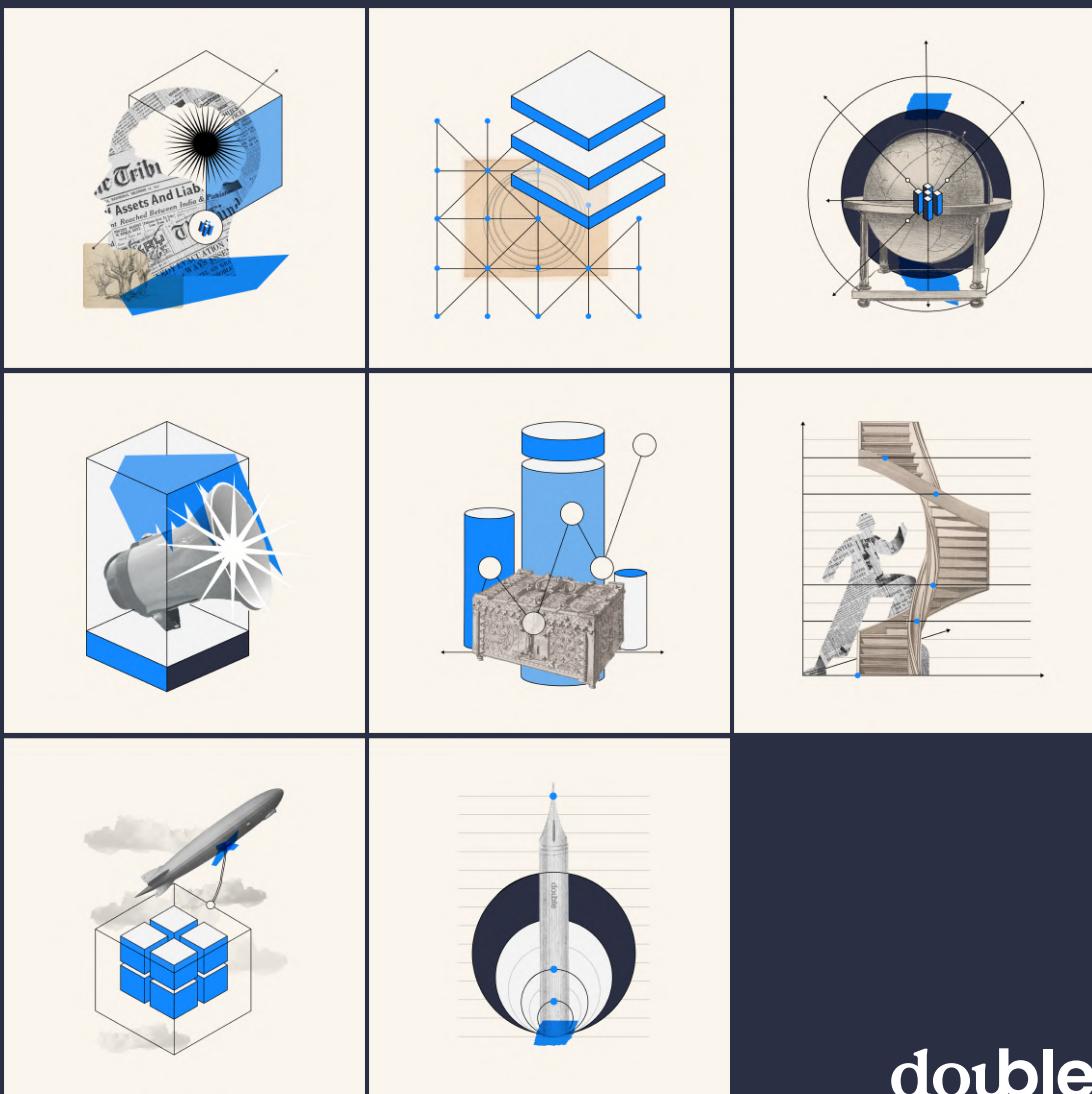


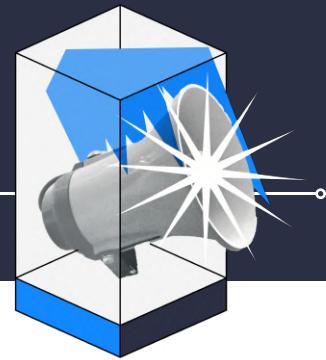
The 38 laws to avoid startup disaster



double

As a growth agency, Double has executed campaigns for some of the fastest growing tech companies in the world.

Here are 38 lessons we learned along the way:



1 Make growth your obsession

Once you have more users, more revenue and more brand equity, all other problems become much easier to solve. Faster growth solves (nearly) all problems.

Growth and distribution should be your top priority, because getting users is harder than it seems. It is poor distribution—not product—that is the number one cause of startup failure. Prioritise accordingly.

2 Systems, not hacks

Not all growth is created equal. Some growth is temporary, while other growth lasts. Growth marketing is about unlocking *structural, compounding growth*. To acquire millions of users, marketing needs to become predictable, systematic, automated and repeatable.

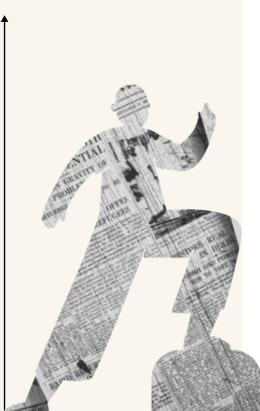
Losers are forever attracted to shortcuts, "growth hacks" and ways to game the system. Forget about that. The essence of growth marketing is to build systems that drive user acquisition, activation and retention at scale.

— How to think about user acquisition —

3 25+ distribution channels

People tend to stick to what they know, but this is a mistake. Before you hone in on any one channel, consider all the options at your disposal (many both organic and paid):

- SEO
- Google ads
- Facebook & Instagram
- Youtube
- TikTok
- Amazon
- LinkedIn, Twitter, Reddit, Quora, Pinterest, etc.
- Programmatic ads
- Influencers, bloggers & podcasts
- Referral schemes
- Word of mouth
- Affiliate marketing
- Outbound sales
- Partnerships & biz dev
- Publicity & PR
- Offline & Out-of-home advertising
- Trade shows
- Offline events
- Communities
- Engineering as marketing
- Embeds, widgets & "powered-by" loops
- Piggybacking existing platforms



4 Start with outbound

Outbound channels are channels where you proactively push your message to an audience, like paid advertising or outbound sales. Startups should start with these channels, because they produce results instantly. They also produce feedback immediate: you will know within days whether your offer resonates or not—unlike inbound channels like content marketing or SEO, where feedback takes months, rather than days.

5 Outbound gets expensive as you scale

Due to their low barriers to entry, outbound channels are attractive places to start. But this also makes them extremely competitive and expensive. As you scale, targeting quality also declines: you start off by targeting your ideal target audience, but scaling up forces you to incrementally widen your audience... leading to lower quality traffic.

Ultimately, outbound channels allow companies to scale fast, but at a cost that eats away virtually all their margins. PPC bidding is designed to allow advertisers to pay exactly the maximum of what they can afford.

6 Inbound is slow, but steady

Channels like SEO and content marketing are considered inbound—people come to you. Inbound traffic is much more valuable than outbound, because those leads sought to interact with you in the first place. Inbound channels compound slowly, but steadily. Inbound is attractive if you can afford to patient, and don't need to grow 30% MoM. Of course, inbound marketing opens pathways to building a strong brand over time (examples: Hubspot, Intercom).

7 Final frontier: product-driven growth

All the fastest growing tech companies in the world rely on product-driven growth almost without exception. Dynamics in the core product experience drive new user acquisition, so that growth can compound as the user base grows. Examples: TikTok, Slack, Uber, Loom, Figma, Notion, Mailchimp, Coinbase, StackOverflow, Paypal, Airbnb, Amazon,... and so many more, across both consumer and B2B.

Your long-term goal is to unlock product-driven growth mechanics. Such mechanisms are governed by "growth loops", which we discuss below.

8 Copywriting is the backbone skill

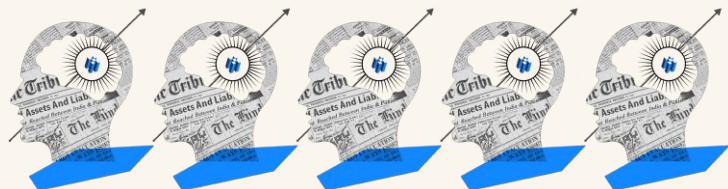
No matter what channels and systems you use, you still need to earn attention and convince people to buy your product. This makes copywriting—the art of writing to drive conversions—the single most important skill in marketing, by far.

— How to turn traffic into customers —

9 Ads shouldn't look like ads

People go to Google to answer their questions, and to Facebook or Instagram to connect with friends. They come on TikTok to be entertained. Nobody goes anywhere to watch ads.

Therefore, the power of an ad is diminished as soon as the user realises it's an ad. So never design your ads to *look like* ads. Leave the logo out, and create the kind of content that people wanted to discover in the first place.



10 What hooks them?

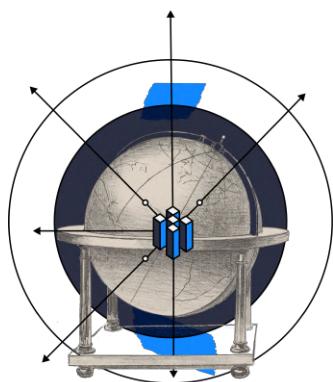
The first two lines of copy make a disproportionate impact on the effectiveness of your whole piece. After all: if people don't get hooked at the beginning, they might never even read the rest of the piece.

Hook people with a massive promise, a surprising finding, or an outrageous piece of news that challenges their current worldview. Start in the middle of the drama. *If you don't hook them immediately, everything else doesn't matter.*

11 Front-load the value

To "provide value" means to help people become successful in their lives. People like to engage with others that can help them to be more successful, even if it's a company. The cool thing about modern marketing, is that we can provide value to millions of people, whilst doing the work only once.

For example: this piece of text is an advertisement, and provides value immediately. It costs us nothing to do that, besides the hassle of writing these learnings down once.



12 Sell the worldview, not the product

The most profound way to provide value, is to help people see the world in a different way, and understand it better. Gary Vaynerchuk provides value by showing young people that hard work and hustle are essential ingredients for success. Tesla helped the world understand that fast and performant electric cars are the future. Steve Jobs helped us understand that design is not an afterthought, but an essential component to how well a product works.

Each of those perspective shifts helped people be more successful in their life. People hate it when a marketer is pushing a product, they are love it when they can get a new perspective on how the world around them works. Once they subscribe to your worldview, buying products from you will feel obvious.

13 Get their number

Dating advice for dummies: if you meet someone new, make sure you get their number. Why? So you can reach them again, after they leave.

It changes the dynamic: you don't need to be in a rush, because you don't need to close the deal all at once. You can build value over time. Slowly. At a pace that matches theirs. No need for pushiness.

14 Radical empathy

Go the extra mile, and genuinely put yourself into the customer's shoes. Would you give up your email for that whitepaper? Would you join that webinar? Would you buy that product without a free trial?

And if you wouldn't... then why would they?

15 Play the long game

Most buyers are slow buyers. In fact, only 15% of people who buy within two years make a purchase in the first 90 days. Everyone else –85% of people who buy—don't make a purchase until *after* 90 days.

Instead of pushing to make a sale that's unlikely to happen (and almost certainly undermining future sales), show genuine empathy and establish credibility, authority and trust. Invest in nurturing. Prioritise relationships above transactions, and the money will come.

16 Branding works

Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM. Nobody ever ate a *terrible* burger at McDonalds. Branding is not about being the best product, but about being the *least likely to be terrible*. Buying brands gives certainty and reduces risk.

To a buyer, buying from a startup is high risk. To compete with incumbents, focus on reducing perceived risk, rather than building even better products. This is why branding matters.

17 Over-invest in visual design

Visual design is the most immediate impression of a brand. Spend money on visual design not in proportion to what is appropriate right now, but to what is appropriate for where you want to go. Spend more on design than feels comfortable. Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.

18 Build a content mesh

Every startup needs enough content around their product that the brand feels substantial and has weight. A content mesh isn't meant to generate traffic, but rather to build brand weight and increase conversions.

Invest in:

- Excellent sales collateral
- Case studies
- Technical documentation
- Support resources
- High-quality photography & video
- Thought leadership content

All of this signals to leads that you are committed to quality, and planning to play the long-term game.

19 Write for the buyer (not the non-buyer!)

90% of people don't care about the problem you solve. That's fine. But don't write your copy to try and please those people. For them, even short copy is too long, and even perfect copy is too boring. Don't write for your mom, your colleagues, or even yourself. Write for the actual buyer.

20 Start with the problem

Explain—in plain terms—which problem you can help them solve. If they don't have the problem, you have nothing to sell to them anyway. If they *do* have the problem, and you can explain it in a way that shows that you deeply understand the intricacies of the problem at hand, you'll have automatically earned their interest and attention.

21 Write like a lawyer

Most copy fails because the logical *structure* of the argument is weak. You make assertions, but don't back them up. You draw conclusions, but don't explain how you got there.

Learn to structure your copy like a lawyer structures his case, so that the jury—your audience—can easily be persuaded that your story makes sense.

22 Don't bury the lede

Often the best lines in your copy are actually a subheader or an innocent byline. Don't bury that gem halfway through the page. Find a way to pull that juicy line—the part that grabs people by the throat and pulls them into the story—and lead with that as an angle.

23 Tell stories to reframe their worldview

Education can kill your sales. Imagine the fitness guru, who teaches me how to do the perfect pushup, for free. That's great, but it also puts the responsibility on me: no more excuses for not doing my pushups. And no reason to buy his paid course, until I'm at least doing 100 pushups a day.

The same applies to all sorts of other products: educating can get in the way of closing the sale. But there's another way: provide reframes. The glass isn't half empty, but half full. Give me a different way to see the world. Reframes provide value by helping me better understand how the world works. And now that I know, I'll feel even more inclined to buy the pushup course.

24 Reframes build a worldview

A collection of reframes give you a new way to view the world. Good examples: Elon Musk, Naval Ravikant, Seth Godin, Warren Buffett, Tony Robbins... but also Hubspot, Apple, Microsoft or Salesforce, as well as Trump and Bernie Sanders, the world's religions, philosophical schools like Stoicism, or the Effective Altruism movement.

Each offers a clear path to solve a complex question about the world around us. When you choose to view the world through their lens, you might end up purchasing products that go along with the worldview. Sell a worldview, and the product sales will follow.

25 Write short and direct

Short words, short sentences and short paragraphs. Simple writing is easier to understand. Get straight to the point, and keep your logic clean. No need for flowers or decoration.

26 The more you tell, the more you sell

People still read books, and binge-watch 3 hour podcast episodes. But the moment it gets boring, they check out and move on. People pay attention for as long as it is interesting, but not a moment longer.

However... before people make a purchase decision, they want to have all their questions and concerns answered. For this reason, longer copy tends to often outperform short-form copy.

—How to create compounding growth—

27 Most people churn on Day 1

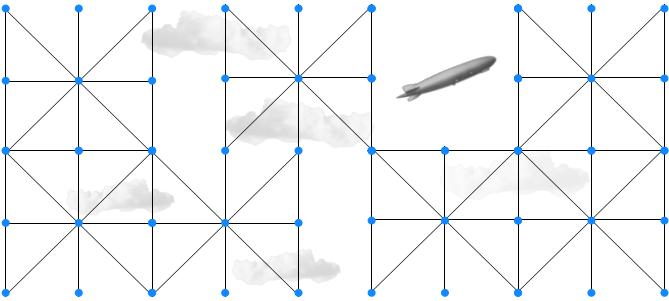
You won't believe it till you see it: 30 to 50% of people churn before they've even gotten started. Think about it: how many apps or products have you opened only once, and never really used? Don't be that product.

Spend as much time activating users as you've spend acquiring them in the first place. You can't build a thriving business on a user base of zombies.

28 Retention is the king of growth

Higher retention and better engagement is the most fundamental driver of faster growth, because retention impacts acquisition in four fundamental ways:

- Higher retention means new revenue is additive, rather than just replacing last month's revenue. Less pressure on acquisition channels, so higher ceilings to scaling.
- Higher retention leads to more revenue per customer. Which means you can afford to spend more to acquire such customers. This, in turn, can unlock new channels that would not have been profitable before.
- Higher retention generates more referral opportunities. Customers that stay longer tend to have more opportunities to tell their friends.
- Higher retention typically means you earn back your acquisition costs more quickly. If you recoup your CAC faster, that means you can spend it again earlier to acquire even more users.



29 Onboarding is the biggest retention lever

To lift retention, most gains are typically made in fixing onboarding and activation, to make sure users are set up for success. This is *vastly* more impactful than fighting late-stage churn. Dedicate most of your resources to onboarding.

30 The AARRR model is broken

The most popular growth marketing framework, AARRR, teaches us that growth is not only about driving acquisition, but also about optimising activation, retention, referral and revenue.

While this is true, the framework can't answer crucial questions such as "*Why does retention impact acquisition?*", or "*Why are many products wildly successful without any referrals?*"

31 Growth loops are everything

Growth loops are the framework that AARRR should have been. Your acquisition system generates traffic and drives it into the sales funnel. The funnel turns cold traffic into excited new customers, and engagement and retention systems help the customer get as much value from the product as possible. That can then generate three things: revenue, referral opportunities, and user-generated marketing assets.

Crucially, these things in turn feed your acquisition system again (!!): revenue allows you to buy paid ads, referrals invite new users, and user-generated content can rank for SEO. That's how growth loops work, and is the essence of growth marketing.

32 Drop the campaign mindset

Traditionally, marketing is organised around *campaigns*. But campaigns are fundamentally temporary, and not systematic. For this reason, growth marketing emphasises always-on forms of marketing that run continuously and can continuously be optimised. Always-on systems that can continuously be optimised on a regime of high-tempo testing typically outperform everything else. Stop thinking in campaigns—start thinking in *systems*.

33 Growth is slow, before it is fast

Systems that drive compounding growth on autopilot need to be optimised and fine-tuned before they become powerful. Remember when there were 100 cases of a new virus in Wuhan? All compound growth feels slow, before it is fast.

34 Speak to your customers

There is no substitute to speaking with customers one-on-one. Speaking to individual users feels slow and wasteful, but it is the fastest way to gain deep market insight. Customer obsession, over time, becomes a deep competitive moat.

35 Test early, test often

Test the big things first. Test for changes that—if successful—can really move the needle. Test giving the paid product away, for free. Test completely different landing pages. Test doubling the price, or cutting it in half. Always be testing, and test the big things first.

36 Optimise for tempo

It's hard to know beforehand what will work, and what won't. For that reason, experiment rapidly and focus on speed of execution above almost everything else. Remove any obstacles (approval processes!) that hinder faster execution and faster learning.

37 Monetise ruthlessly

Map out use cases and user journeys to uncover new opportunities to charge users. You don't have to feel guilty about this. If you're truly providing value, there's a strong chance that your audience will happily pay for it. Mastering monetisation can be the difference between a struggling company and a thriving one.

38 Repeat what works

Once you've found things that are successful, find ways to double down on them and do more of it. Most companies succeed by doing a few things right, and then doing them all the time.

In the past 5 years, Double has worked with some of the fastest growing startups in the world, some with unicorn or near-unicorn valuations: TikTok, Glowforge, Lely and Alpian are some of the more notable.

Do you feel comfortable implementing these principles into your strategy alone? If you prefer working together with a team of experts, you are in the right place.

Have a look at our [services](#) or send us an email to double@double-agency.com and let's talk.