The

Growth Ladder

Creating Predictable B2B Growth

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What's the Growth Ladder?

A simple framework that helps B2B founders and senior leadership teams understand where their business sits on its growth journey.

It maps the predictable stages (or rungs) that companies move through as they climb from founder-led momentum to a structured commercial engine capable of sustained, scalable growth.

The ladder is made up of 5 rungs:

1: Survival by Reputation (new businesses)

2: Searching for Repeatability

3: Revenue Crossroads

4: Strategic Realignment

5: Market Gravity

For each, we break down the characteristics, recommended strategies and activities that can build tangible growth.

Who it's for

The Growth Ladder is designed for B2B founders and leadership teams who come from a strong commercial background and are building or growing a business. The business may be gaining traction and generating revenue, but growth can feel inconsistent, heavily founder-dependent, or harder to scale than expected.

Why we created it

We created the Growth Ladder after we noticed a recurring pattern in B2B companies. Early growth often comes from reputation, delivery, and commercial instinct, but eventually those strengths stop being enough on their own. As markets evolve and technology reshapes how buyers buy, founders need clarity on which stage they are truly in and what must change in order for them to grow.

The ladder gives leadership teams a shared language for growth, helping them move forward with more focus, confidence, and control.

For each rung on the ladder, you'll find recommended goals and linked actions to help your business climb to the next rung.

Who is Cernago?

We combine strategic consultancy with outreach and marketing services to help B2B companies create predictable growth.

Our process spans from sharpening your positioning to designing and deploying always-on marketing engines that communicate your real value to ideal clients through high-impact design, content and outreach.

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Rung 5: Market Gravity

- Founder as industry influencer
- Inbound momentum
- Market authority
- Commercial engine runs independently
- Growth feels stable, predictable, strategic

Rung 4: Strategic Realignment

- Structured sales activity
- Founder steps back from day-to-day
- Systems and nurturing
- Market positioning and leadership influence
- Growth begins to feel intentional, less reactive

Rung 3: Revenue Crossroads

- Pipeline exists but lacks leverage
- Growth feels heavy
- Founder critical at key moments
- Positioning less sharp than it should be
- Team busy but not aligned

Rung 2: Searching for Repeatability

- Early sales structure
- Reliant on judgement over process
- Inconsistent results
- What works doesn't scale
- Moving beyond founder-led

Rung 1: Survival by Reputation

- Carried by reputation
- Experience-led, not system-led
- Founder dependent growth
- Pipeline unpredictability
- Structural insecurity

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Rung 1: Survival by Reputation

"We can't scale. There's only one of me."

WHAT'S HAPPENING?
Growth is too dependent on the founder and existing relationships, which makes the business feel more fragile and less likely to be able to scale.

- Carried by reputation
- Experience-led, not system-led
- Founder dependent growth
- Pipeline unpredictability
- Structural insecurity

MINDSET:

One sharp move at a time. Founder-led businesses often win early because they are agile, resourceful, and willing to take chances others miss. But eventually, growth requires more than momentum.

It requires **structure**.

RISK:

Jumping mentally to Rung 3 tactics too early

- Expecting campaigns to scale fast
- Expecting automation to solve a lack of structure
- Treating AI as a solution, rather than simply a tool

GOALS:	CLIMB THE NEXT RUNG:
Capture founder knowledge to build into a repeatable engine	Expert interviews and sales collateral creation
Define your ideal client, so your effort can be directed efficiently	"Ideal customer" profile creation and data sourcing
Focus messaging on one clear audience and your strongest proposition	Positioning and messaging framework
Communicate your true value to persuade the right prospects	High-converting campaign landing page
Create a clear, visible pipeline process so you know what's coming next	CRM deal pipeline setup
Deploy targeted outreach to your defined ideal clients	Always-on email and LinkedIn outreach

Rung 2: Searching for Repeatability

"No one knows who we are, or why we're different."

WHAT'S HAPPENING?
Activity exists, but there is no reliable system, so effort increases without consistent results.

- Early sales structure
- Reliant on judgement over process
- Inconsistent results
- What works doesn't scale
- Moving beyond founder-led

MINDSET:

Businesses at this stage begin introducing structure and deliberate activity, testing different approaches to discover what creates momentum. But eventually, progress requires more than experimentation.

It requires **consistency**.

RISK:

Building more activity on top of inconsistency

- Scaling outreach before proving what consistently converts
- Adding new channels instead of doubling down on what's already working
- Allowing founder instincts to drive decisions rather than building repeatable processes

Result: The business stays stuck between experimentation and real commercial momentum.

GOALS:

- Turn early sales activity into a consistent commercial system
- Strengthen positioning so it's clear and repeatable across the team
- Build reliable pipeline stages and lead qualification criteria
- Improve conversion by aligning messaging with real buyer needs
- Move from opportunistic outreach to structured new business activity
- Reduce reliance on instinct: introduce simple reporting and review habits

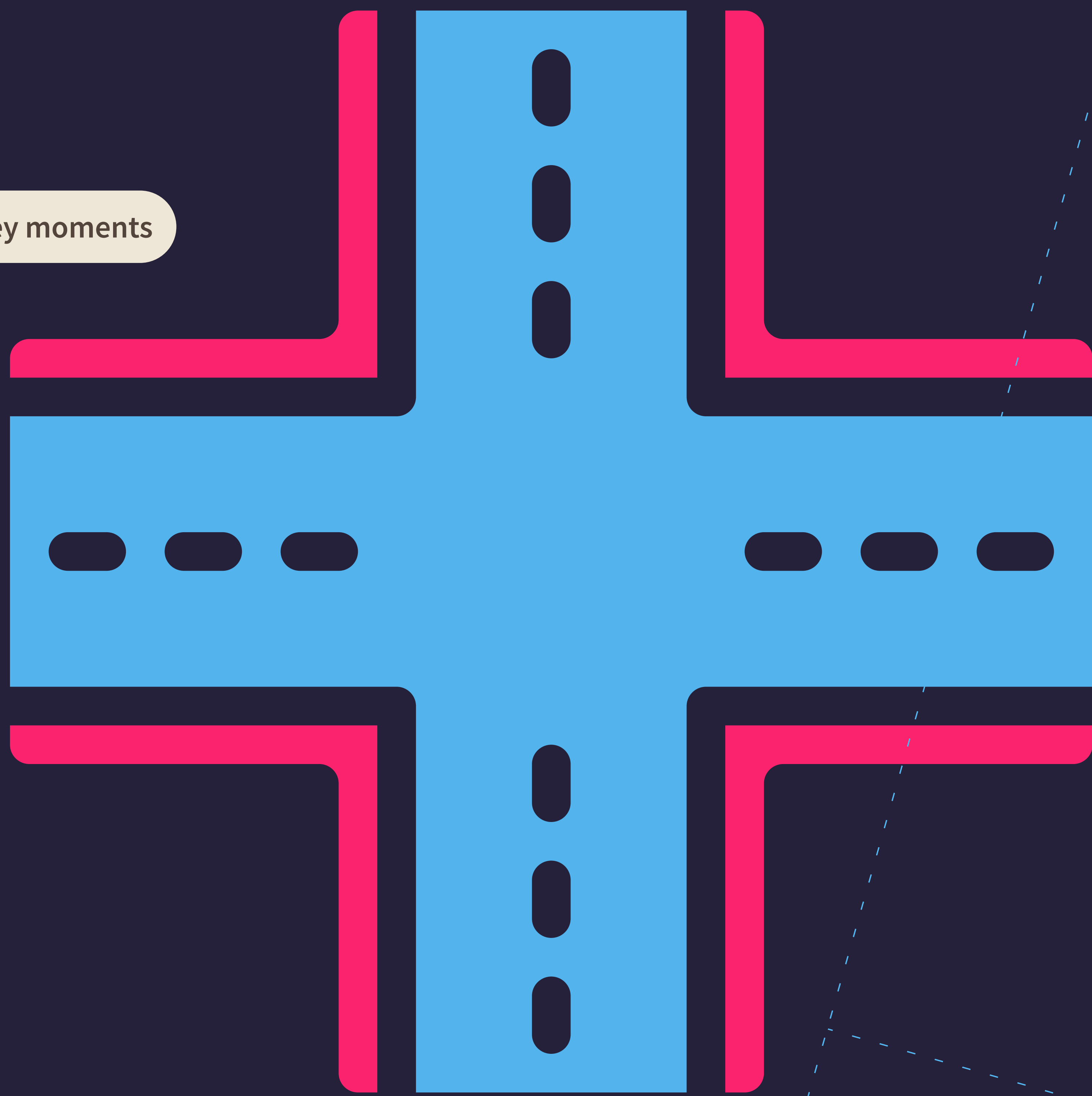
CLIMB THE NEXT RUNG:

- Customer interviews & buyer journey mapping
- High-conversion microsite and campaign landing pages
- Simple and well-maintained CRM deal pipeline
- Regular, high value emails for warm leads
- Digital paid advertising
- Deal reporting dashboard

Rung 3: Revenue Crossroads

“We’re creating opportunities, but not converting enough.”

WHAT’S HAPPENING?
The system works, but is heavy.



- Pipeline exists but lacks leverage
- Growth feels heavy
- Founder critical at key moments
- Positioning less sharp than it should be
- Team busy but not aligned

MINDSET:

Established businesses at this stage often keep growing through resilience, effort, and persistence even when progress feels heavier than it should. But eventually, growth requires more than endurance.

It requires **alignment**.

RISK:

Sales and Marketing misalignment

This is the friction that prevents businesses moving from Rung 3 onto Rung 4.

When commercial teams operate with different priorities, definitions, or success metrics, activity increases but momentum doesn’t. Pipeline grows, but conversion stalls. Effort rises, but growth feels heavier.

Alignment between sales and marketing is the gateway between structured activity and scalable growth. Without it, businesses remain stuck in effort, rather than progressing toward results.

GOALS:

- Align sales and marketing around a single commercial direction
- Clarify your difference, so you stand out without founder explanation
- Increase forecasting confidence through better pipeline management
- Create scalable demand to support sales rather than compete with it
- Shift the founder from the primary closer to a strategic market influencer
- Build consistency, so growth feels lighter rather than heavier

CLIMB THE NEXT RUNG:

- Marketing owns the pipeline / Sales owns conversion
- Defined brand guidelines & positioning
- Pipeline forecasting dashboards
- Multi-channel campaigns (email+social+web)
- Publish content sourced from founder’s expertise
- Build a repeatable marketing engine

Rung 4: Strategic Realignment

"We don't know how to balance brand and activation marketing."

WHAT'S HAPPENING?
Patience required while the new system takes hold.

- Structured sales activity
- Founder steps back from day-to-day
- Systems and nurturing
- Market positioning and leadership influence
- Growth begins to feel intentional, less reactive

MINDSET:

The business no longer relies on constant founder intervention to create momentum. Systems are working, decisions are more intentional, and the founder begins to shift from operator to market signal.

The challenge now is not activity.

It is becoming **known** for something that can scale.

RISK:

Losing balance between brand and activation

At Rung 4, the commercial engine is working and growth feels more intentional.

The risk is losing balance. Lean too heavily into activation, and results can look strong in the short term but momentum fades as long-term brand isn't being built. Lean too heavily into brand with a long-term mindset, and the sales team feels unsupported and pipeline slows.

This is the gateway challenge at Rung 4. Without the right balance, businesses either exhaust demand or fail to convert it, preventing the move from structured growth to true market authority.

GOALS:

- Design a system that operates with minimal founder dependency
- Balance short-term activation with longer-term brand building
- Strengthen market authority via clear positioning and visible leadership
- Diversification to reduce dependency and build commercial resilience
- Create unique, valuable, shareable insight across the customer lifecycle
- Use data and insight to guide investment decisions with confidence

CLIMB THE NEXT RUNG:

- Revenue operations automation and workflow design
- Brand and activation media planning
- Enhanced PR support and sponsorship
- Fast experimental campaigns to test new markets
- Webinars & podcasts
- Attribution modelling

Rung 5: Market Gravity

"Demand and conversion are largely predictable."

WHAT'S HAPPENING?
Growth no longer feels fragile.

- Founder as industry influencer
- Inbound momentum
- Market authority
- Commercial engine runs independently
- Growth feels stable, predictable, strategic

MINDSET:

The commercial engine runs without daily founder involvement, and opportunities arrive because the market understands who you are and why you matter.

The focus is no longer on building momentum.

It is on protecting position and shaping the category around you.

RISK:

Complacency and loss of distinctiveness.

When systems are strong and pipeline is stable, businesses can start to:

- Optimise efficiency instead of evolving their position
- Rely on past success rather than renewing creative advantage
- Drift into category sameness while competitors become more distinctive
- Protect what exists instead of shaping what comes next

GOALS:

- Protect market position through sustained brand presence & authority
- Scale growth through strategic creative investment
- Deepen customer value through structured cross-sell and up-sell
- Ensure commercial performance is driven by systems, not individuals
- Maintain alignment between brand, sales, and long-term strategy
- Grow predictably while the founder leads from the front, not inside

NEXT LEVEL GROWTH:

- Brand building campaigns (TV, Influencers, OOH)
- Long-term brand asset deployment and protection
- Targeted campaigns to existing customer base
- Advanced sales enablement tools and buyer assets
- Brand-led campaigns to reinforce differentiation
- Revenue intelligence & continuous improvement loops

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What next?

Further reading

The following links are recommended reading for anyone in B2B, but we believe certain articles will be of particular relevance to those who have identified that they are on a particular rung.

Building a Structured B2B Sales Pipeline RUNG 1

https://blog.hubspot.com/sales/essential-stages-b2b-sales-pipeline

Outlines how a clearly defined sales pipeline helps B2B businesses move from founder-led selling toward a more structured and predictable commercial process.

The Growth Ladder uses this thinking at Rung 1 to help founders move from reactive opportunity chasing toward a repeatable system that supports confidence, visibility, and control.

Why Most B2B Advertising Fails to Deliver RUNG 3

https://tinyurl.com/3usrbku5

Research from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute shows that a large proportion of B2B advertising fails to capture attention or build lasting memory, meaning campaigns generate little commercial impact despite media investment. Many businesses increase media activity expecting stronger results, when the real constraint is creative quality and distinctiveness.

The Growth Ladder helps leadership teams understand that media amplifies exposure, but only strong ideas create attention, memory, and long-term growth.

The Creative Dividend in B2B Marketing RUNG 5

https://system1group.com/the-creative-dividend

Research from the Effie Awards and System1, drawing on evidence from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute and the IPA Databank, shows that the strongest business results come when creative quality and media investment work together over time. As businesses reach higher levels of commercial maturity, marketing shifts from short-term activity to a compounding growth asset.

The Growth Ladder helps leadership teams understand that at Rung 5, creative effectiveness is no longer a marketing choice, but a strategic advantage that protects market position and sustains predictable growth.

The Hidden Reality of B2B Demand RUNG 2

https://www.marketingweek.com/ehrenberg-bass-linkedin-b2b-buyers/

Most B2B markets operate on a simple but often overlooked truth: the majority of potential buyers are not ready to purchase today. Research from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute highlights the well-known 95:5 rule, showing that only around 5% of buyers are actively looking to buy at any one time.

The Growth Ladder helps leadership teams recognise this imbalance and build a commercial approach that balances immediate opportunity with long-term demand.

The 5 Principles of Growth in B2B Marketing RUNG 4

https://business.linkedin.com/advertise/resources/b2b-institute/marketing-as-growth

Research from the LinkedIn B2B Institute, drawing on analysis by Les Binet and Peter Field, shows that most businesses over-focus on immediate lead generation, while underinvesting in the brand effects that create future demand, pricing power, and sustained growth.

As organisations mature, marketing becomes less about isolated campaigns and more about managing the balance between activation and long-term memory building.

The Growth Ladder helps leadership teams understand that this shift typically emerges at higher levels of commercial maturity, where structured systems allow brand & performance activity to work together as a single growth engine.

What about AI?

At Cernago, we recognise that AI is a powerful tool that helps scale founder insight and accelerate execution, but it never replaces human thinking or judgement. Used properly, it can help turn real expertise into consistent, high-quality commercial activity without losing the human edge that makes it valuable. Used poorly, and business output becomes generic and erodes differentiation.

Where should I start?

A useful initial step would be to have an informal and free 30 minute chat with our team to understand more about what you can do to make real progress in your growth journey.

Contact us to book a slot

Learn more about how we help:
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