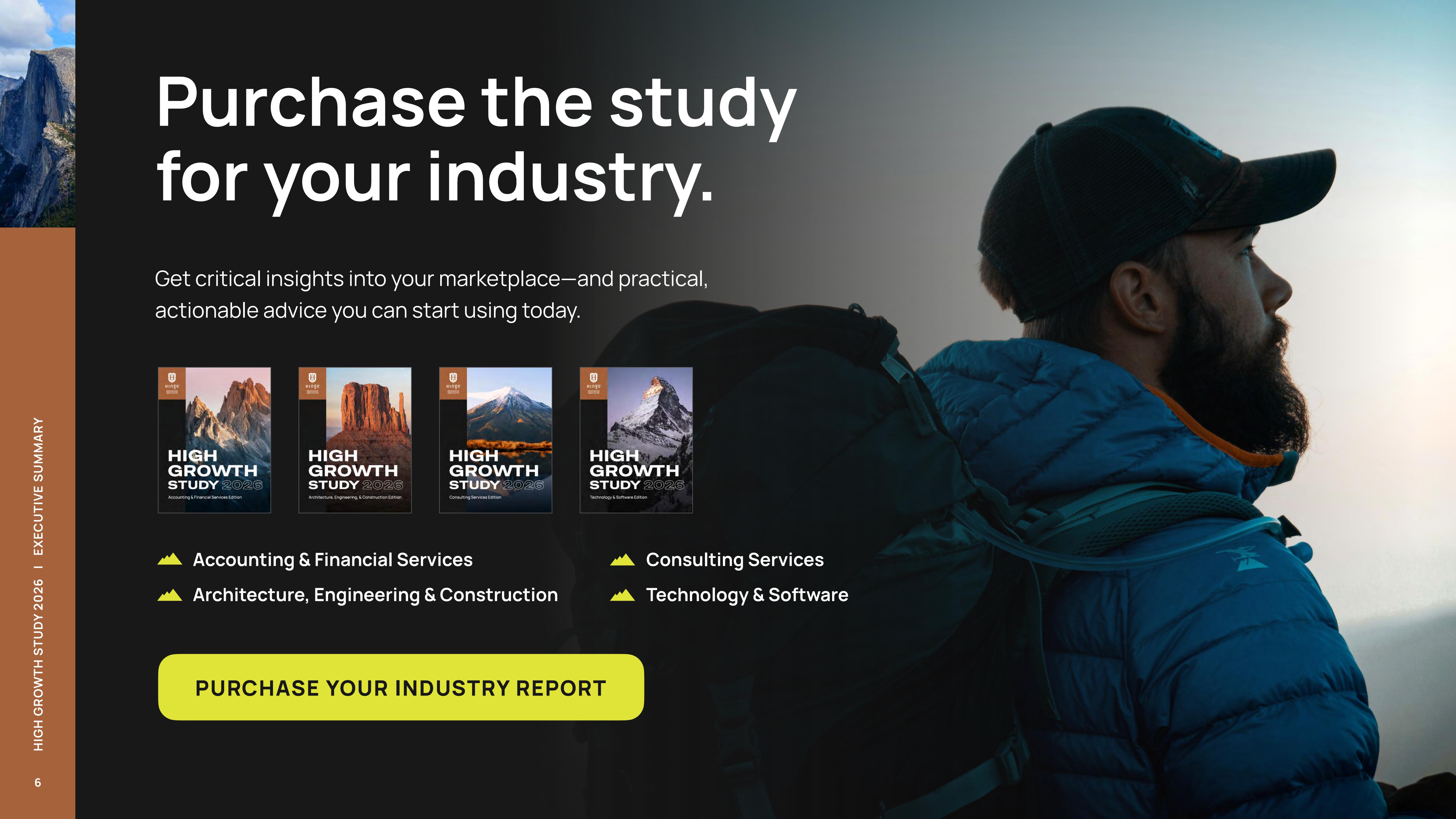
High Growth Firm Profitability:

2024

25%

2026

39.5%



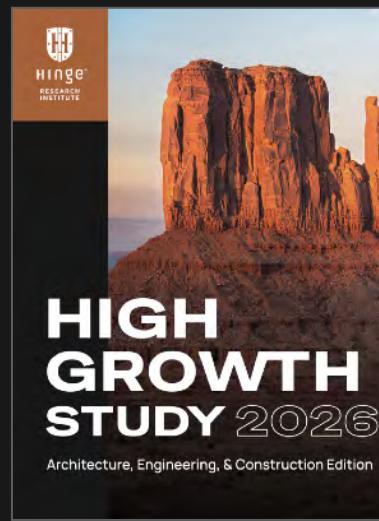
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DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS



Major Trend Analysis

Growth Continues to Slide

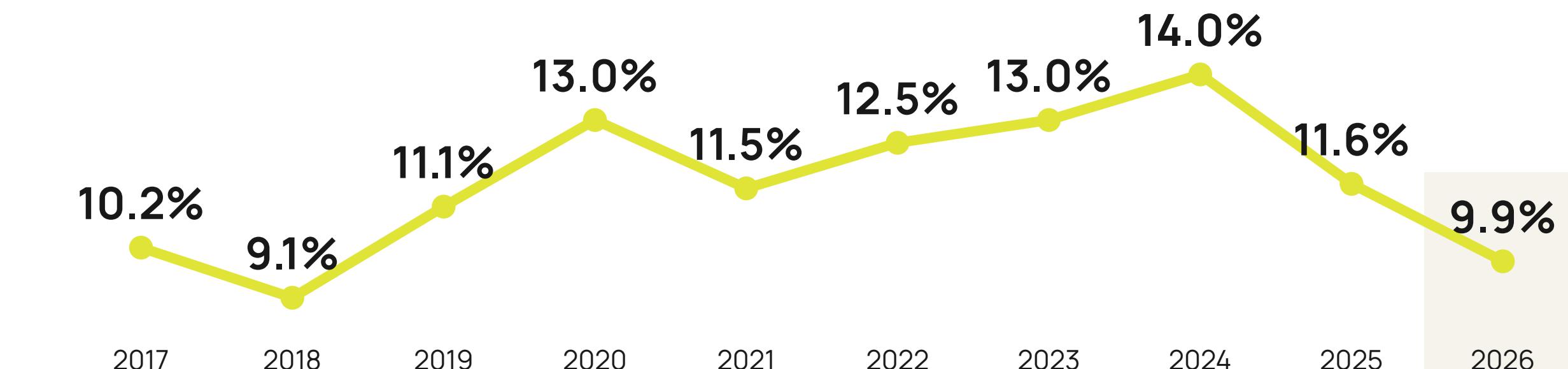
This year's median growth rate for professional services firms is 9.9%, marking a 15% (4.1 point) year-over-year decrease (see Figure 1). This is the lowest rate recorded since 2018. This trend represents a clear cooling off from the post-pandemic peak of 14.0% in the 2024 report—and a 30% drop from that high. This two-year decline suggests the professional services market may be contracting or normalizing after a period of expansion, with market saturation, economic headwinds, and increased competition making organic growth more difficult to achieve for the average firm.

Marketing Budgets Tick Up Slightly

According to Figure 2, firms appear to be recalibrating their approach to marketing investment. After severe budget cuts in 2024 and 2025 saw spending dip to a low of 7.0%, the slight increase to 8.0% in this year's report may be a correction to what may have been an overreaction to market pressures. However, this level of investment is still far below the pandemic-era highs of 15.0% recorded between 2020 and 2022. This year's modest increase in marketing spend may suggest that professional services firms are attempting to counteract slowing growth rates.

FIGURE 1.

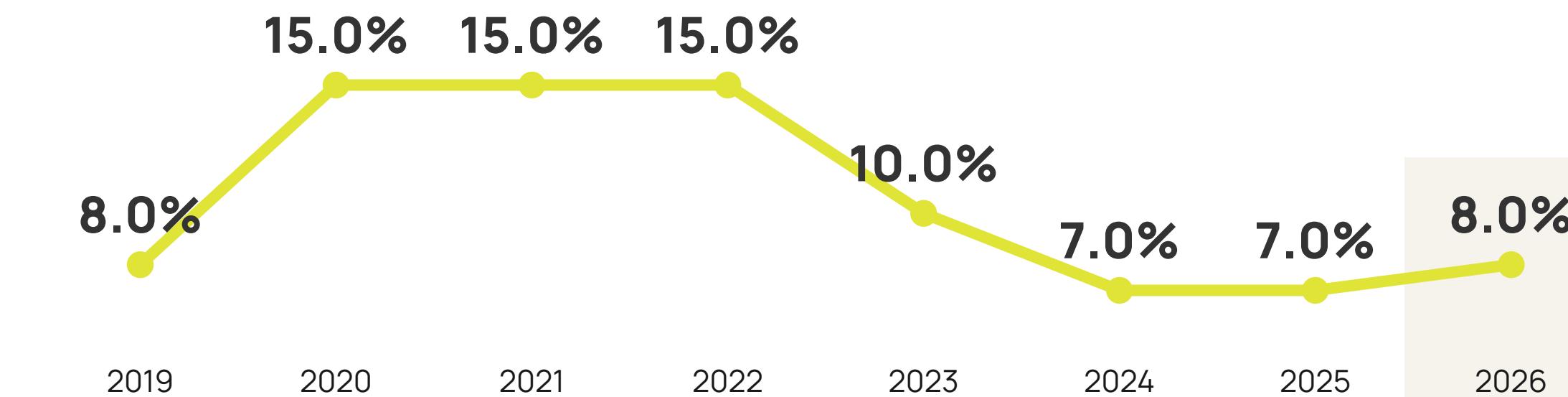
Median Growth Rate Over the Past Decade*



*Dates refer to the year the data was published, not when it was collected. Each year's data was captured in the prior year. For instance, data labeled 2025 reflects the marketplace in 2024.

FIGURE 2.

Percent of Revenue Dedicated to Marketing (Excluding Compensation)**



**These marketing budget percentages are respondents' estimates and can be higher than actual spend, perhaps because respondents tend to factor in effort or time commitment rather than dollar allocation alone. Also, budgets vary by size of firm and target audience. The budget percentages are best used to understand patterns and trends, rather than express a precise amount spent.

Major Trend Analysis

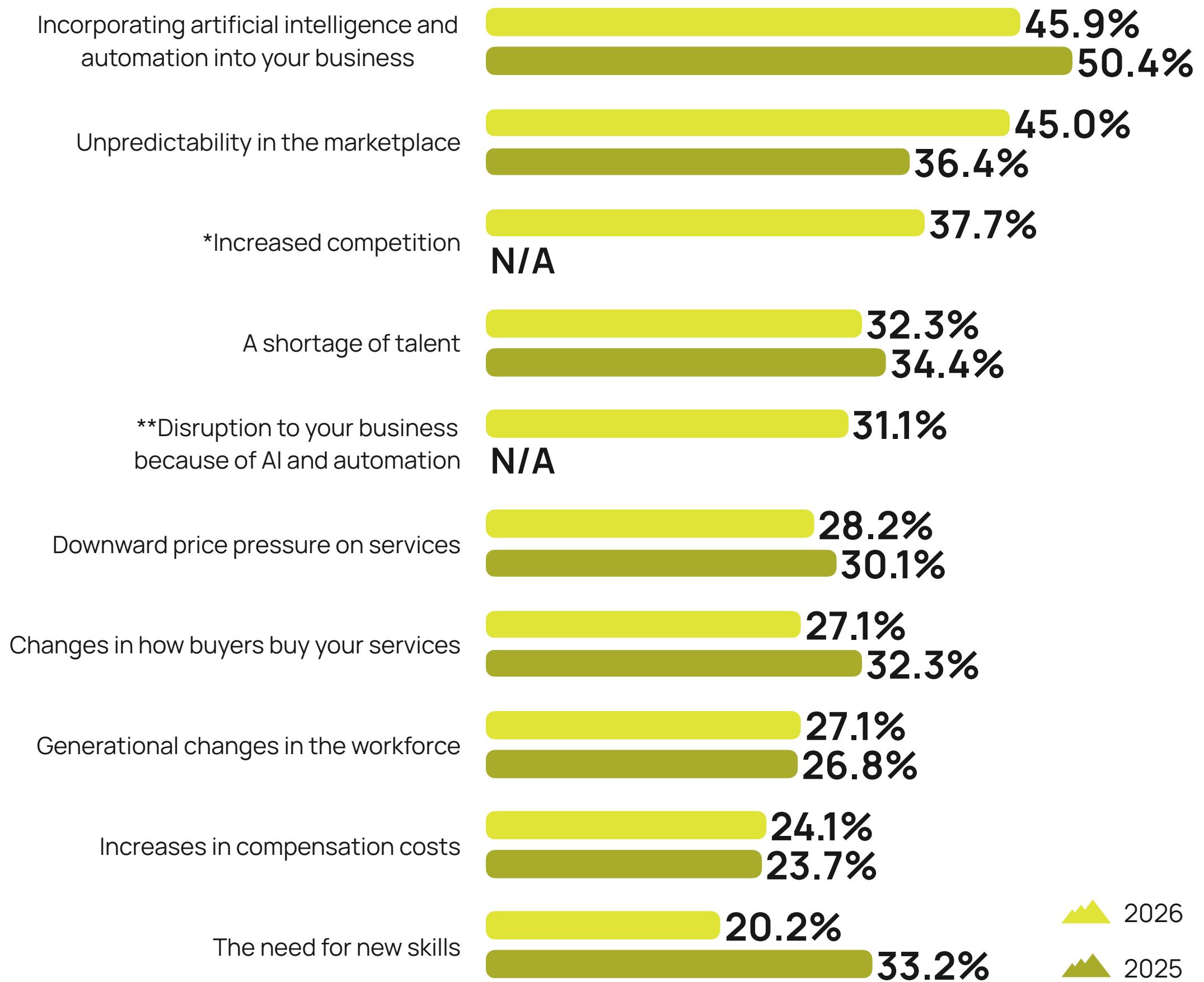
AI Anxiety Evolves as Market Uncertainty Returns

For the second consecutive year, artificial intelligence\automation remains the number one challenge for professional services firms (45.9%). While the difficulties of adopting these technologies have eased slightly since last year's report, they remain a major challenge. At the same time, just under a third of respondents expressed worry about the disruption they might cause. This data suggests that firms are not only thinking of AI as a promising productivity tool but as a competitive threat that could fundamentally alter their business models.

Compounding this technological anxiety is a resurgence of economic unease. "Unpredictability in the marketplace" surged nearly 9 percentage points to 45.0%, putting it in a virtual tie for the top spot. Interestingly, while fears of external disruption and volatility are rising, internal concerns about the need for new skills plummeted from 33.2% to 20.2%. This divergence could mean that firms feel confident they possess the talent they need to execute the work, but they are increasingly unsure if the marketplace will continue to value that work in the same way.

FIGURE 3.

Top Challenges of Professional Services Firms



*In the 2025 report, we asked about competition in two different ways, making direct comparisons with this year's result impractical.

**In 2025, we did not ask this question.



Major Trend Analysis

Human Interactions Remain the Dominant Engine of Growth

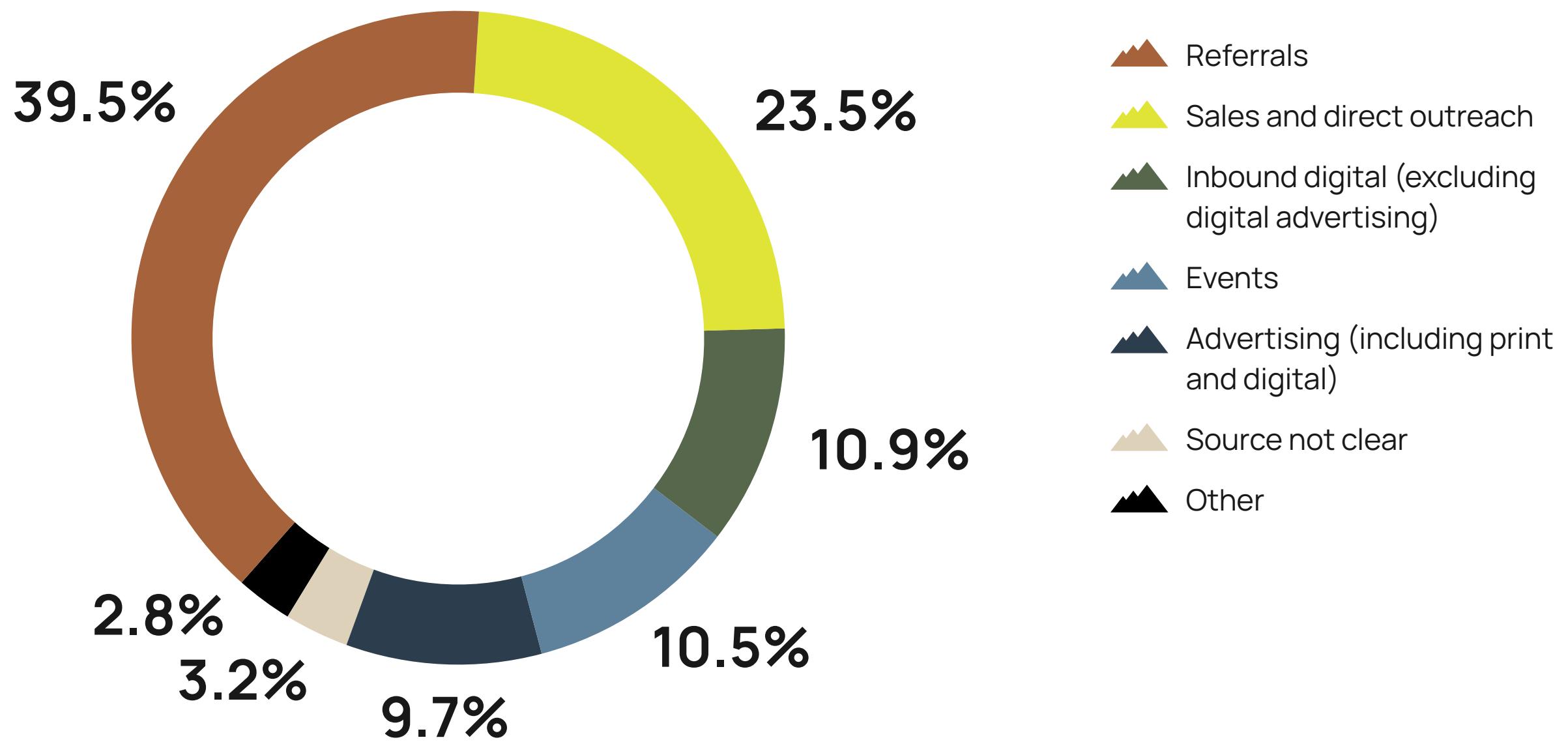
Despite the rapid proliferation of AI and digital tools, relationships still drive the majority of new business. In an era defined by digital transformation, professional services remains a deeply human-centric industry. While referrals are down compared to a decade ago, they continue to dominate the landscape, accounting for 39.5% of all leads—nearly double the next largest category. Combine this with "sales and direct outreach" (23.5%) and it becomes clear that almost two-thirds of lead generation comes from reputation, relationships, and direct human intervention.

In last year's study, we noted a resurgence in traditional networking and face-to-face interactions following the pandemic. While firms are heavily investing in technology to create efficiencies, the initial spark of a business opportunity is still most likely to come from outreach or a recommendation.

Do not conclude, however, that digital marketing is on the wane or irrelevant. Digital marketing remains the most effective way firms build visibility. Without that digital presence, many of these traditional leads would not occur, and many of the contacts would be more difficult to cultivate and close. As you will see in the pages below, High Growth firms rely on a combination of traditional and digital marketing strategies to outcompete their challengers.

FIGURE 4.

Percent of Leads by Source





High Growth Firm Analysis

**WE LAUNCHED THE
HIGH GROWTH
STUDY MORE THAN A
DECADE AGO. WHAT
WE LEARNED HAS
CHANGED THE WAY
MANY FIRMS DO
MARKETING TODAY.**

By examining the best performing firms and comparing them to their slower-growing peers, we can learn what the top performers do differently and what gives them an advantage. Organizations that have not achieved sustained levels of success can look to this fast-growing, high-profitability group of firms for insights and practical ideas they can implement in their own organizations.

What exactly is a High Growth firm? We define High Growth firms as those with a minimum 20% compound annual growth rate over a three-year evaluation period. When we compare these firms to those that experienced little or no growth over the same time frame, we are able to identify strategies and practices that are associated with faster growth and higher profitability.

About the Growth Categories

In the study, we grouped the participating firms into three categories: High Growth (see definition at left), No Growth (those that experienced zero or negative growth), and Average Growth (the rest of the sample).





Meet the High Growth Firms

High Growth Firms Grew 4.3X Faster and Were 33% More Profitable than Average

High Growth firms continue to deliver remarkable performance, achieving a median growth rate of 36.6% compared to just 8.5% for Average Growth firms—an over 4X advantage. In stark contrast, the No Growth cohort shrank by -11.4%. All growth categories, however, are underperforming the 2025 data. This suggests that external factors have slowed their growth potential.

The most striking finding in the 2026 data, however, is the surge in efficiency. High Growth firms reported a median profitability of 39.5%, significantly outpacing Average Growth firms (29.6%) and nearly doubling the profitability of No Growth firms (20.3%). This represents a massive leap in margins compared to the previous year, when High Growth profitability sat at roughly 27% and Average Growth firms were at 23.1%. This suggests that High Growth firms are not just winning more business, they have mastered the art of delivering it more efficiently—in some cases with the help of AI and automation technologies.

FIGURE 5.

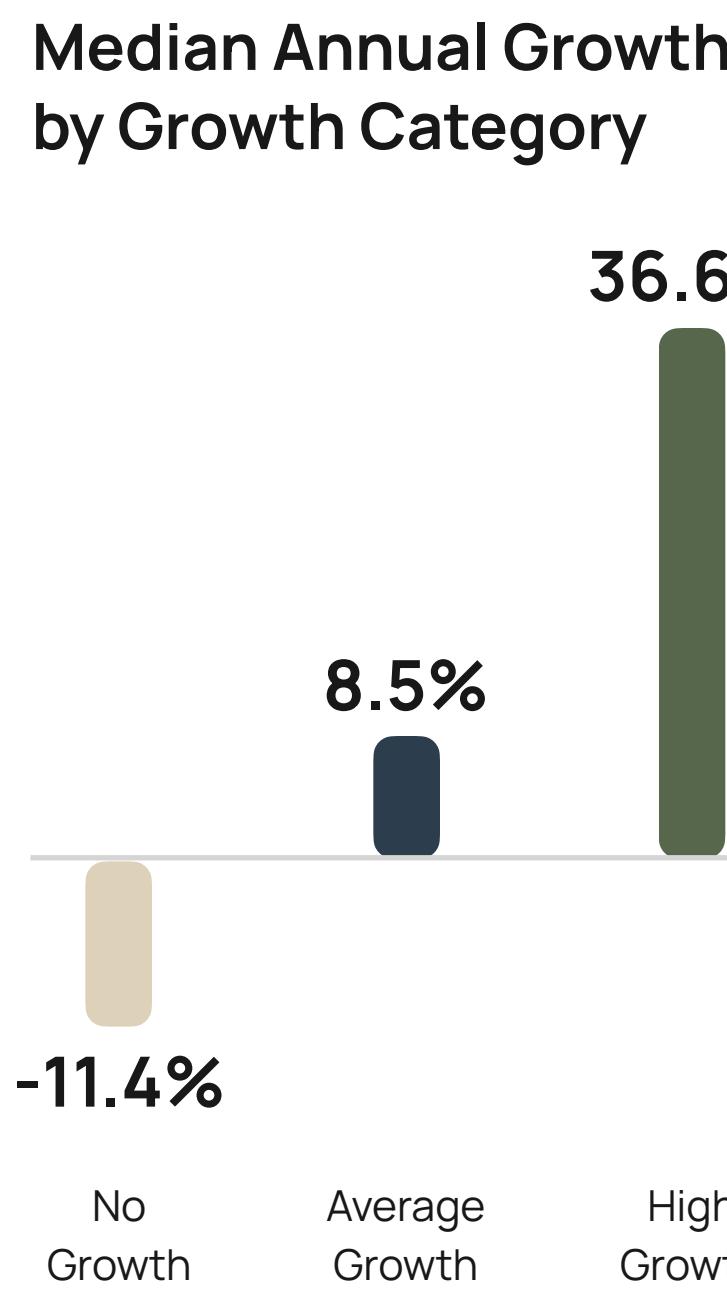
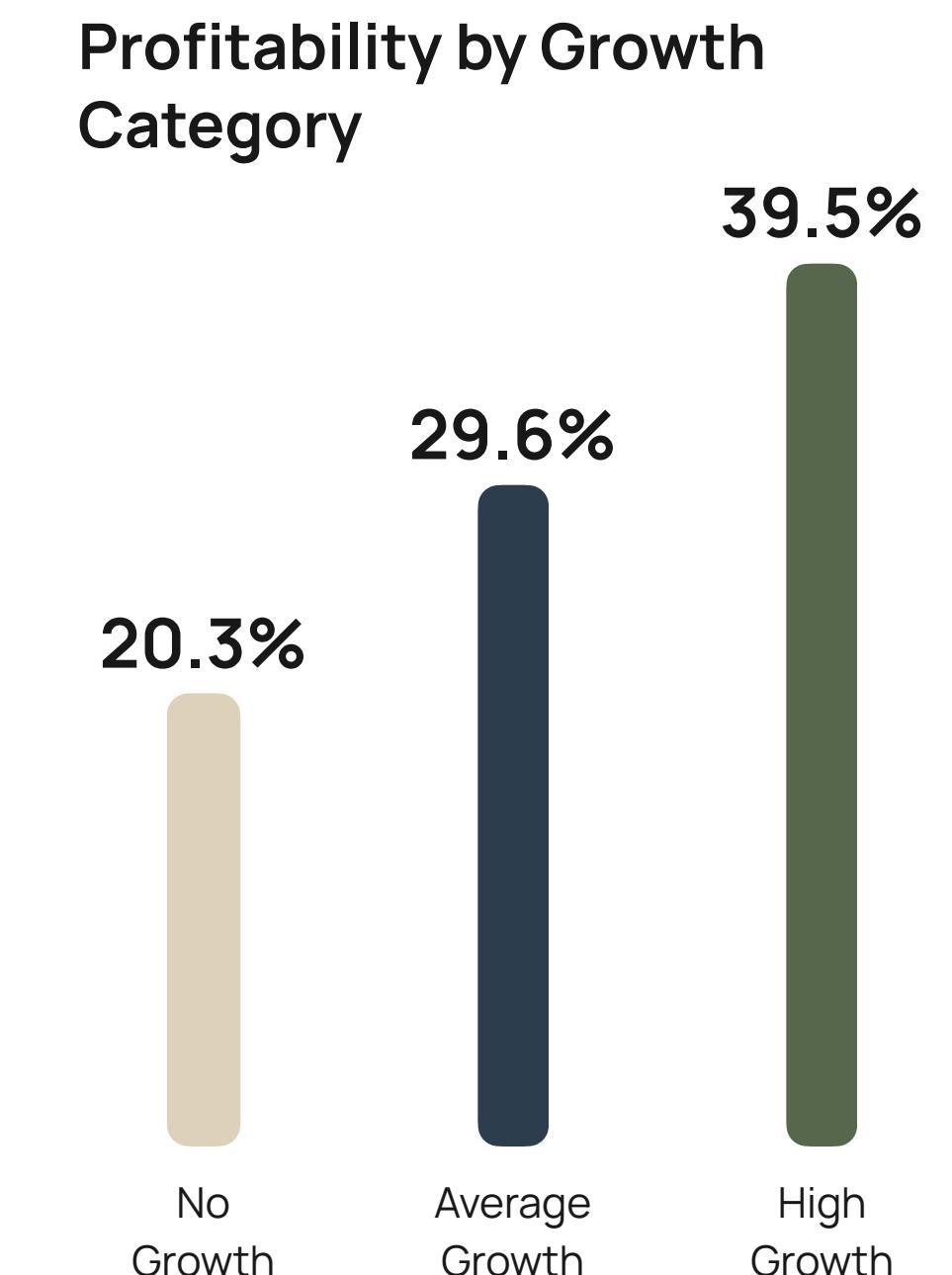
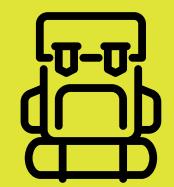


FIGURE 6.



We identified key advantages in five areas



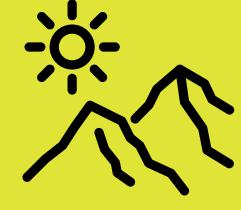
Marketing & Business
Development



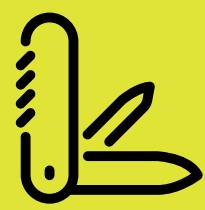
Talent



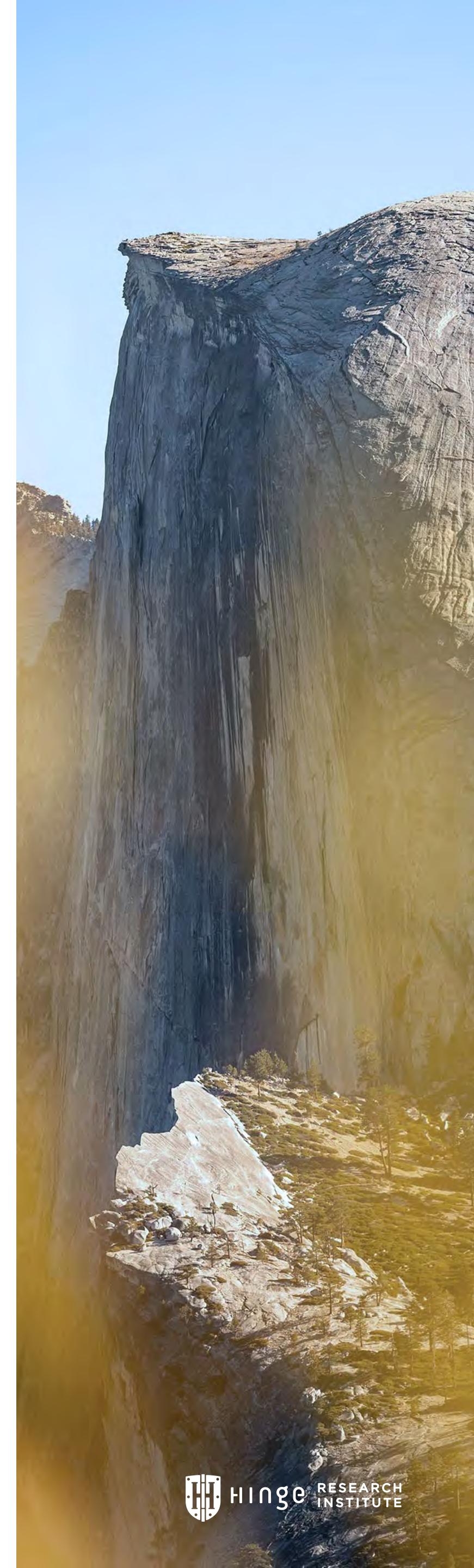
Strategy



Talent (Outsourcing
& Experts)



Technology



KEY ADVANTAGE: -----

Marketing & Business Development

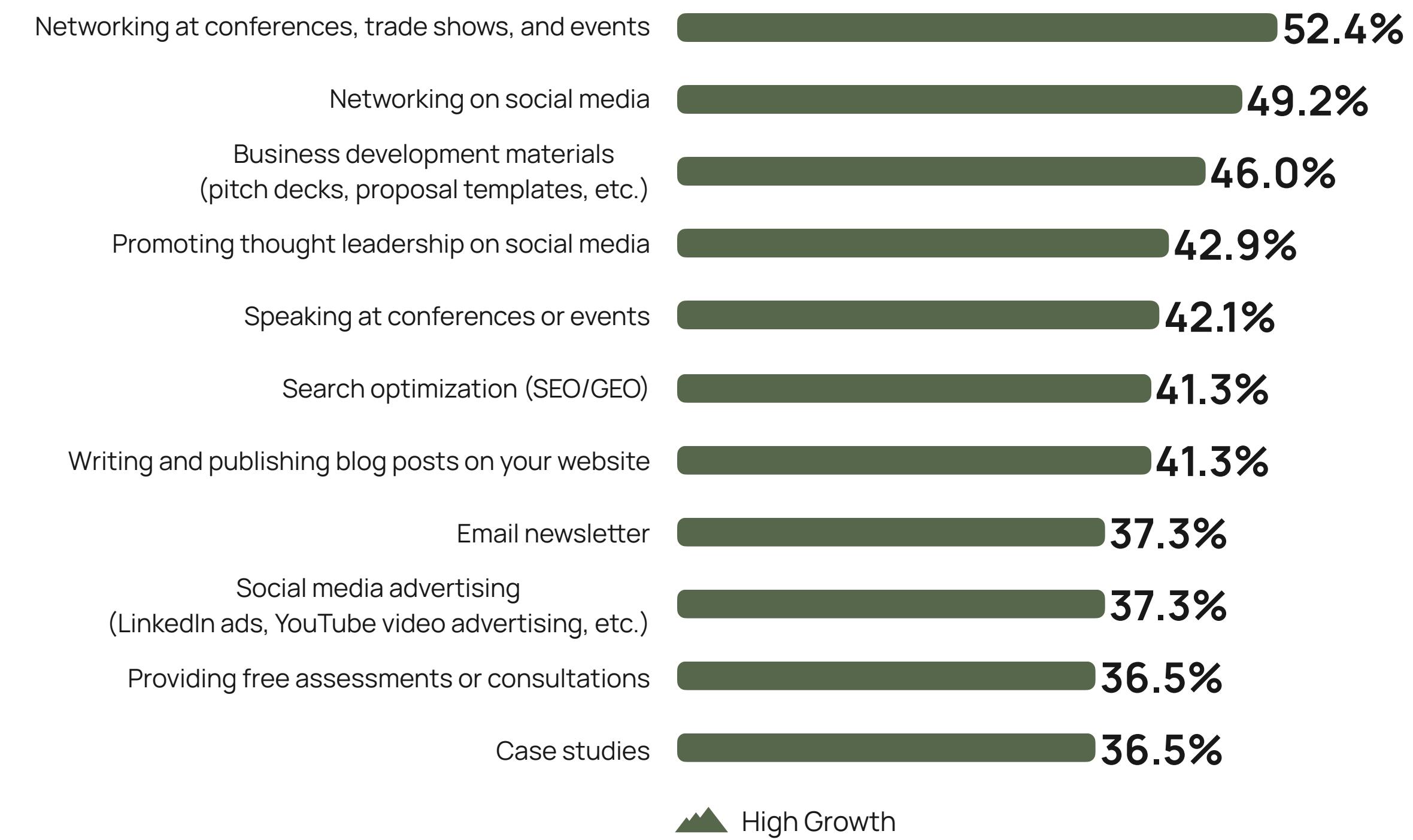
High Growth Firms Prioritize In-Person and Online Networking

What marketing and business development techniques do the top-performing firms use most often? High Growth firms appear to have embraced a hybrid networking strategy, aggressively building relationships in person and on digital platforms. Networking at live events and on social media take the top two positions in this year's study. Why? In our decades of working with professional services firms and helping them grow, we've witnessed firsthand—validated by our clients' lead-gen analytics—the way these two techniques complement each other to reach, capture, and engage a specific audience (more on this in Figure 8).

But content is always on High Growth marketers' minds, as well. Promoting thought leadership on social media, speaking at conferences, SEO, blogging, and email newsletters are major components of their marketing programs. This focus on educating their audience has been an increasing trend as firms recognize the value of freely sharing their expertise, building visibility, and developing a loyal following.

FIGURE 7.

Marketing Techniques High Growth Firms Use Most Often



Marketing & Business Development

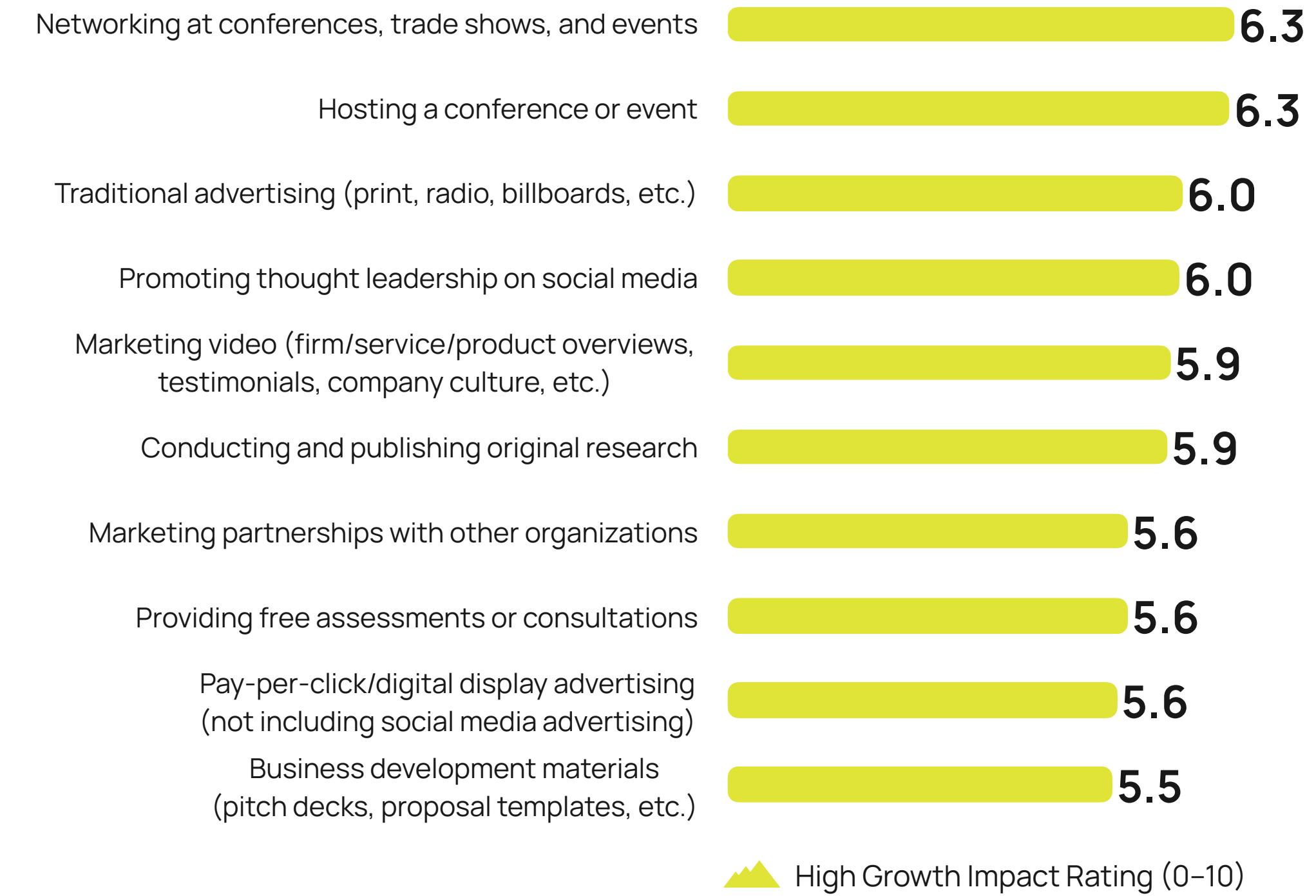
Networking, Events, and Brand Awareness Activities Deliver the Greatest Impact

We asked participants to rate each marketing and business development tactic they use for its impact. The results are shown in Figure 8. Tied for the top spot at a rating of 6.3 are event networking and hosting a conference or event. This is the first year that hosting an event has made the top 10 list, suggesting that High Growth firms are no longer just part of industry conversations—they are often creating the platforms where those conversations happen, and it's working.

Another “old-school” technique, traditional advertising (such as print, radio, and billboards), has surged up the charts with an impact rating of 6.0, in a tie with the more modern tactic of promoting thought leadership on social media. When you consider this revival of traditional media together with conducting and publishing original research (5.9), marketing video (5.9), and digital advertising (5.6), it is clear that a diversified strategy is bearing fruit. High Growth firms are not relying on a single silver bullet. Instead, they are executing a multi-front strategy—blending in-person interactions with broad-reach traditional and digital techniques to dominate their markets.

FIGURE 8.

Most Impactful Marketing and Business Development Techniques





KEY ADVANTAGE:

Marketing & Business Development

A Strategic Shift from Production to Promotion

In the 2024 and 2025 reports, creating content was firms' number one marketing priority. The 2026 data signals a subtle pivot away from creating content and toward distributing it and engaging the people who consume it.

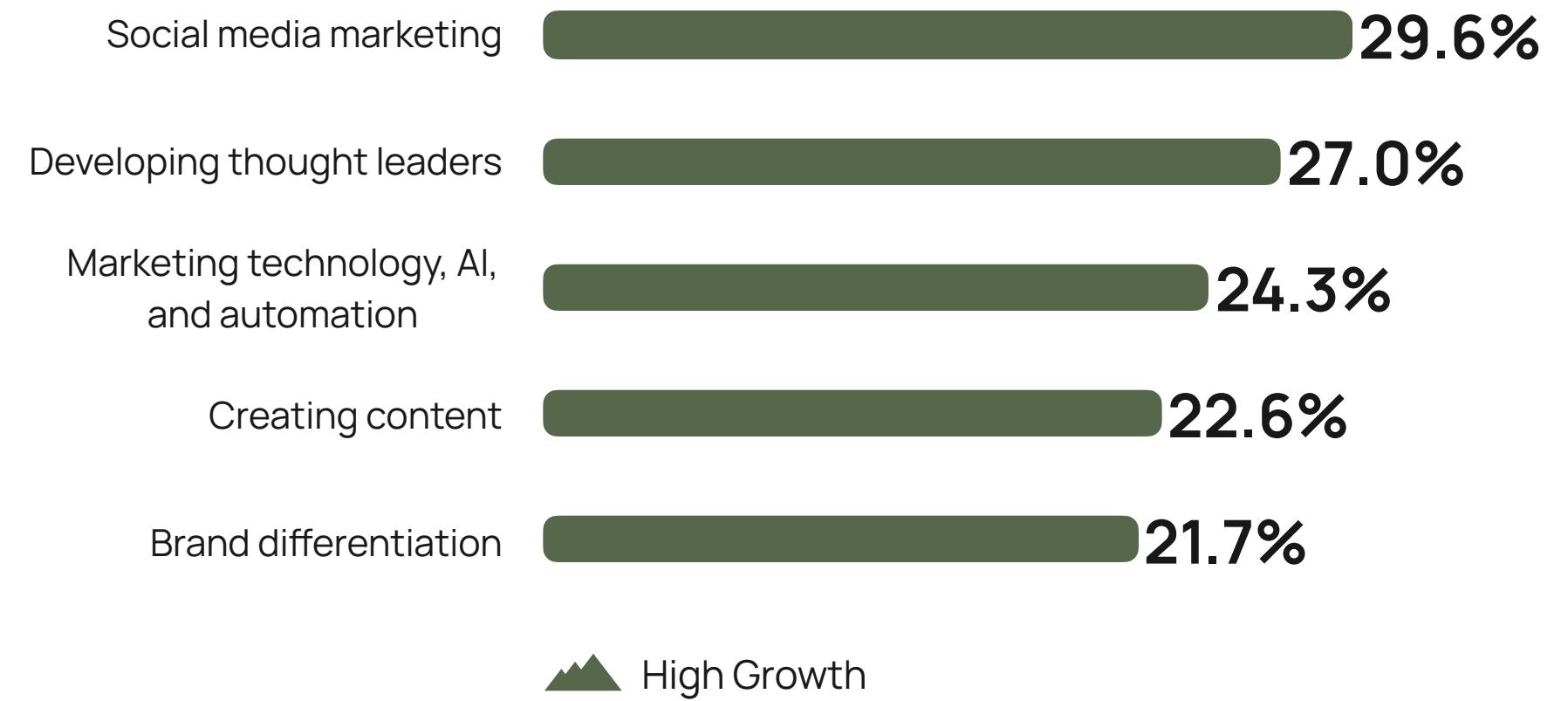
This year, social media marketing claims the top spot, suggesting that many High Growth firms are shifting their attention from producing expert content to actively promoting it. This aligns with the rise of "developing thought leaders" to the second position (and a five-percentage-point increase year over year), indicating that firms are prioritizing the messenger as much as the message. In a content-saturated marketplace—likely fueled by the generative AI boom noted in previous years—visibility, personal reputation, and true expertise may be the new currency of trust.

Meanwhile, "marketing technology, AI, and automation" has returned to the top three, reflecting the operational necessity of executing these strategies at scale. Creating content remains a top-five area of interest, though it has taken an 11.5-point slide this year. Brand differentiation, which eludes many professional services firms, continues to be a top priority of top performers.

The winning formula for 2026 may be a hybrid approach, using AI and automation to handle some of the logistics of marketing, while deploying human thought leaders on social platforms and elsewhere to create original content and build authentic connections.

FIGURE 9.

Top Marketing Priorities for 2026



Marketing & Business Development

High Growth Firms Widen the Investment Gap

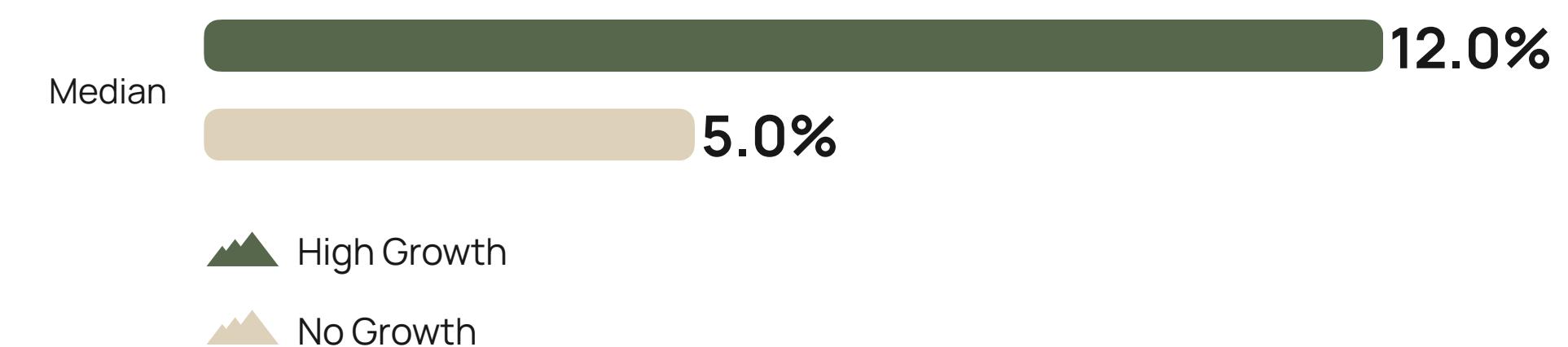
High Growth firms have aggressively increased their marketing investment, allocating a median of 12.0% of revenue to marketing efforts compared to just 5.0% for No Growth firms. This represents a significant jump from 2024 and 2025, when High Growth spending held steady at 10.0%. The data suggests that while struggling firms continue to treat marketing as a cost center to be minimized, industry leaders are doubling down, outspending their No Growth peers by more than a 2-to-1 margin.

This year's 20% surge in spending among the High Growth group may reflect the capital intensity of a modern, AI-driven marketing strategy. The implication for 2026 appears to be that the "pay-to-play" threshold for growth has risen. Firms attempting to compete with a lean 5-8% budget are being outspent and outmaneuvered by competitors who view marketing not as an expense, but as their primary engine for growth.*

*Keep in mind that marketing spend varies widely by industry. See the [breakout report](#) for your industry to find out what top performers in your industry are spending.

FIGURE 10.

Marketing Budget as Percentage of Revenue**



**These marketing budget percentages are respondents' estimates and can be higher than actual spend, perhaps because respondents tend to factor in effort or time commitment rather than dollar allocation alone. Also, budgets vary by size of firm and target audience. The budget percentages are best used to understand patterns and trends, rather than express a precise amount spent.

KEY ADVANTAGE: -----

Talent

High Growth Firms Staff for Scale, Especially in the Small- and Mid-Market

In this study, we make a distinction between marketing and business development (BD). We define marketing as the function that exposes a business to new audiences, engages them, and compels them to reach out when they are ready to buy. BD, sometimes called sales, takes the relationship from there, moving a prospect from initial interest to closed sale. We recognize that these are somewhat artificial distinctions, and in real-world organizations the two functions overlap to varying degrees. Nevertheless, in most firms these two responsibilities are handled by different teams.

In the small (\$1-4.9M) and mid-size (\$5-49.9M) categories, High Growth firms dramatically out-staff their No Growth peers in both functions. Of the mid-size firms, the High Growth group employs more than triple the business development staff (11.1% vs. 3.5%) and double the marketing staff (5.3% vs. 2.4%).

In micro organizations (<\$1M), however, No Growth firms actually report significantly higher proportions of both marketing and BD staff, likely reflecting the challenges of the "seller-doer" model. The High Growth firms in this category may simply have more efficient processes. At the large firm level (\$50M+), High Growth businesses operate with a leaner marketing headcount (6.9% vs. 7.7%) while maintaining a larger BD force (12.0% vs. 8.9%).

FIGURE 11.

Proportion of Marketing Staff to FTEs

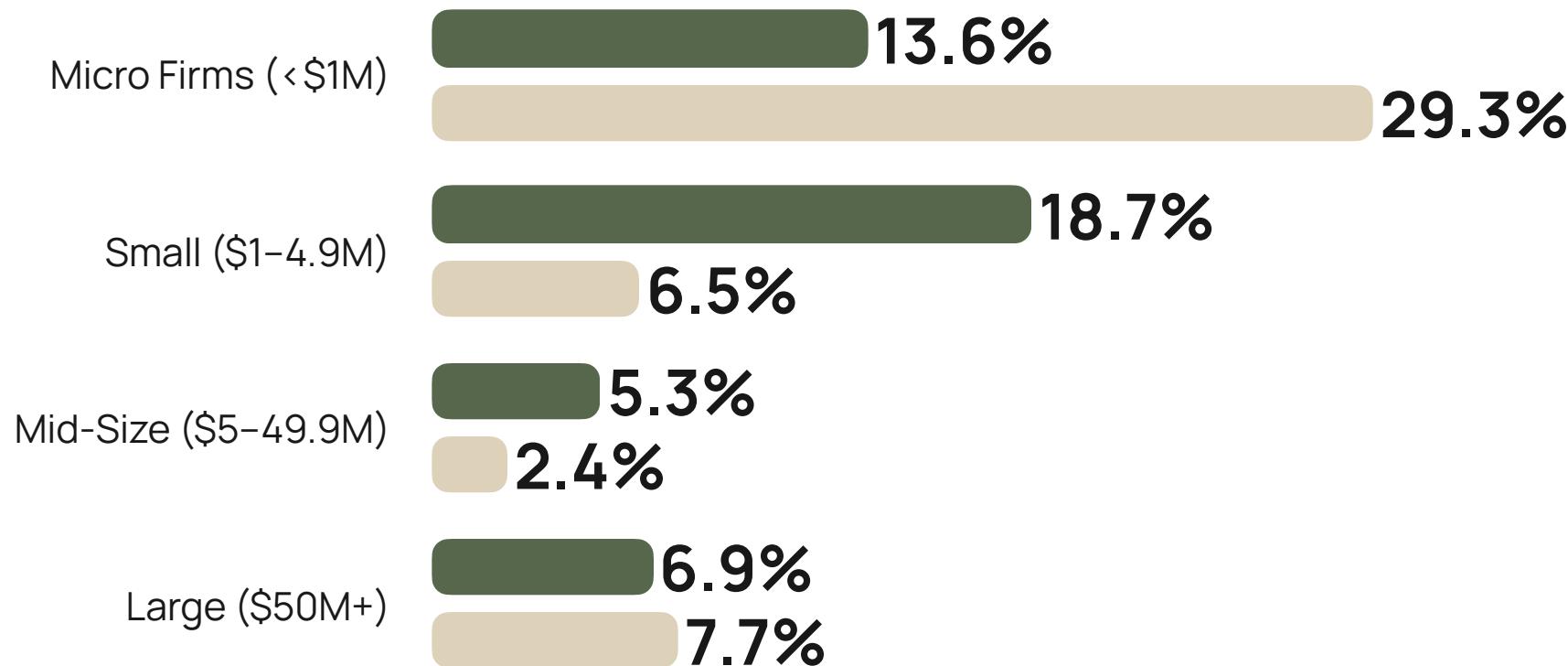
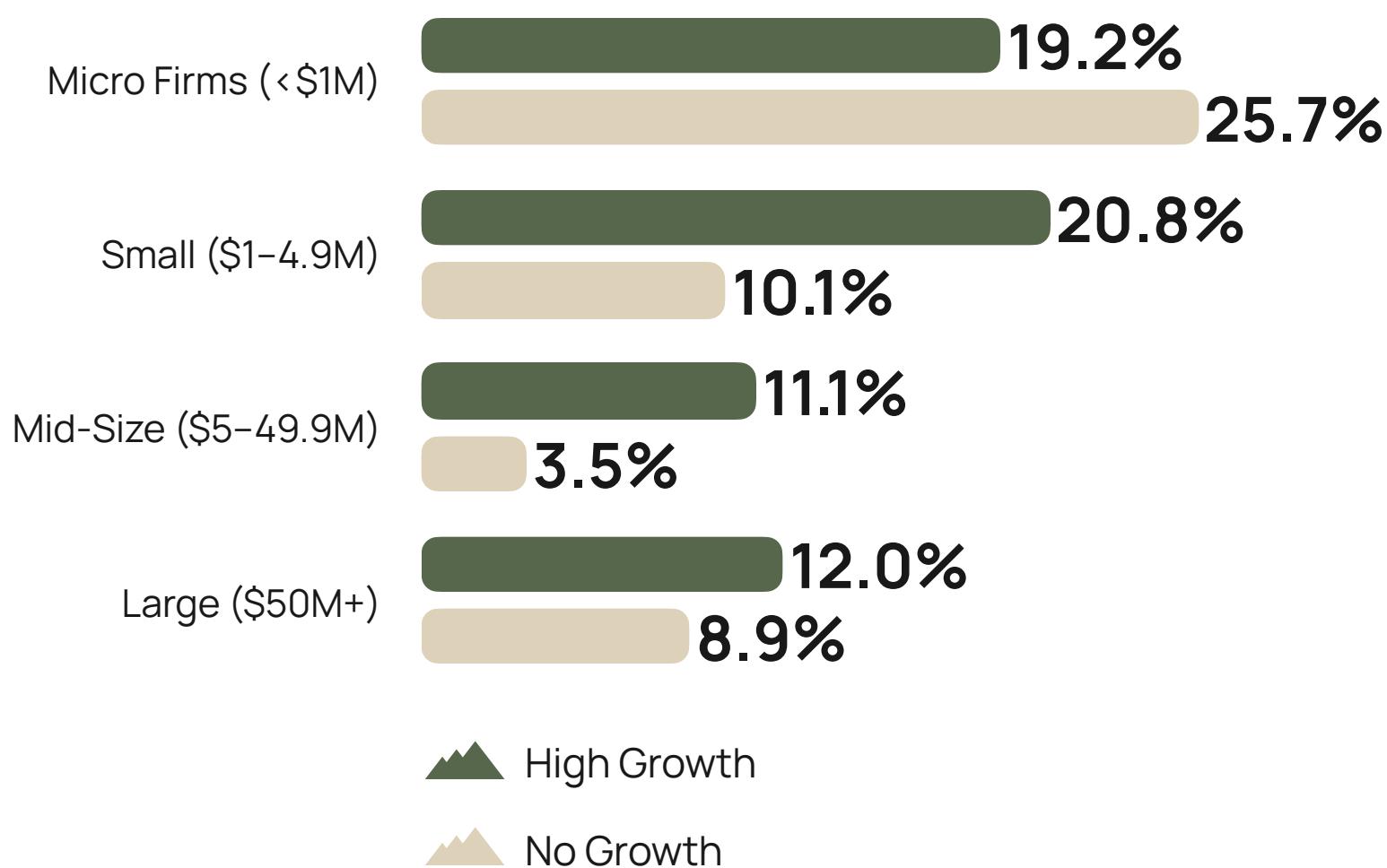


FIGURE 12.

Proportion of Business Development Staff to FTEs



KEY ADVANTAGE:

Talent

High Growth Firms “Staff for Scale” in the Critical Mid-Market

Figure 13 shows the proportion of both marketing and business development staff to all of a firm's FTEs. High Growth firms have about the same percentage of these team members as their No Growth counterparts at the smallest and largest firms. In small and mid-size firms, however, they invest more heavily in marketing and business development personnel.

The “Seller-Doer” Model Powers High Growth at Every Level

Figure 14 shows the proportion of seller-doers to FTEs. High Growth firms engage a significantly higher proportion of seller-doers across every firm size category than their No Growth peers. This gap is most dramatic among large firms (\$50M+), where 17% of High Growth organizations FTEs are seller-doers compared to just 6.6% at No Growth firms. Similarly, among mid-size firms, High Growth organizations have nearly triple the proportion of seller-doers than their No Growth competitors. Industry leaders appear to embed a culture of business development deep into their delivery teams, ensuring that many of those who deliver the work are also active in winning it.

FIGURE 13.

Proportion of Marketing & Business Development Staff to FTEs

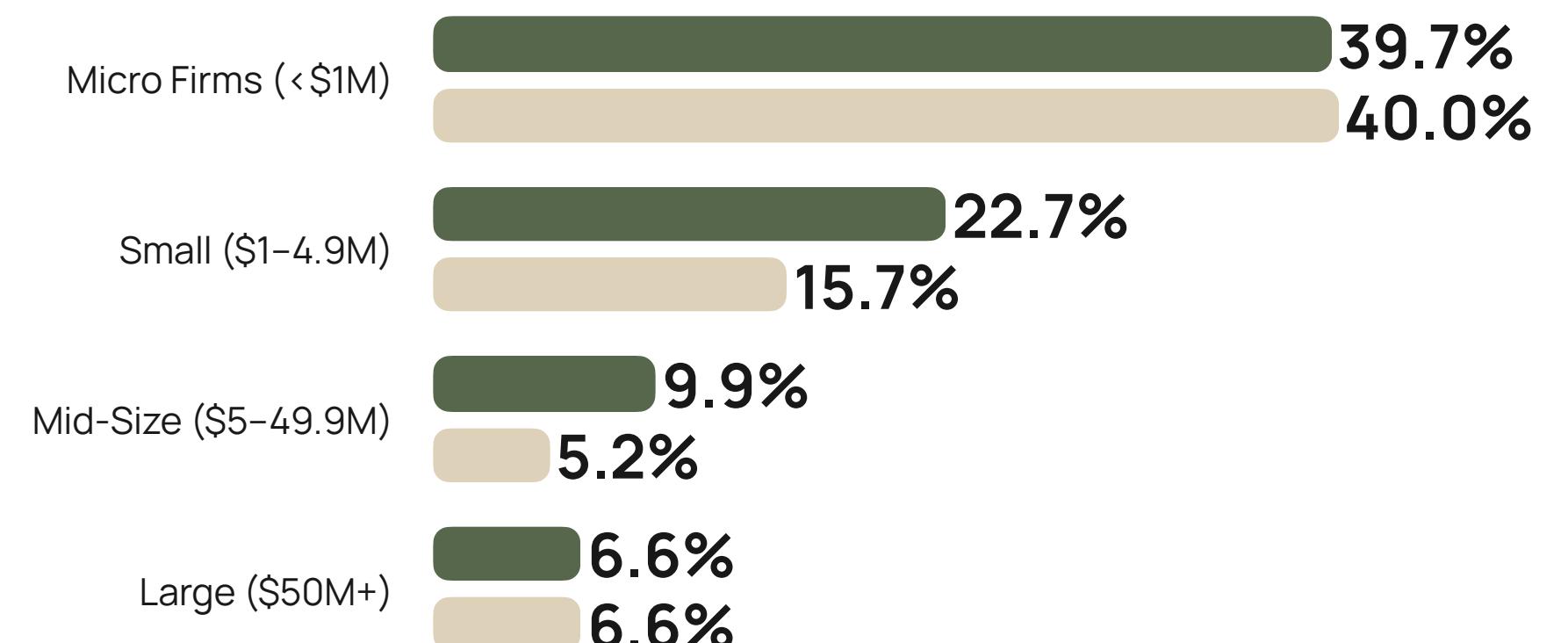
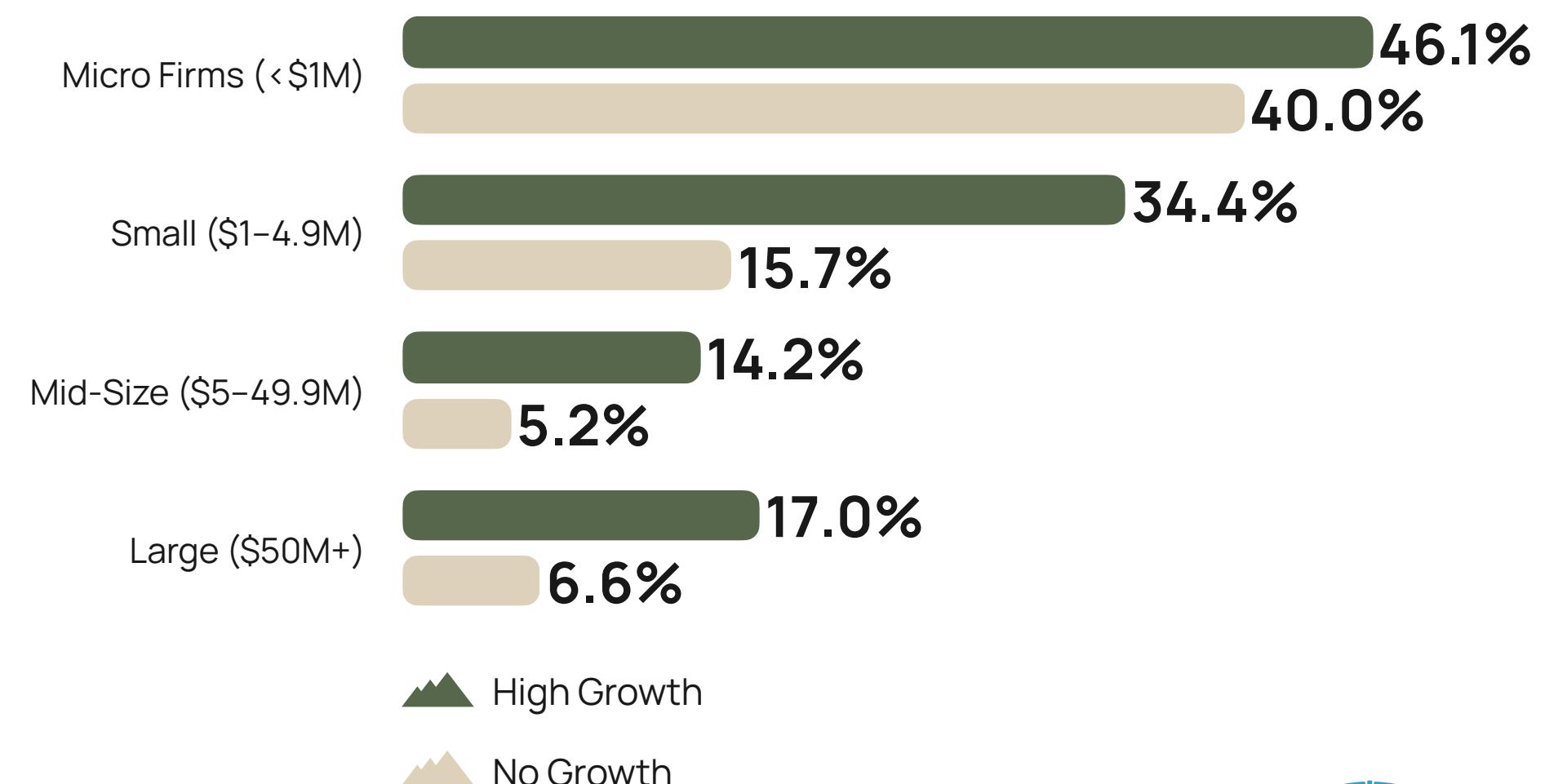


FIGURE 14.

Proportion of Seller-Doers to FTEs

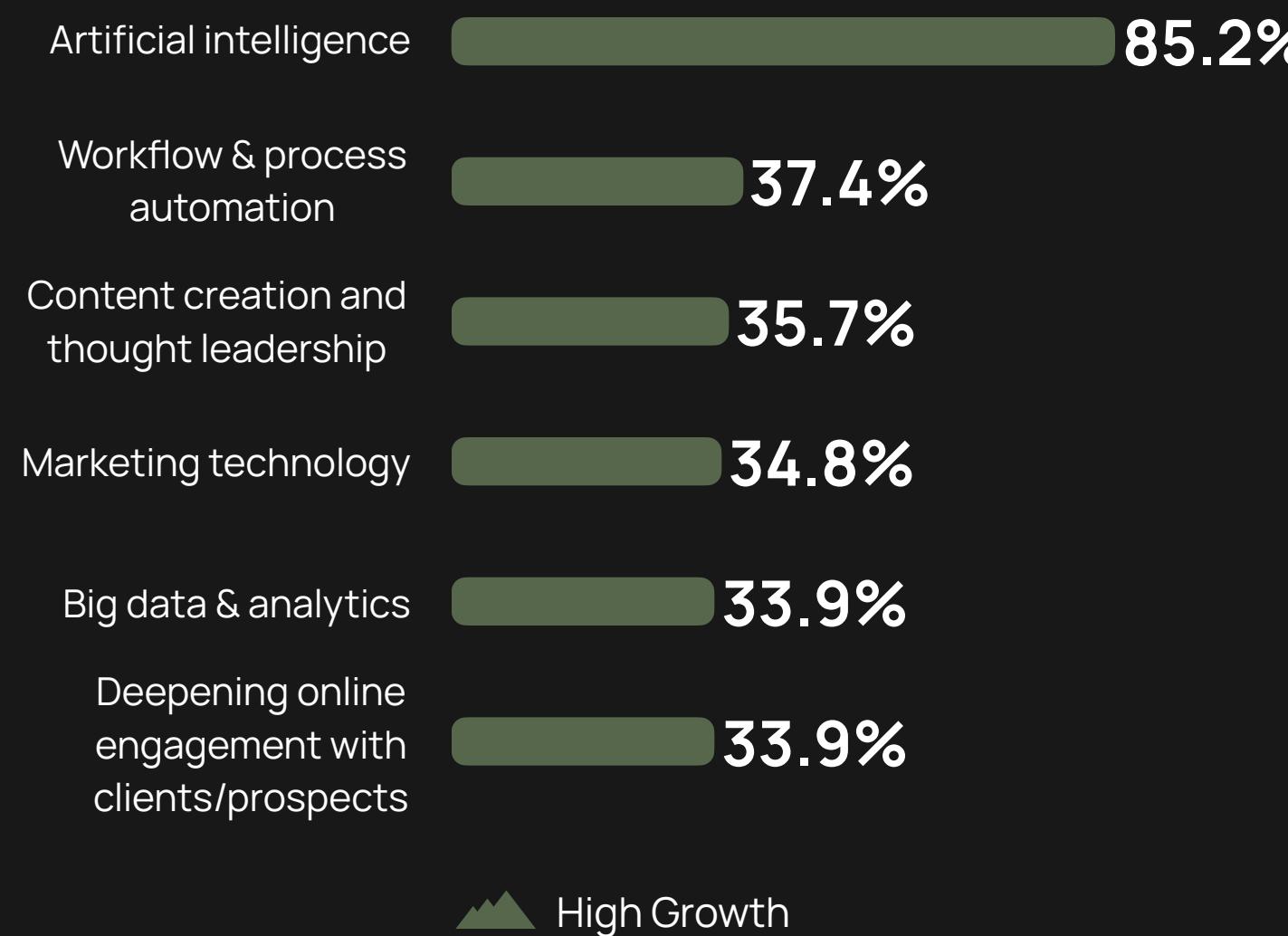


KEY ADVANTAGE:

Strategy

FIGURE 15.

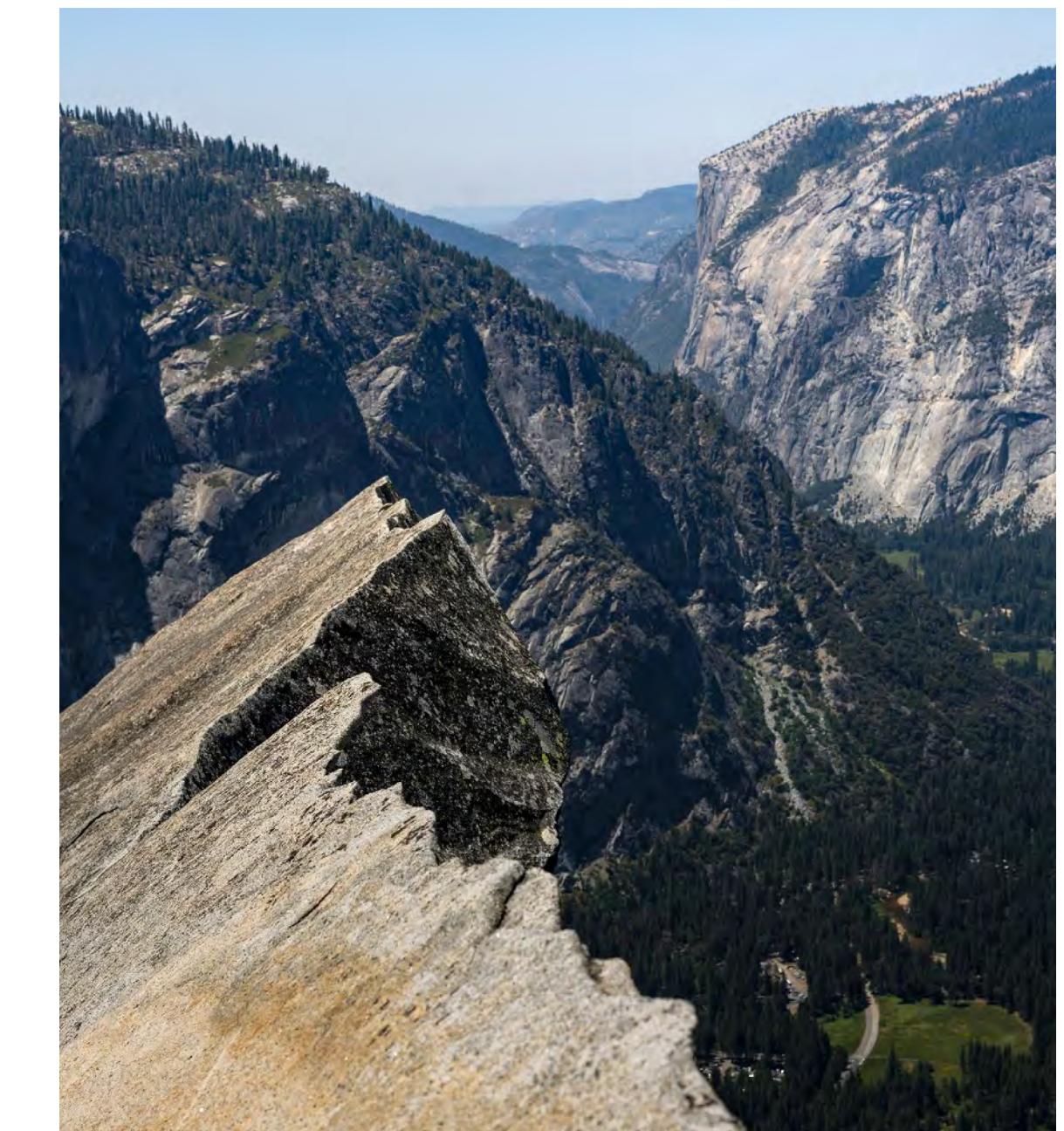
Topics and Trends to Learn More About in 2026



High Growth Firms' Interest in AI and Efficiency Grows Stronger

What do High Growth firms want to learn about most in 2026? In last year's report, AI led the way with about 52% of High Growth firms expressing interest. This year, that interest has grown by a whopping 63%, with 85.2% of these firms listing it as a topic for further investigation. In a distant second place is workflow and process automation. Both of these topics have one goal in common: efficiency. Finding new efficiencies, boosting team productivity, and preparing for the disruption that AI promises to bring to almost every industry are driving these firms to think deeply about how technology will shape their future.

In fact, the only item on this list that doesn't always involve technology is "content creation and thought leadership," which holds third place. High-performing firms understand that building a firm of high-visibility thought leaders is a key to driving future growth.



KEY ADVANTAGE: -----

Strategy

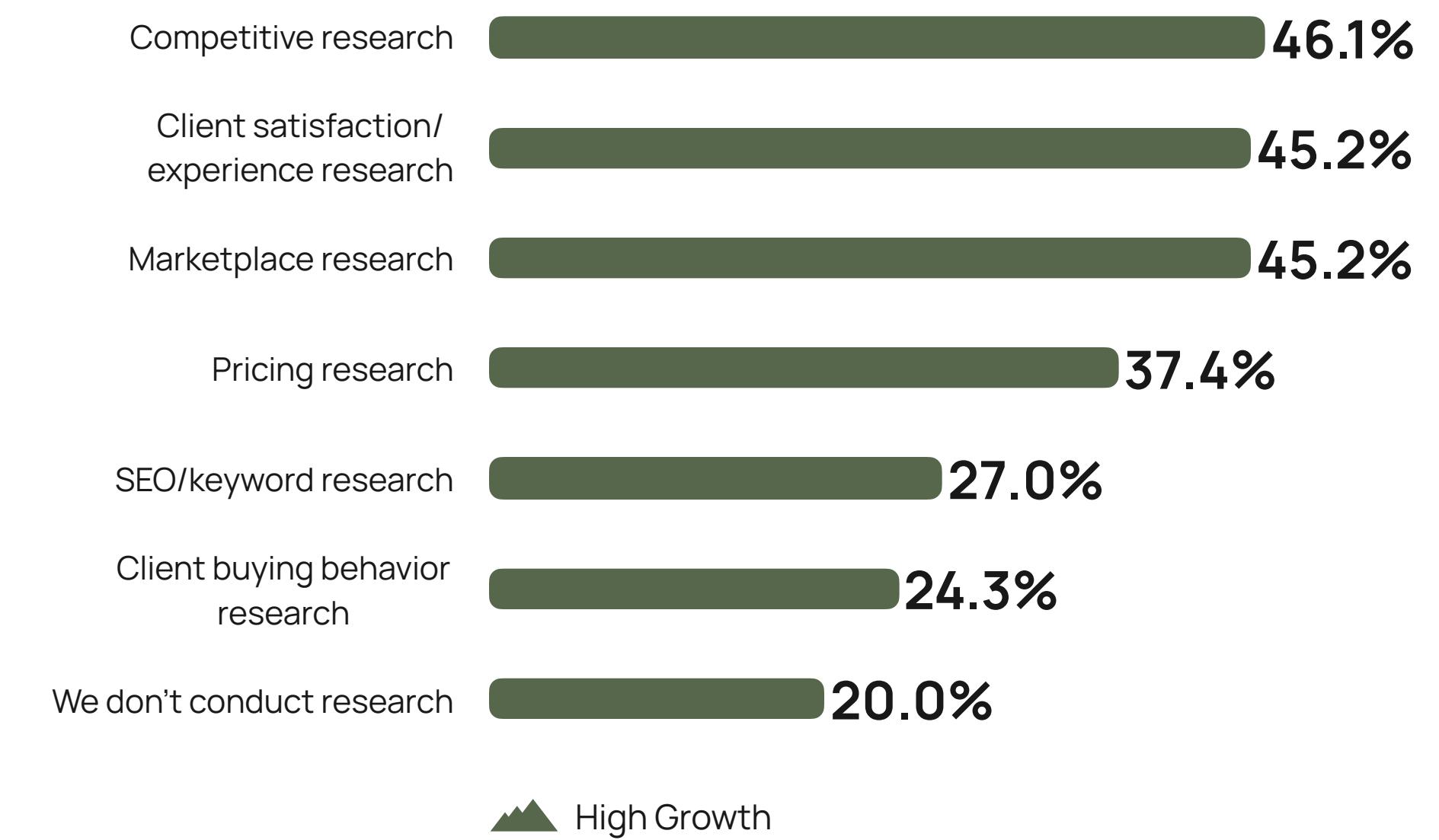
High Growth Firms Conduct a Variety of Research

Figure 16 shows the rates at which High Growth firms conduct six types of research. Almost half of firms research competitors, client satisfaction, and the marketplace. Interestingly, one in five firms do no research at all. On the other hand, 80% of High Growth firms invest in at least some research.

We were surprised to find that SEO/keyword research declined from 33.5% in the 2025 report to 27% this year. This might reflect firms' reactions to the dramatic rise in no-click searches and the commensurate decline in SEO performance metrics. It also might reflect uncertainty about how to address the new challenge of AI search.

FIGURE 16.

Types of Marketing Research Conducted by High Growth Firms





KEY ADVANTAGE:

Strategy

M&A Volume Drops, But Revenue Impact Remains High

The 2026 data reveals a dramatic cooling of the merger and acquisition marketplace. As shown in Figure 17, 16.8% of High Growth firms reported merging with or acquiring another firm in 2025, a sharp drop from the 46.3% reported in the previous year's study. This change may be driven by economic headwinds, or it could be a temporary pause while firms digest previous acquisitions. Despite this sharp reduction in deal volume, M&A remains a massive revenue driver for industry leaders. High Growth firms attributed 34.5% of their revenue to M&A, nearly matching the 36.4% reported in the prior year. This indicates that while High Growth firms are making fewer deals, the acquisitions they do make—or the ones they have successfully integrated—are delivering outsized financial returns.

In contrast, No Growth firms are struggling to extract value from M&A. While 10.6% of No Growth firms engaged in a merger or acquisition, they attributed only 7.7% of their revenue to these activities. This stark disparity could reflect a critical execution gap. High Growth firms are using M&A to transform their balance sheets, deriving nearly five times the revenue impact of their slower-growing peers.

FIGURE 17.

Percentage of Firms that Merged With or Acquired Another Firm in 2025

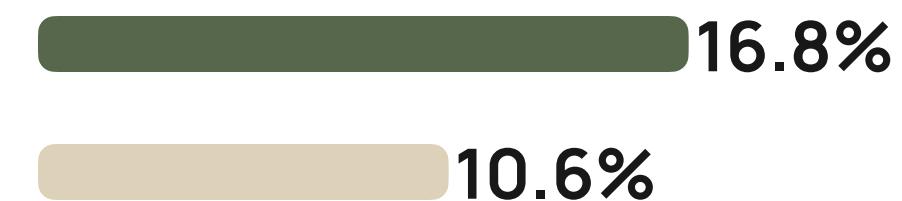
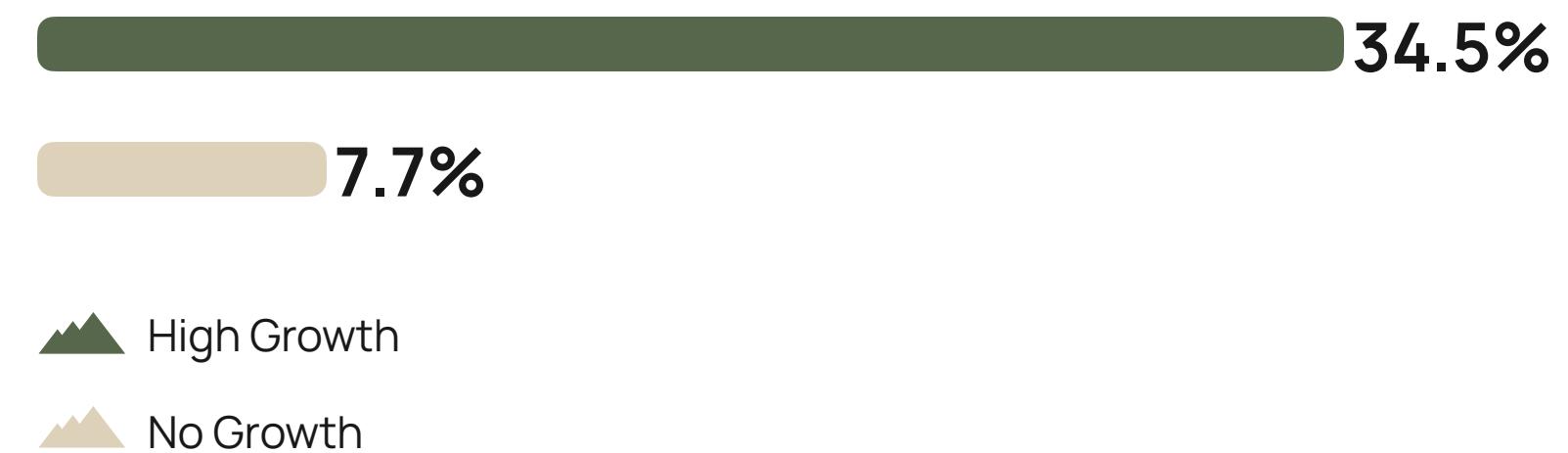


FIGURE 18.

Percentage of Revenue Attributed to M&A

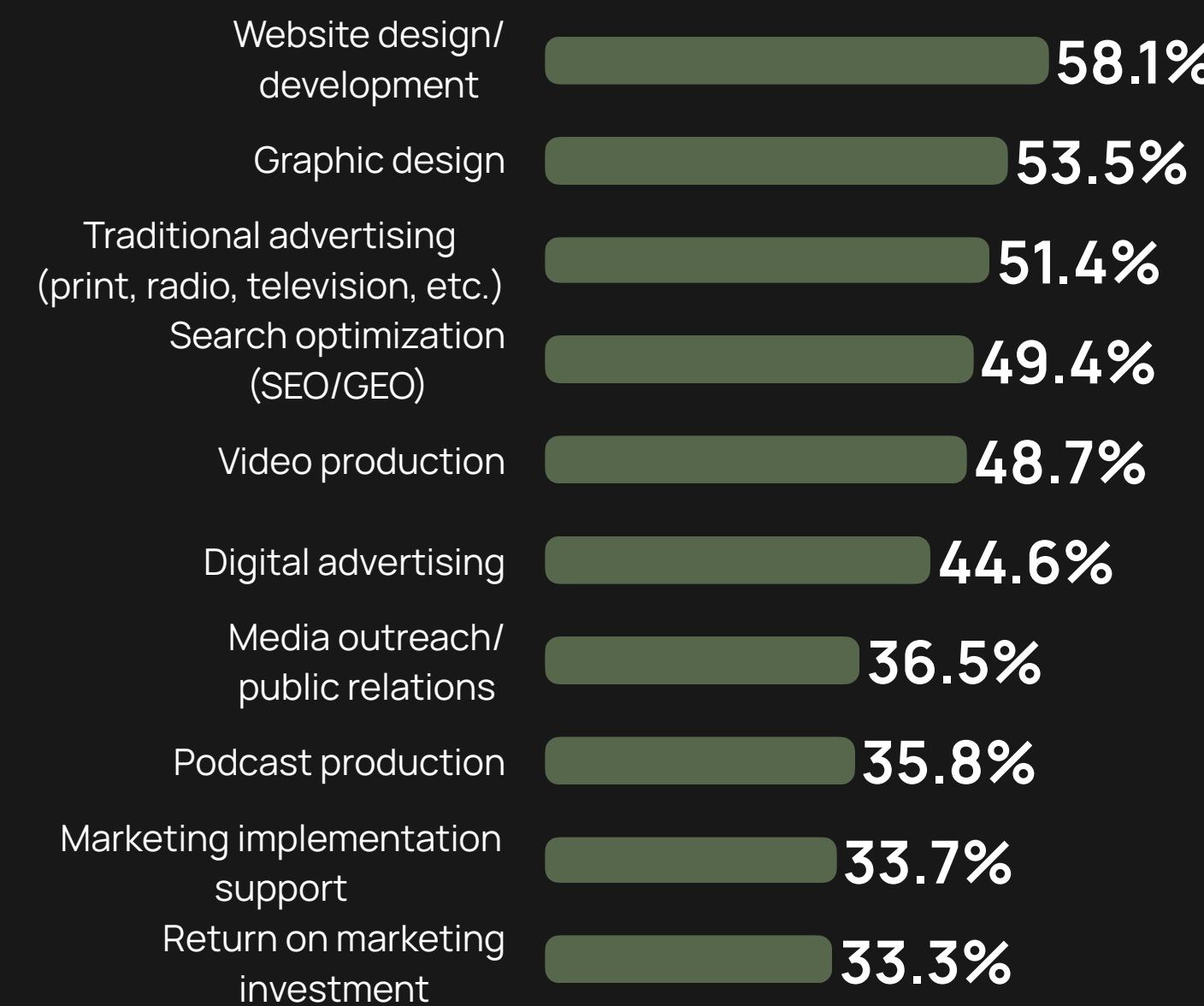


KEY ADVANTAGE:

Talent (Outsourcing & Experts)

FIGURE 19.

Top 10 Outsourced Marketing Skills



High Growth

What Marketing Skills Do High Growth Firms Outsource?

High Growth firms understand that outsourcing is a flexible and affordable way to access specialized skills they don't use every day. As in the 2025 report, website design/development (58.1%) and graphic design (53.5%) are the top two outsourced marketing functions. Using high-quality external creative experts allows these firms to maintain a sophisticated market presence without the overhead of maintaining a full-scale internal agency.

Traditional advertising, in third place, squares with our earlier finding that advertising is a high-impact technique (see Figure 8). Outside agencies are best qualified to develop and deploy successful advertising campaigns.

The prominence of "search optimization (SEO/GEO)" (49.4%) is a bit of a surprise, given what we learned in Figure 16. However, that chart focused specifically on SEO and keyword research, whereas Figure 19 broadens the scope to include GEO (Generative Engine Optimization), a hot and still developing discipline.





KEY ADVANTAGE:

Talent (Outsourcing & Experts)

High Growth Firms Activate Their Experts

Figure 20 illustrates a stark activity gap when it comes to subject matter experts. High Growth firms are more than 2.5 times more likely than their No Growth peers to cultivate highly active experts (21.0% vs. 8.1%). By contrast, nearly 70% of No Growth firms classify their experts as having little thought leadership activity. High Growth firms understand that expertise can drive revenue—but to do so their experts must be visible and engaged in the marketplace.

High Growth Firms Don't Leave Visibility to Chance

High Growth firms' high level of expert activity is not accidental. It is the result of deliberate support and investment. The vast majority of High Growth firms support their visible experts in some fashion, with only 8.6% providing no resources at all. The type of support they provided most often was marketing strategy and planning (62.1%), which suggests that High Growth firms treat personal branding as a deliberate strategic initiative. Firms also provide a wide range of tactical support, from SEO and video production to outreach and media training.

FIGURE 20.

How Active Your Subject Matter Experts Are in Producing and Promoting Thought Leadership Content

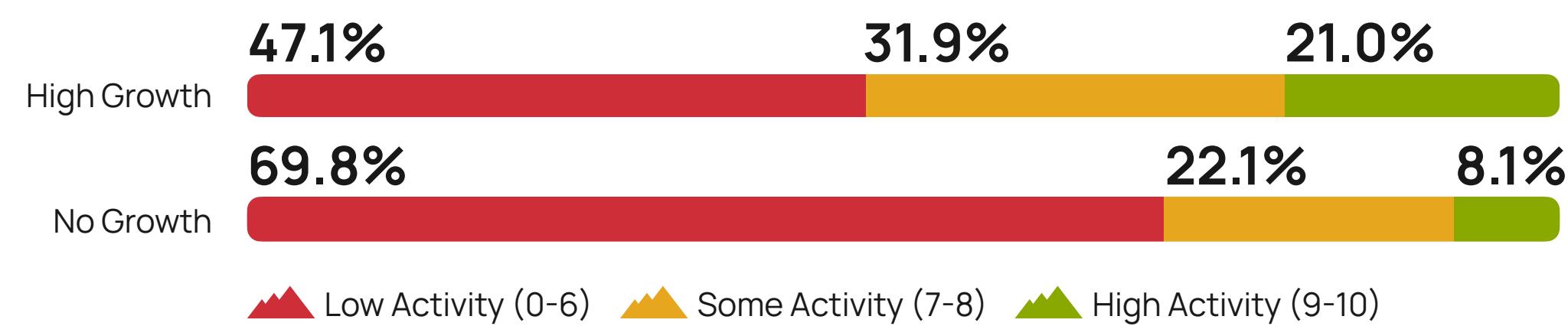
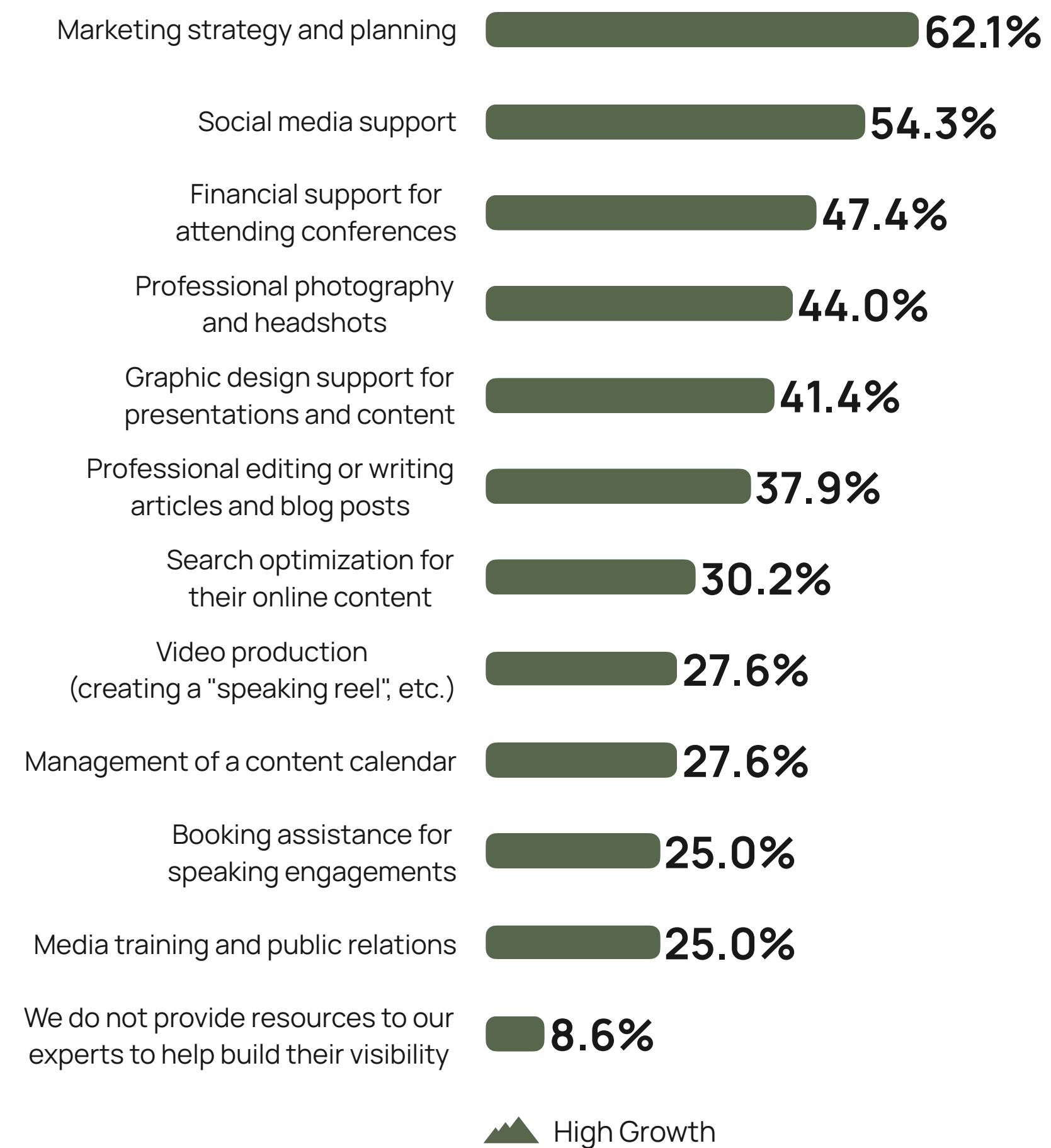


FIGURE 21.

Resources Provided by Firm to Support Visible Expert Activity



KEY ADVANTAGE: -----

Technology

High Growth Firms Prioritize Visibility and Engagement Over Retention

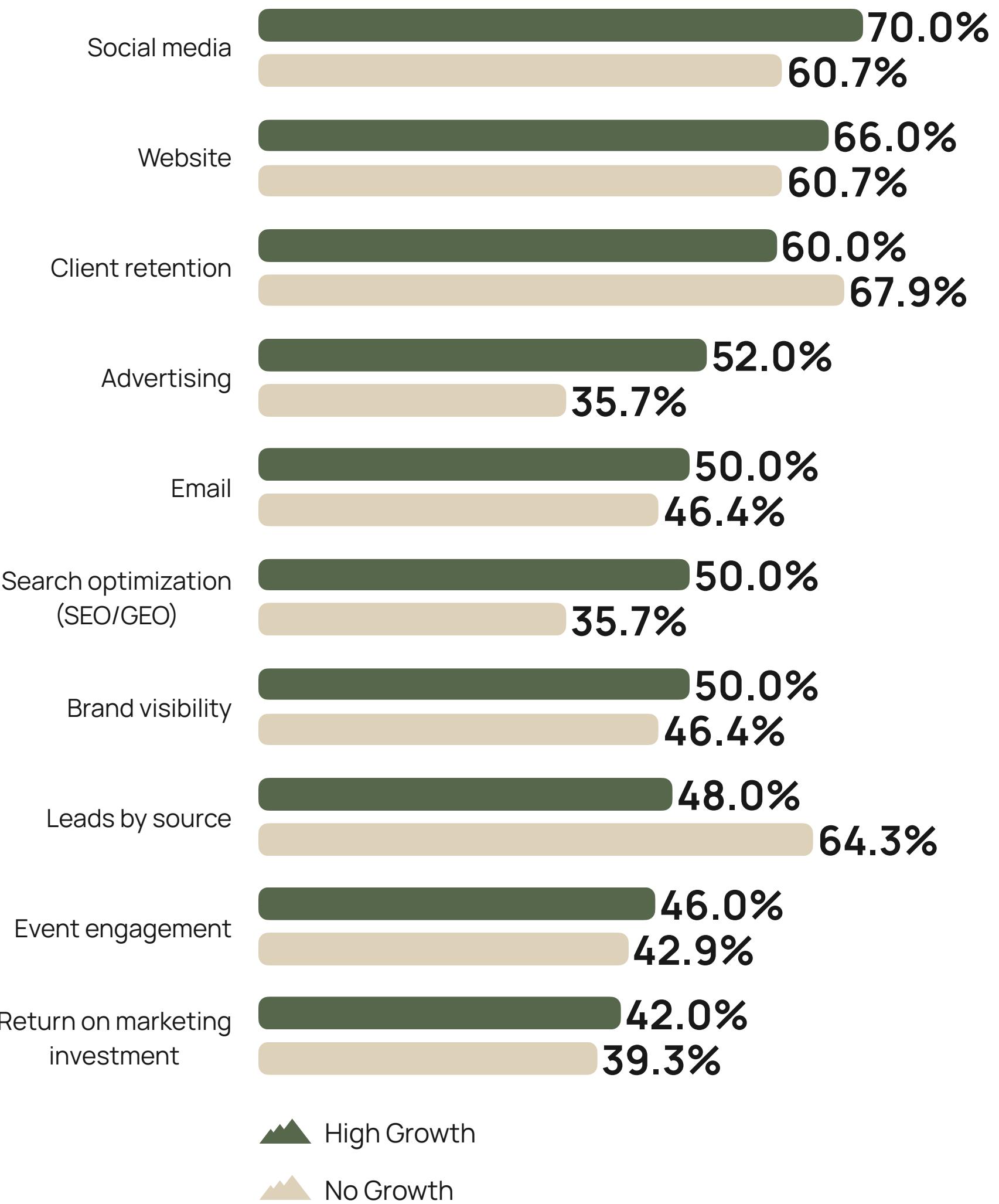
The 2026 data reveals a difference in how firms measure success. High Growth firms focus more on measuring engagement and visibility activities, while No Growth firms prioritize more passive metrics.

High Growth firms are significantly more likely to track metrics that measure visibility and market expansion, leading their No Growth counterparts in social media (70.0% vs. 60.7%) and website analytics (66.0% vs. 60.7%). The gap is even more pronounced in technical and paid discovery channels. High Growth firms are nearly 50% more likely to track advertising performance (52.0% vs. 35.7%) and search optimization (SEO/GEO) (50.0% vs. 35.7%). This suggests that industry leaders are actively optimizing their outreach strategies.

No Growth firms, on the other hand, prioritize client retention (67.9% vs. 60.0%) and leads by source (64.3% vs. 48.0%). While tracking retention is critical for most businesses, the fact that No Growth firms track it **more** than their fast-growing competitors implies a greater interest in protecting existing business than generating new revenue.

FIGURE 22.

Top Marketing and Business Development Metrics



Technology

High Growth Firms Are More Proficient in Capturing and Using Metrics

While tracking data is common, the ability to use it effectively remains a defining characteristic of the fastest growing firms. Figure 23 reveals a dramatic disparity at the top end of the skill spectrum. High Growth firms are more than three times as likely to rate their proficiency in using metrics as "high" (25.0%) than their No Growth peers (7.3%). Advanced proficiency likely gives these firms a competitive advantage. For instance, real-time insights allow them to optimize marketing spend, refine messaging, and pivot quickly when tactics fail. In contrast, No Growth firms largely operate without this navigational aid, with nearly two-thirds (65.9%) reporting low proficiency.

We can't ignore what this chart says about the broader professional services industry. Data mastery remains elusive for the majority of firms. Even among the High Growth cohort, 56.0% of organizations rate their proficiency as "low". Achieving a competitive advantage does not require data perfection. Simply elevating a team's skills from "low" to "some proficiency" would give a firm more insights than they ever had before.

FIGURE 23.

Proficiency in Capturing and Using Marketing and Business Development Metrics



Technology

More High Growth Firms Have High Digital Maturity

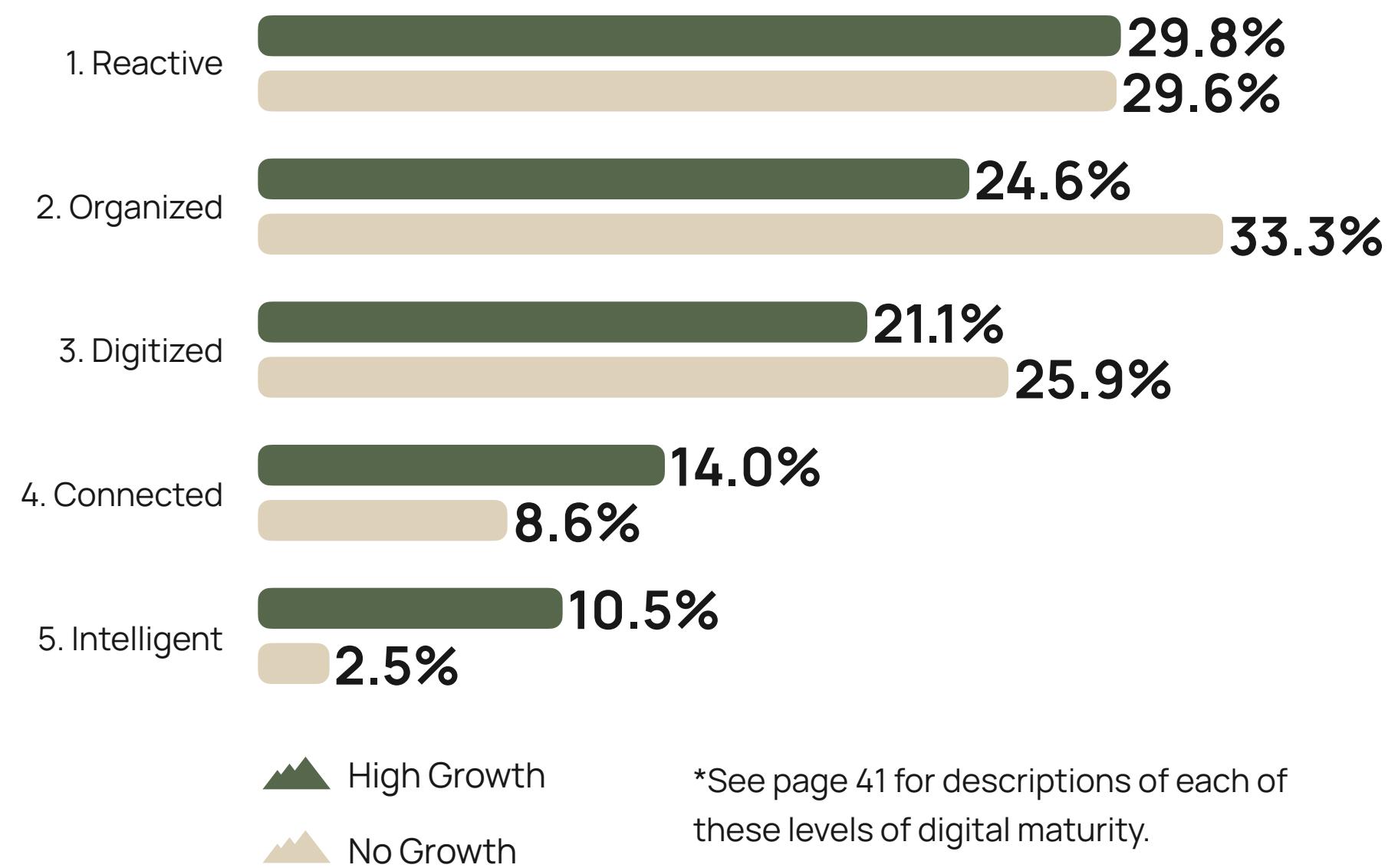
Over the past year, more High Growth firms have moved into the “connected” and “intelligent” tiers of digital maturity. High Growth firms are more than four times as likely than their No Growth counterparts to be classified as “intelligent” (10.5% vs. 2.5%). They also hold a significant lead in the “connected” stage (14.0% vs. 8.6%), indicating that industry leaders have successfully broken down data silos to integrate their processes across departments.

In contrast, a majority of No Growth firms are clustered in the “organized” (33.3%) and “digitized” (25.9%) stages, suggesting they are investing in software but have not yet achieved the cross-functional integration required to turn that software into a strategic competitive advantage.

This chart is also a warning signal for the entire profession. Over half of both growth categories remain mired in the lowest two tiers. Even in the High Growth category, less than a quarter of firms have achieved levels 4 or 5. Clearly, there is significant room for improvement—and greater operational efficiency—especially as AI tools and workflows mature.

FIGURE 24.

Current Level of Digital Maturity*



*See page 41 for descriptions of each of these levels of digital maturity.



KEY ADVANTAGE:

Technology

FIGURE 25.

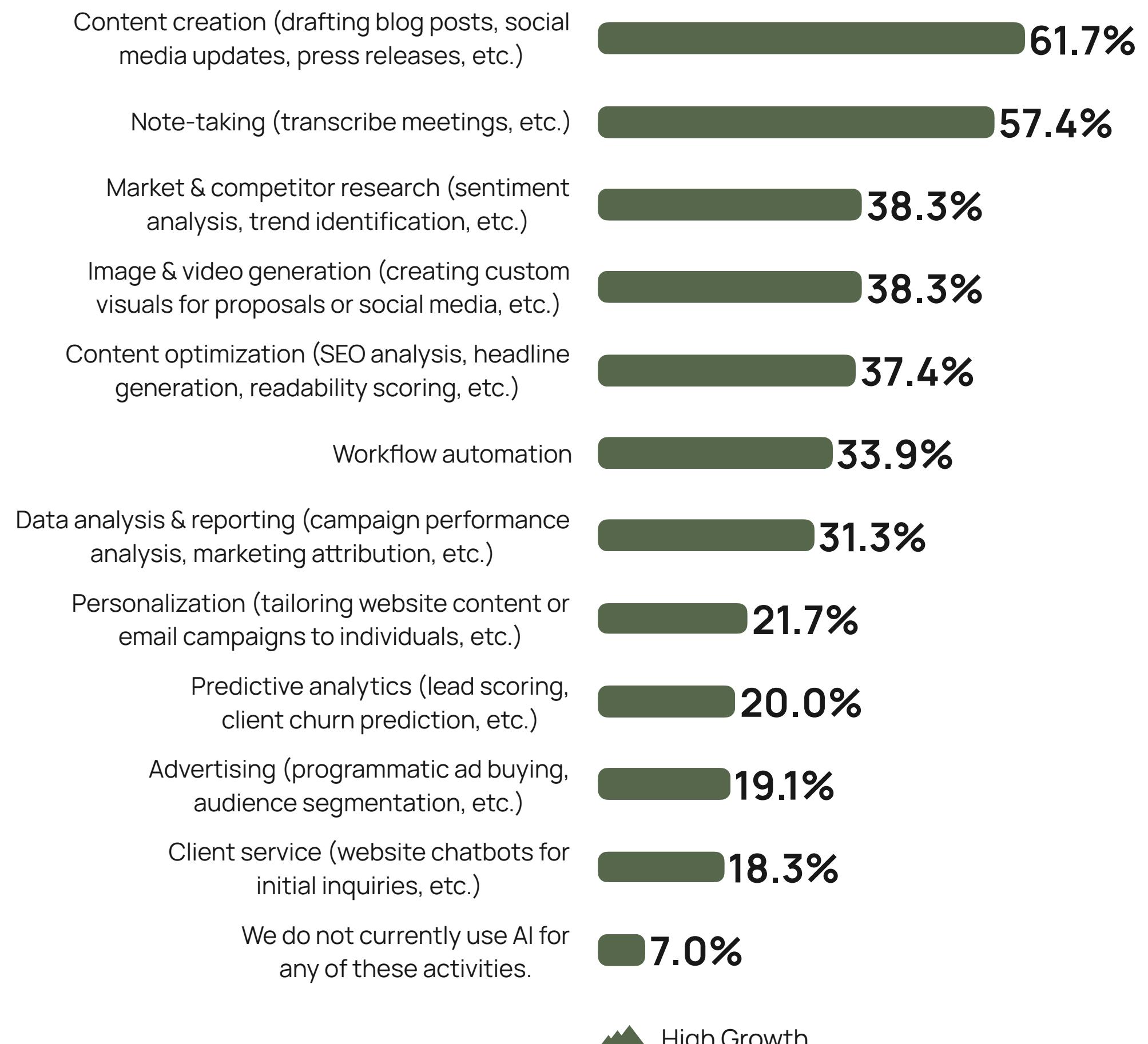
High Growth Firms Use AI to Accelerate Output and Build a Competitive Advantage

When ChatGPT was released in late 2022, professional services finally understood the potential—and potential threat—of artificial intelligence. Every year since, an increasing number of firms have scrambled to figure out how to implement it. Figure 25 shows how firms today are using AI-enabled technologies.

With only 7.0% of High Growth firms reporting no AI usage, the technology has achieved near-universal adoption among top performers. Today's use cases are heavily skewed toward efficiency and production. The top two applications—"content creation" (61.7%) and "note-taking" (57.4%)—indicate that High Growth firms are primarily using AI to accelerate administrative tasks and writing.

At the same time, a significant portion of High Growth firms are beginning to use AI for strategic insight, signaling the next phase of maturity. Roughly one-third of firms are employing tools for market & competitor research and data analysis & reporting. While the majority of the market is busy using AI to write faster, the true advantage may go to firms that learn to use these tools to drive strategy, predict client needs, and tailor experiences at scale.

How High Growth Firms Use AI Powered Tools Today



CONCLUSION

Practical Insights for a Challenging Marketplace

Today's professional services marketplace may be undergoing a period of contraction, with the median growth rate for professional services firms sliding under 10% and nearly one-third of firms reporting disruption from artificial intelligence. Uncertainty is the operating reality for 45.0% of firms. Yet in this somewhat discouraging landscape, High Growth firms are taking the high ground. Undaunted, they are aggressively investing in the data, talent, and technology it takes to grow even in the face of adversity.

To emulate the success of these industry leaders—who grow more than four times faster than the average firm—consider adopting some or all of the strategies below.



Invest in Marketing

In a contracting market, High Growth firms are buying their advantage. While No Growth firms' marketing budgets hover around 5.0% of revenue, High Growth firms have accelerated their investment to 12.0%. This more than 2-to-1 spending advantage allows them to invest in the infrastructure and skills that will give them an advantage. And AI is only part of the equation. Examine Figures 7–9 to see the range of techniques and strategies they use with great success.



Reposition AI from Efficiency to Strategy

Artificial intelligence has achieved near-universal adoption, but most firms are still using it for basic applications like note-taking and drafting content. Many High Growth firms are exploring how to use AI more deeply. To compete with these firms, you must think of AI less as a typewriter and more as an analyst, assembling a suite of tools that can make your operations and client deliverables more insightful, valuable, and efficient.



Conduct Competitive Research

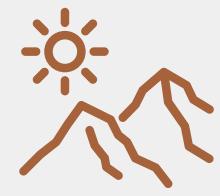
You cannot outmaneuver a competitor you do not understand. High Growth firms know this. In fact, 46.1% conduct competitive research and 45.2% conduct marketplace research. Regular intelligence gathering allows you to spot threats early and identify the service gaps your competitors can't see.

CONCLUSION:**Activate Your Subject Matter Experts**

In a content-saturated world, personal reputation is the new currency of trust. High Growth firms are 2.5 times more likely to have highly active visible experts than their No Growth peers. This is no accident. It is the result of supplying them with critical resources like marketing strategy and social media and video production support. They think of thought leadership as a firm-wise strategic initiative, not a personal hobby.

**Track the Right Metrics**

Top-performing organizations are significantly more likely to track visibility and engagement metrics than No Growth firms, that tend to focus more on passive metrics like client retention (see Figure 22). To help you drive growth, your dashboard should focus on the metrics that give you insights into prospect behavior, visibility, and campaign performance.

**Outsource to Elevate Quality**

High Growth firms don't go it alone. They aggressively outsource specialized skills, particularly website design, graphic design, and video production. This allows them to maintain a polished, professional market presence and outperform competitors that rely on jack-of-all-trades in-house teams.

**Take Command of Your Future**

The data from 2026 sends a clear message: passivity is a risk factor. The gap between the leaders and the laggards is widening, driven by a pay-to-play dynamic where those willing to invest in intelligence, brand visibility, and technology are growing faster and capturing eye-watering profits.

The strategies outlined in this report provide a blueprint to use that investment wisely. By following the path blazed by today's High Growth firms, you can turn others' marketplace uncertainty into your competitive advantage.



ABOUT THE STUDY

About the Study

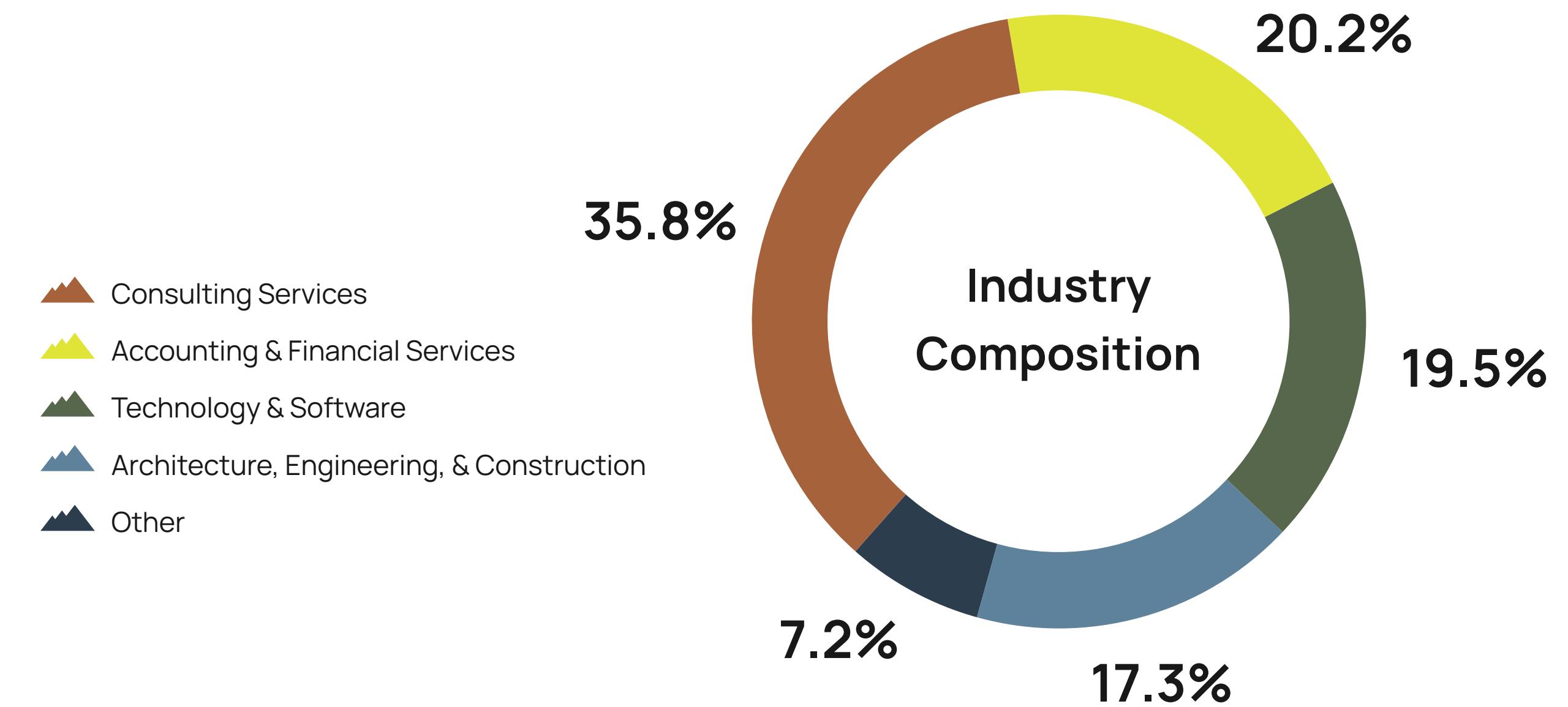
Every year, the Hinge Research Institute conducts a study of professional services firms to identify emerging trends and determine what the fastest growing, most profitable firms do differently. This year's study taps into a robust sample.

495 FIRMS ACROSS A VARIETY OF INDUSTRY GROUPS PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY. THEY REPRESENT OVER \$84.8 BILLION IN COMBINED REVENUE.

Figure 26 shows the distribution of these industries in the sample. Full research reports are available for each major industry group.

FIGURE 26.

Composition of Sample by Industry





About the Study

The sample contained firms of all sizes (see Figure 27). Firms in the sample conduct business in every region of the globe (see Figure 28).

FIGURE 27.

Composition of Sample Based on Revenue

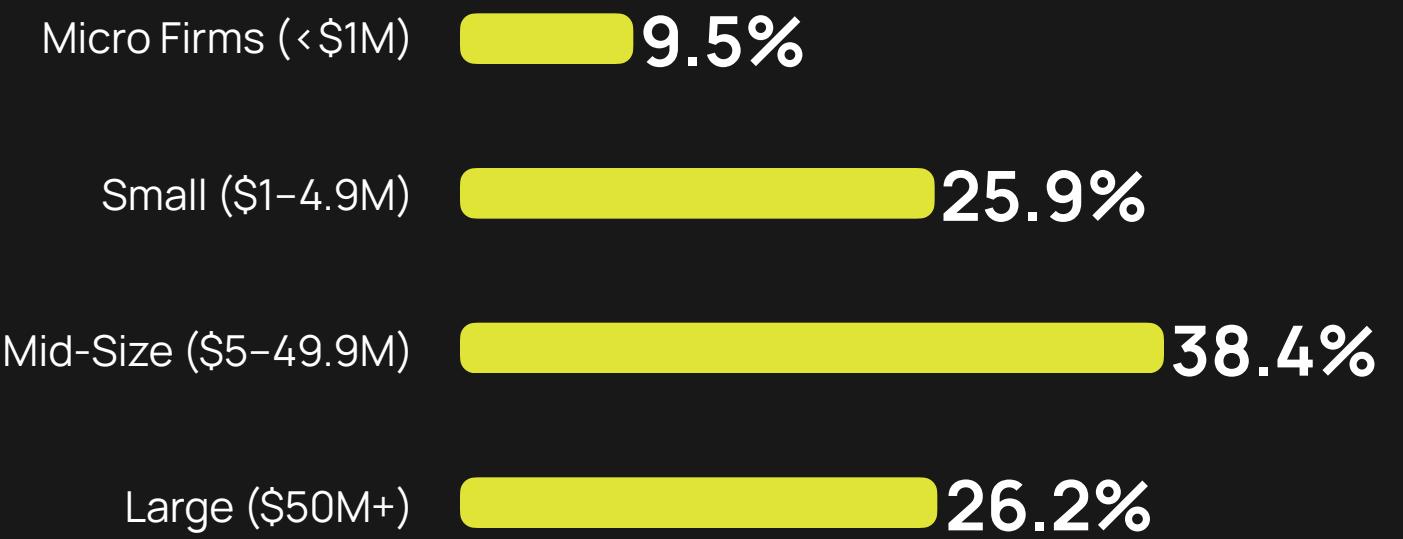
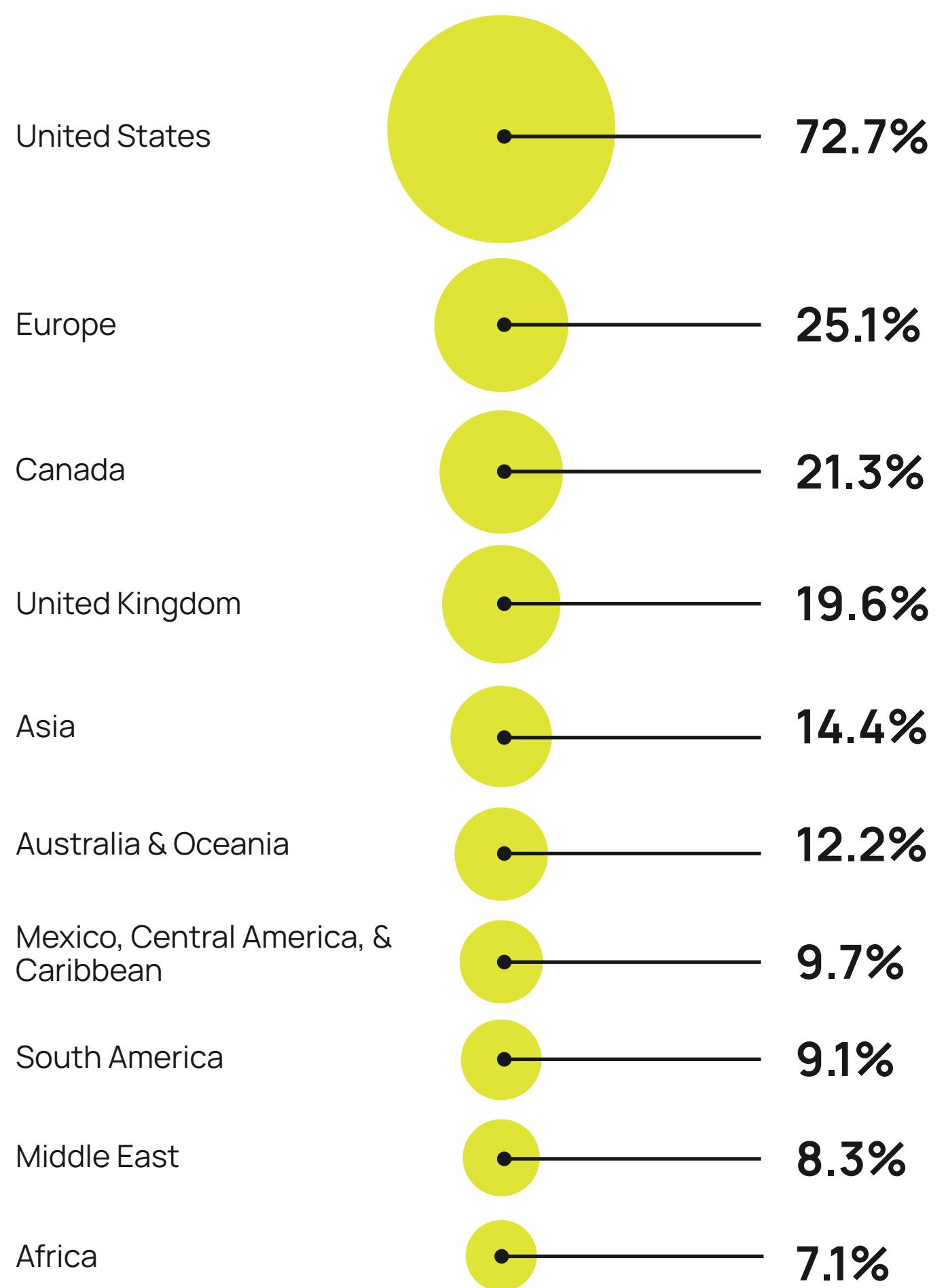


FIGURE 28.

Regions in Which Firms Do Business





Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following organizations. Without the support of their staff and members, this study would not have been possible.



APPENDIX





Marketing Technique Descriptions

Branded marketing collateral for in-person events	Marketing materials, imprinted with a firm's logo, that support business development (e.g., brochures, sales sheets, giveaways).
Business development materials	Assets used to demonstrate value, outline solutions, and persuade potential clients or partners to enter into a formal business relationship (pitch decks, proposal templates, etc.).
Case studies	Written or video descriptions of a client engagement that explain how the firm solved a problem or produced a positive result.
Cold outbound sales calls from internal teams	Direct telephone outreach initiated by a firm's employees to prospective leads who have had no prior contact with the brand, aimed at qualifying interest and scheduling follow-up discovery meetings.
Conducting and publishing original research	Producing primary research on topics of interest to a firm's target audience that can be sold or made available as free premium content.
Direct mail campaigns	Physical marketing materials sent directly to a prospect's mailbox to capture attention, build brand awareness, or drive specific offline-to-online conversions.
Directory listings (Clutch, G2, Crunchbase, etc.)	Profiles on third-party review platforms that aggregate client reviews and service offerings to improve search visibility and build credibility with buyers.
Downloadable, gated content	High-value, premium content (e.g., guides, ebooks, white papers) that can be obtained on a website in exchange for a small amount of personal information.



Marketing Technique Descriptions

Educational webinars	Developing and presenting live or pre-recorded educational audio/video material to an online audience.
Email marketing campaigns	Marketing initiatives that use email to deliver educational content, marketing messages, or promotions to prospective clients.
Hosting a conference or event	The strategic planning and execution of an industry-specific gathering (in-person, virtual, or hybrid) designed to establish thought leadership, facilitate networking, and generate high-intent leads.
Live service/product demonstrations	Presentations, often conducted online, that demonstrate key features and benefits of a specific product or service.
Marketing partnerships with other organizations	Mutually beneficial marketing relationships between a firm and another organization (e.g., co-branded educational events).
Marketing video	Professional quality digital films that promote various aspects of a firm (e.g., overviews, testimonials, speaking videos, etc.).
Networking at conferences, trade shows, and events	Attending specific conferences, trade shows, or other networking events to build visibility and establish personal connections with prospective clients.
Networking on social media	Connecting and engaging with a target audience on social networking platforms.



Marketing Technique Descriptions

Pay-per-click or display advertising	Electronic advertisements, either text-based or graphical, that promote a product or service, particularly on search engines.
Producing an original podcast	The creation and distribution of proprietary audio and/or video content featuring interviews, storytelling, or expert commentary.
Producing video thought leadership content	Using video to deliver short educational content to a firm's audience across a variety of platforms (video blogs, shorts, etc.).
Promoting thought leadership on social media	Using social networking platforms to promote original thought leadership.
Providing free assessments or consultations	Meetings with prospective clients for a consultation or an assessment of their current situation to demonstrate a firm's expertise, establish whether a prospect will be a good fit, and determine how the firm can deliver value.
Public relations	Using news and media outlets to promote major developments within the firm (press releases, paid media, earned media, etc.). Can also be used to mitigate the effects of bad publicity.
Publishing written blog posts on your website	Producing articles to be published on a firm's own blog.
Pursuing industry awards	Applying for, winning, and showcasing awards won by a firm.



Marketing Technique Descriptions

Search optimization (SEO/GEO)	Techniques that optimize web pages to improve search engine and generative engine rankings and attract new web visitors.
Social media advertising	Paid advertising on social media platforms (LinkedIn ads, YouTube video advertising, etc.)
Speaking at conferences or events	Securing speaking opportunities and speaking at events on topics that are relevant to a firm's target audience.
Speaking on external podcasts or webinars	Using third-party podcasts or radio programs to build an expert's visibility and share thought leadership.
Sponsoring conferences or events	Securing brand visibility at an event, usually for a fee or bartered service.
Traditional advertising	Mass-media marketing efforts using physical or broadcast channels—such as print publications, radio spots, and billboards—to reach a broad, local, or national audience and build high-level brand recognition.
Using external vendors for prospecting/lead generation	Initiatives in which firms, or subcontracted agencies, call potential clients to promote or sell a product or service.
Writing for external publications or blogs	Securing placements and writing content for outside blogs or other publications.



Levels of Digital Maturity

1. Reactive	Processes are immature or non-existent, data is inconsistent, and paper and spreadsheets usage is prevalent. Firm reacts to an event and projects are often carried out manually.
2. Organized	Previously converted data gets clustered to belonging categories in a centralized repository and organized so it is easily accessible when needed.
3. Digitized	Inefficient processes have been eliminated and all main processes are managed through technology and are automated—so they are faster, more efficient, and can be measured with simple analytics.
4. Connected	All processes are streamlined and fully integrated across departments. Vast amounts of cross-departmental data are providing insights across the business. Digital data is integrated deeper into business models. Data is of higher quality but it is still incomplete.
5. Intelligent	Data is complete and consistent, processes are fully aligned with business needs, and the firm has the ability to include other people such as customers into the process. The digital ecosystem of the firm extends into the consumer journey to deliver customized experiences for current and potential customers.

ABOUT HINGE

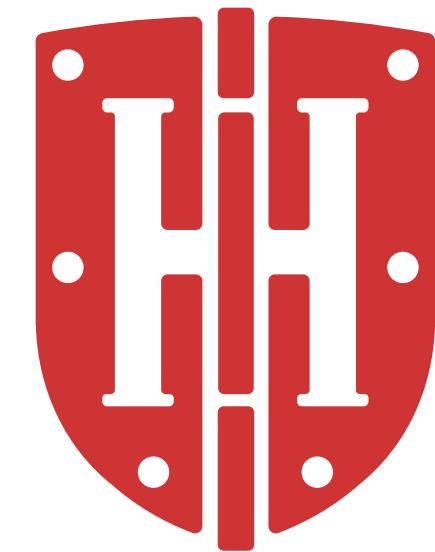


Hinge is the leading research-based branding and marketing firm for professional services.

Hinge is the leading branding and marketing firm for professional services. Our ongoing research into **over 50,000 professional services firms** and buyers of their services is changing the way firms go to market. With a special focus on high-growth firms, this research equips our clients with the insights, best techniques and tools to build a brand and marketing program that outperforms.

Our services include everything a firm needs to become a market leader—from research and strategy to visual brands and marketing implementation. And we provide all the support you need to bring a winning strategy to fruition.

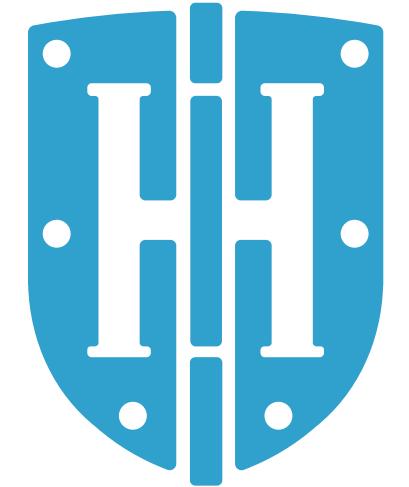
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About the Hinge Research Institute



The Hinge Research Institute, a division of Hinge, has a two-part mission:

1. To study high-growth professional services firms and their clients.

We collect data and analyze marketplace trends to discover why some firms grow much faster than average and reap greater profits. We share this knowledge so that every professional services firm can prosper.

2. To help organizations engage their professional services audience.

We do this in a variety of ways, such as:

Creating Custom Research:

Commission a piece of research once and repurpose it many times in blogs, webinars, articles, social media posts, and more.

Licensing Existing Research:

License our existing research in the form of studies, books, and guides—at a fraction of the price of custom research.

Co-brand a webinar:

Co-present a webinar with one of our research analysts and reach Hinge's database of over 60,000 professionals. Get engagement like never before.

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