



The 2026 Recalibration:

How High Growth Firms Outpace the Market



Hinge is the leading research-based 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.

We work closely with our clients to give their businesses every advantage. Here are some of the ways we do this:

- Research-based strategy
 - Gorgeous, differentiated brands
 - Powerful marketing programs
 - High-performance websites
 - Custom research studies
-

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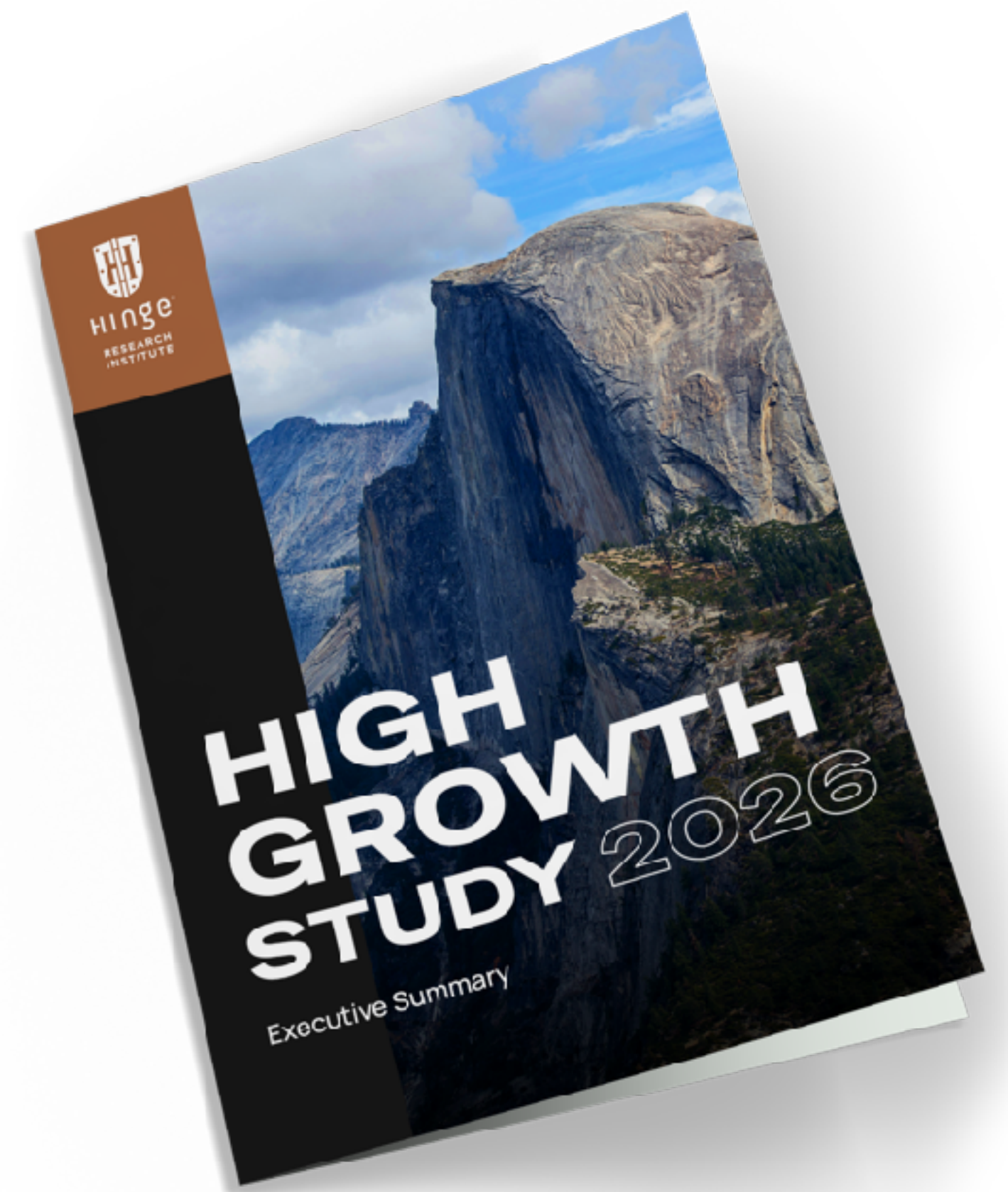
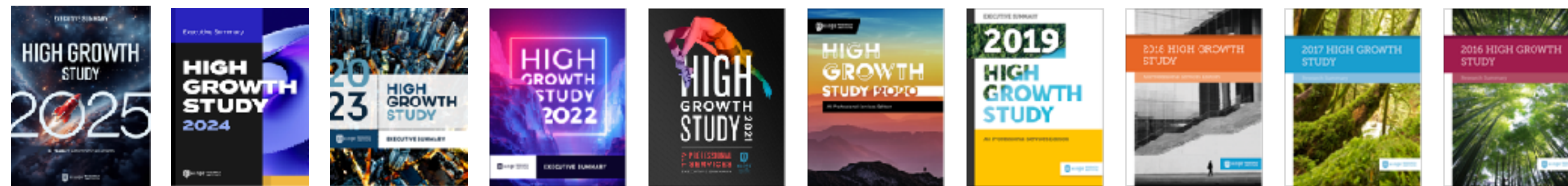
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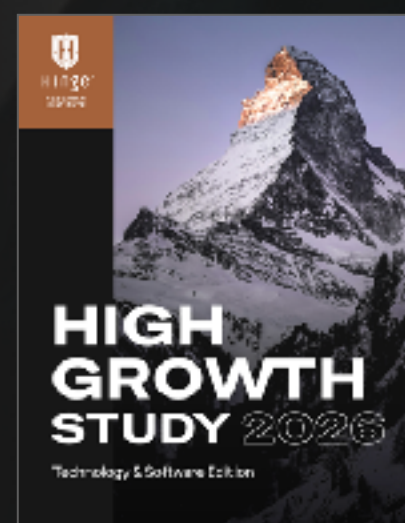
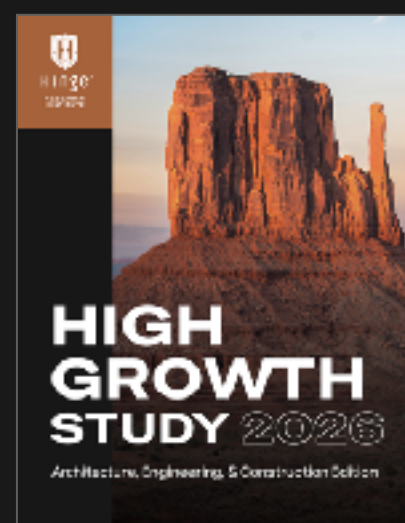
The High Growth Study

- › The 2026 edition is the 11th consecutive annual edition
- › 495 firms from four industry groups
- › Executive Summary available for free today at www.hingemarketing.com/highgrowth



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Get critical insights into your marketplace—and practical, actionable advice you can start using today.



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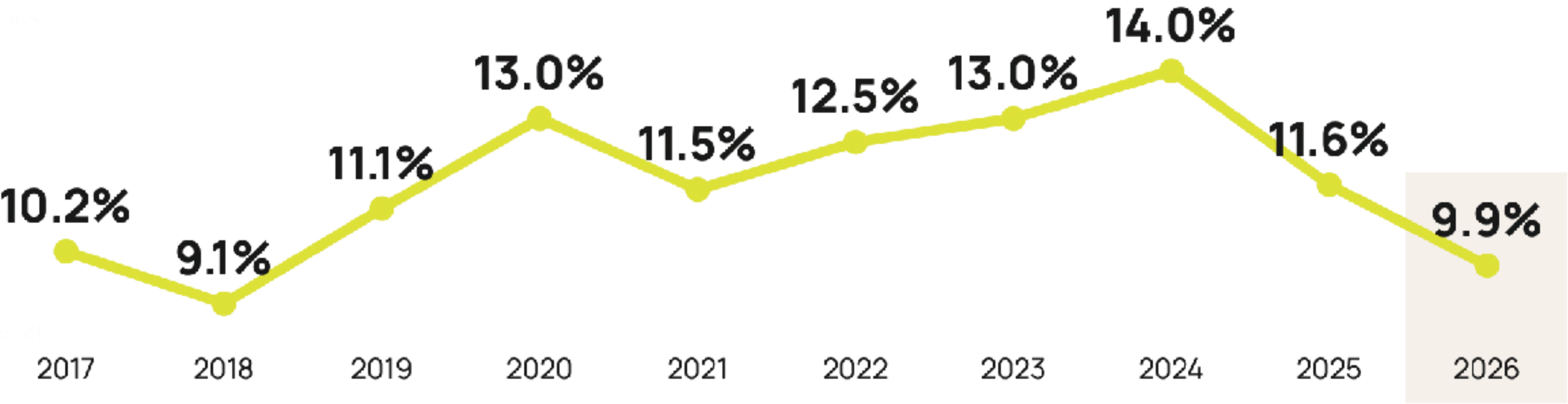


The High Growth Difference



Professional Services Growth Has Cooled Off

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.

Then & Now

Growth Rate of All Firms:

2024 -----
14%

2026 -----
9.9%

High Growth Firm Profitability:

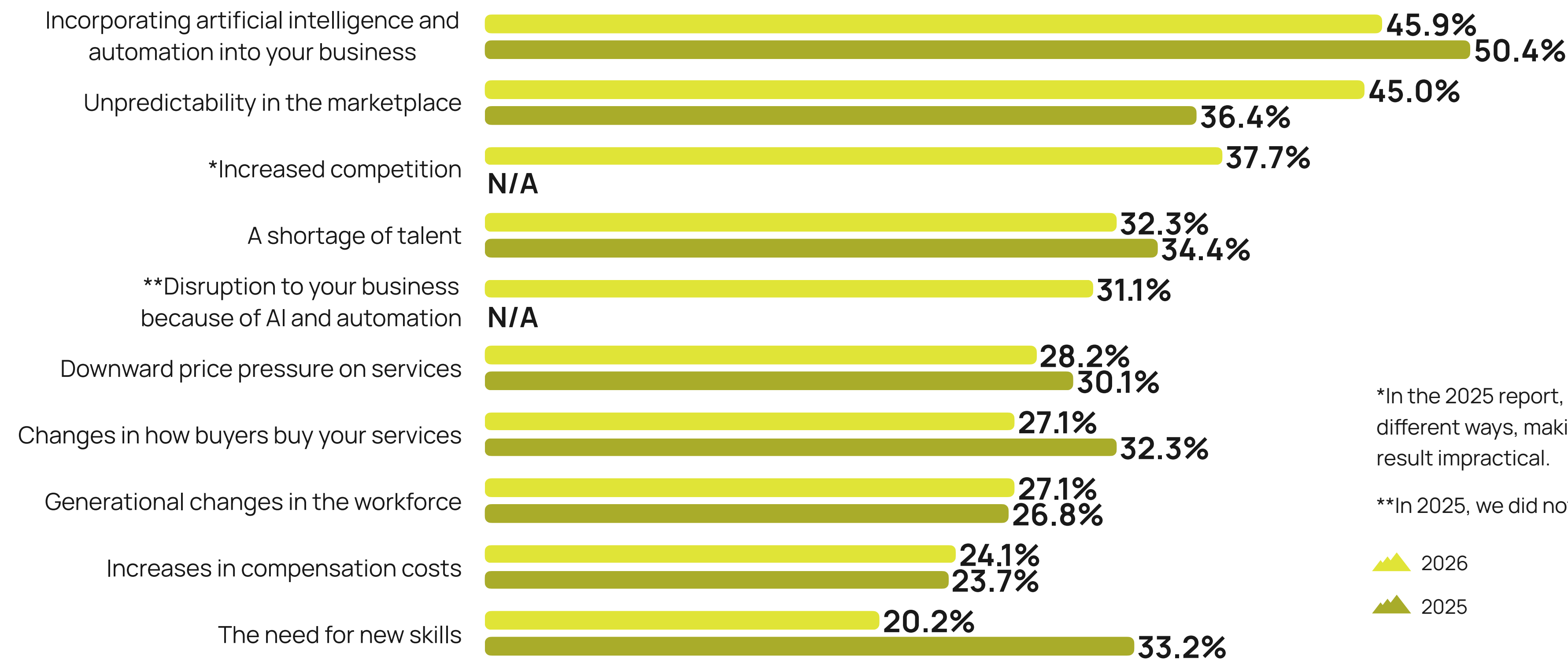
2024 -----
25%

2026 -----
39.5%



Today We Deal With Many Challenges

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.

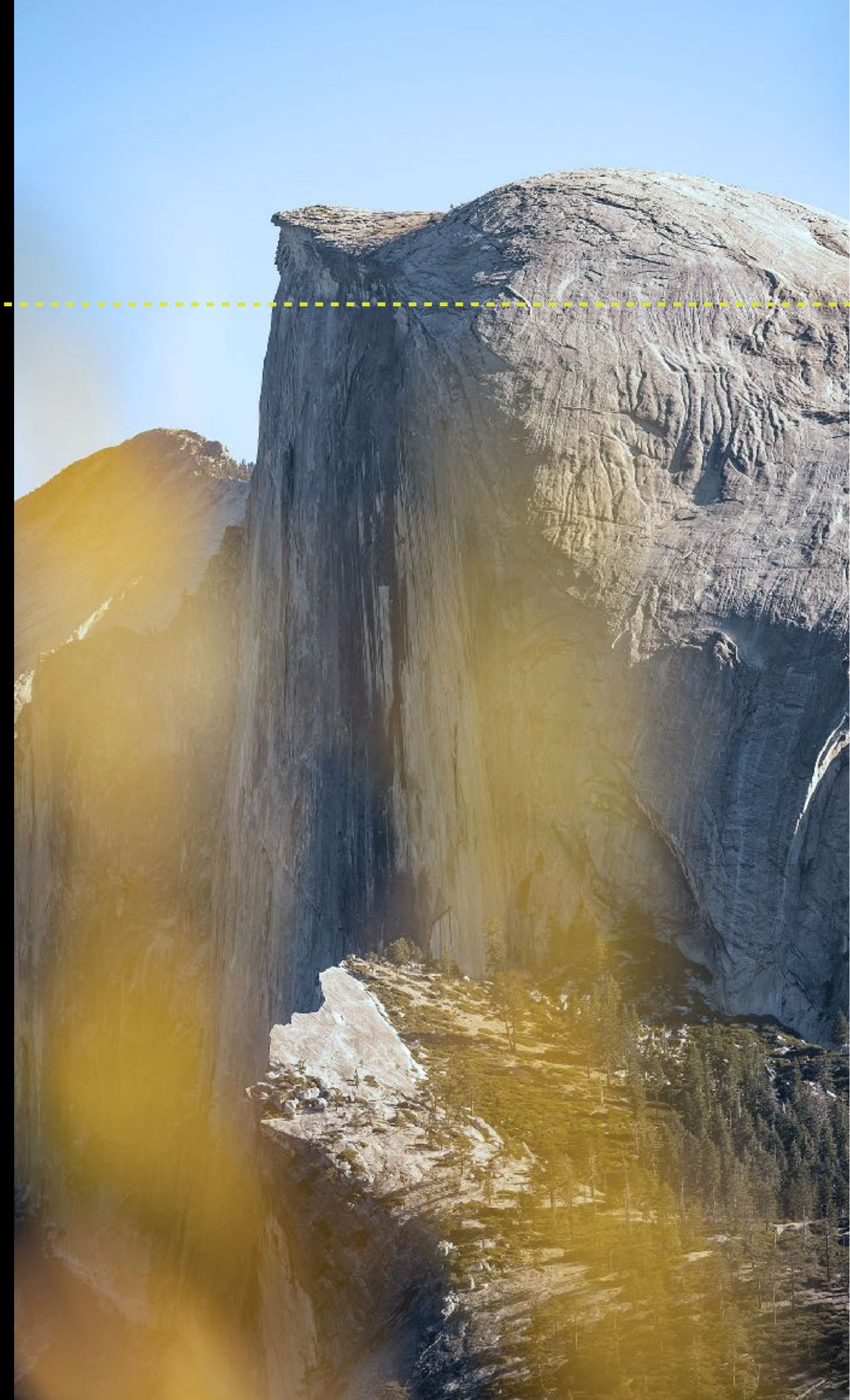
**In 2025, we did not ask this question.

2026
2025



What is a High Growth Firm?

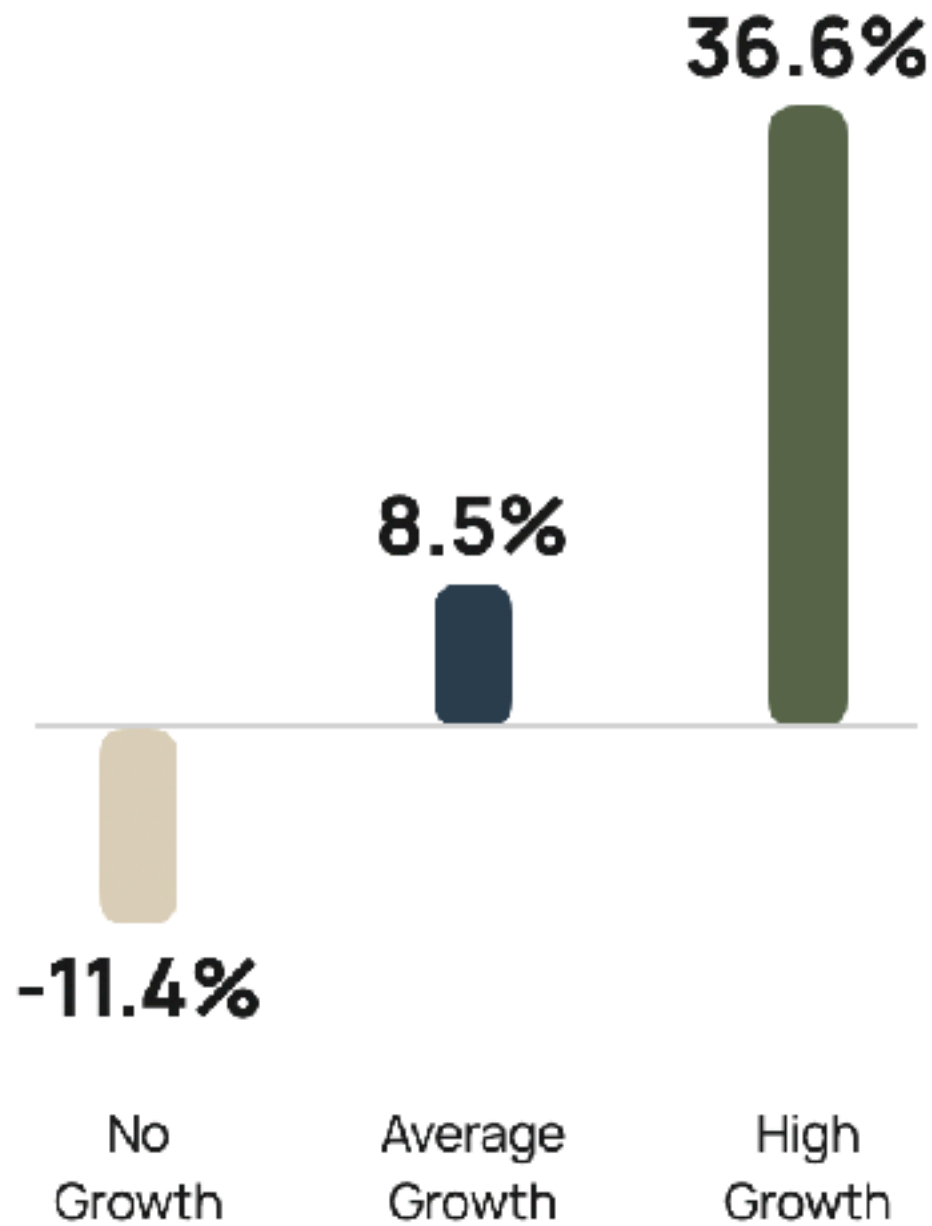
We define High Growth firms as those with a minimum of 20% compound annual growth rate over a three-year evaluation period.



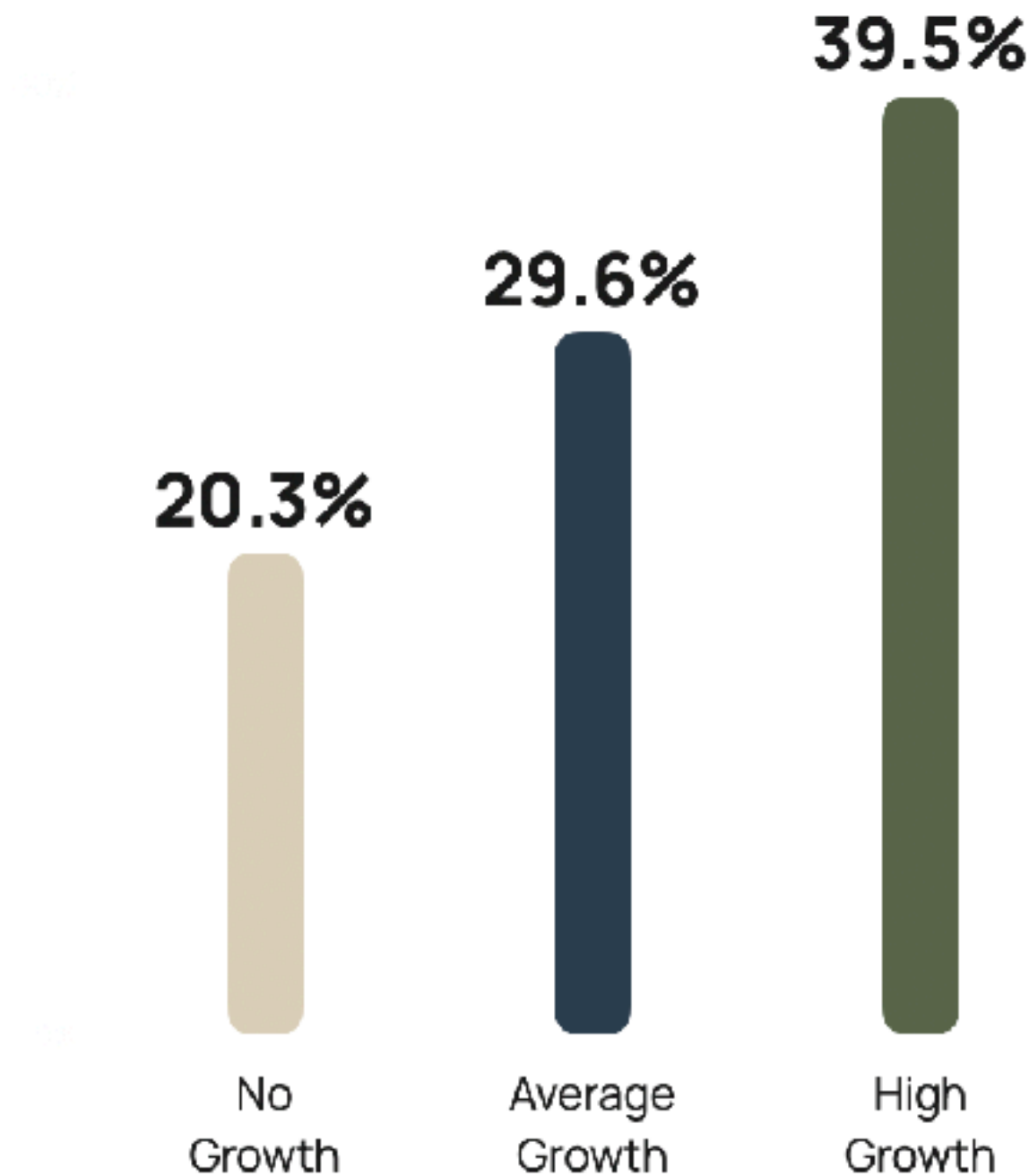


High Growth Firms Grow 4X Faster

Median Annual Growth
by Growth Category



Profitability by Growth
Category





What can we learn from the High Growth firms?

- › What are their primary advantages?
- › How are they funding and building their marketing team?
- › Where do they place emphasis in their marketing programs?
- › What trends are they paying the most attention to?

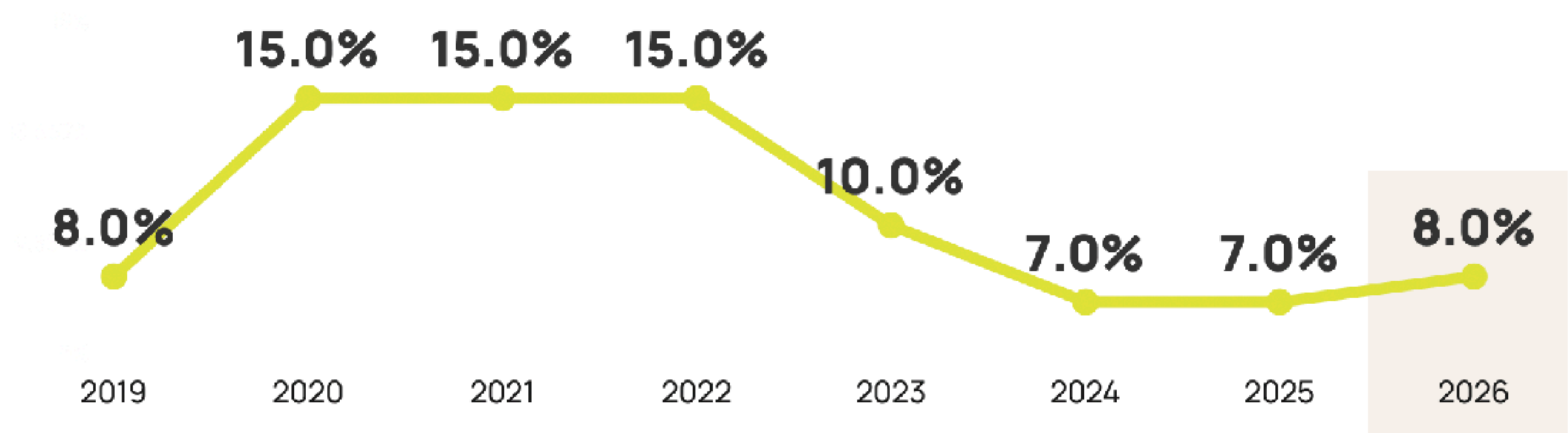


1. High Growth Firms Outspend Others 2:1



Marketing Spending Increased

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

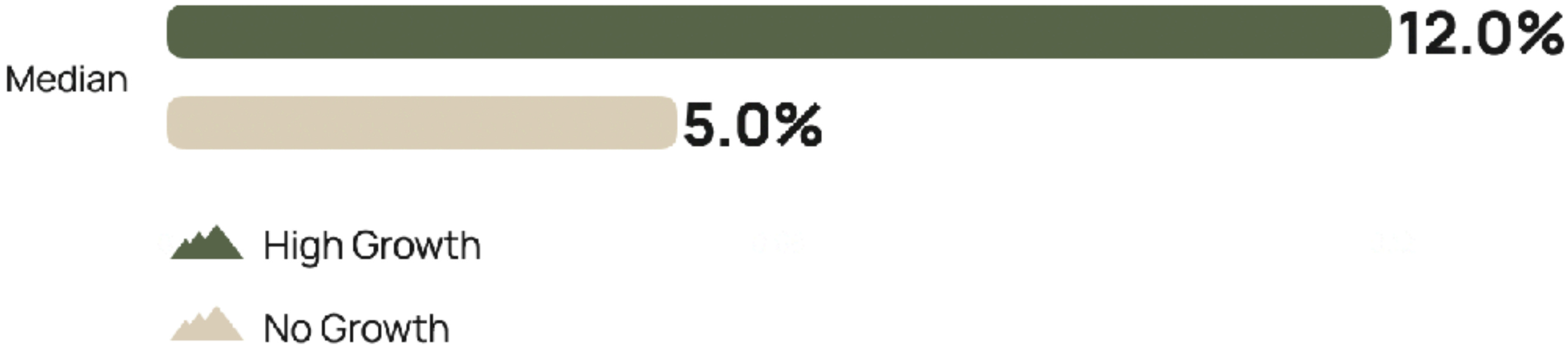


**These marketing budget percentages are respondents' estimates and can be higher than actual spend, perhaps because respondents tend to factor in effort or time commitment rather than dollar allocation alone. Also, budgets vary by size of firm and target audience. The budget percentages are best used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



High Growth Firms Twice as Much on Marketing

Marketing Budget as Percentage of Revenue**

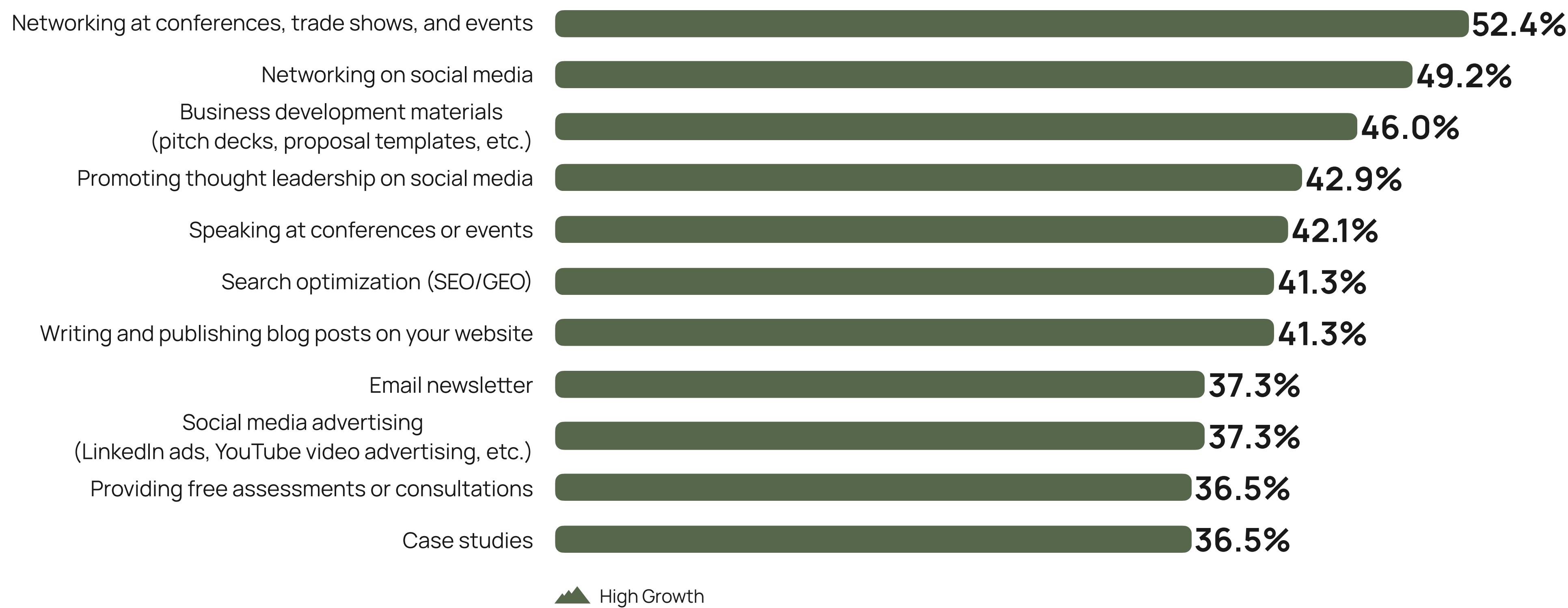


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Where High Growth Firms Invest

Marketing Techniques High Growth Firms Use Most Often





How to Advocate for Increased Marketing Spending

- › Speak the language of your stakeholders
- › Align your marketing to business goals
- › Use data to educate and validate
- › Metrics guide better decision making
(ex: visibility metrics and business impact metrics)



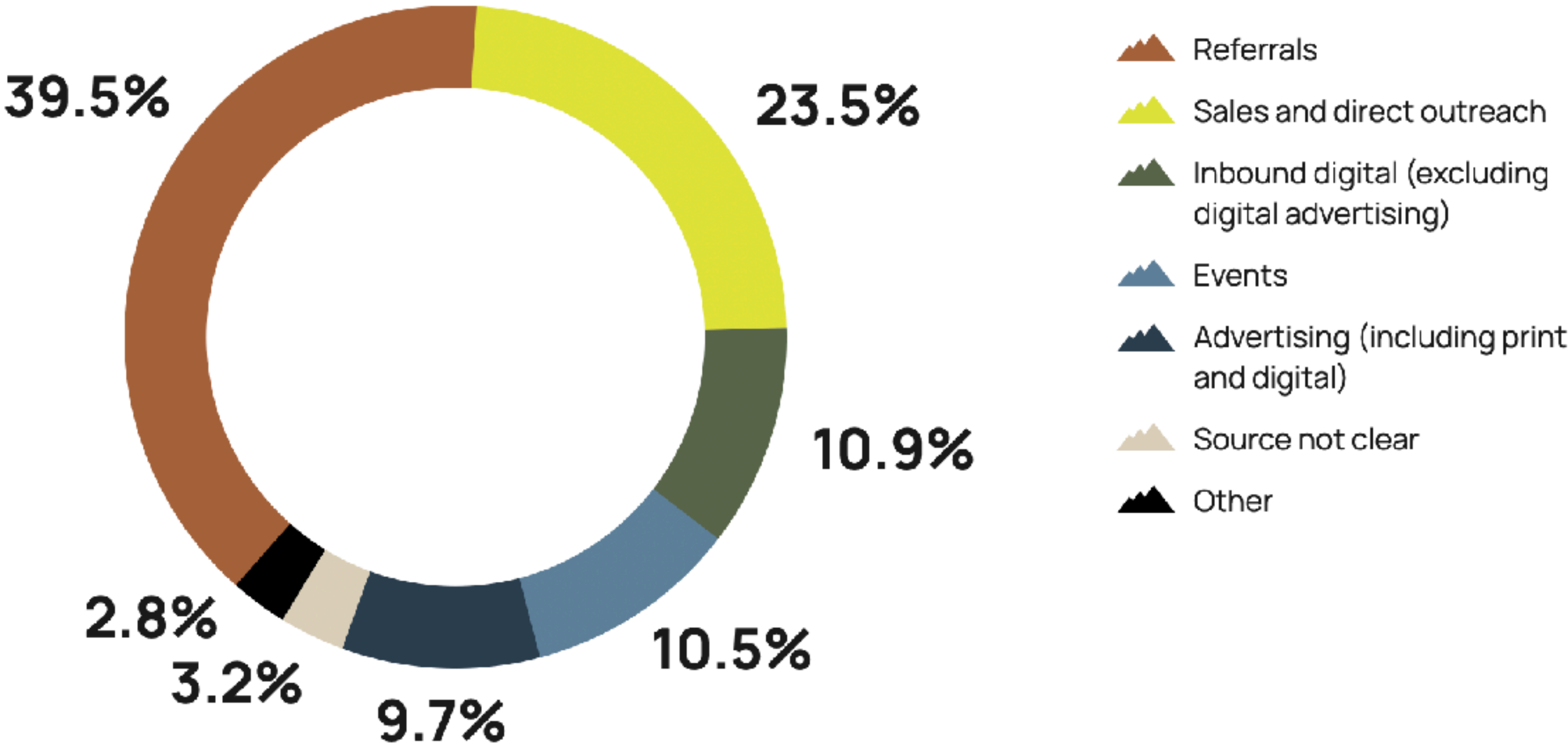


2. Marketing Impact and Lead Sources Are Diverse



Lead Sources Are Diverse, Led By Referrals

Percent of Leads by Source





Avoiding “Referral Killers”

Referral killers are brand deficiencies that cause a prospect to abandon a firm after being referred, but before they even make contact.

Examples:

- › Generic messaging
- › Outdated website design
- › Confusing offer strategy
- › Unresponsive team members
- › Disorganized content structure
- › Inactive channels





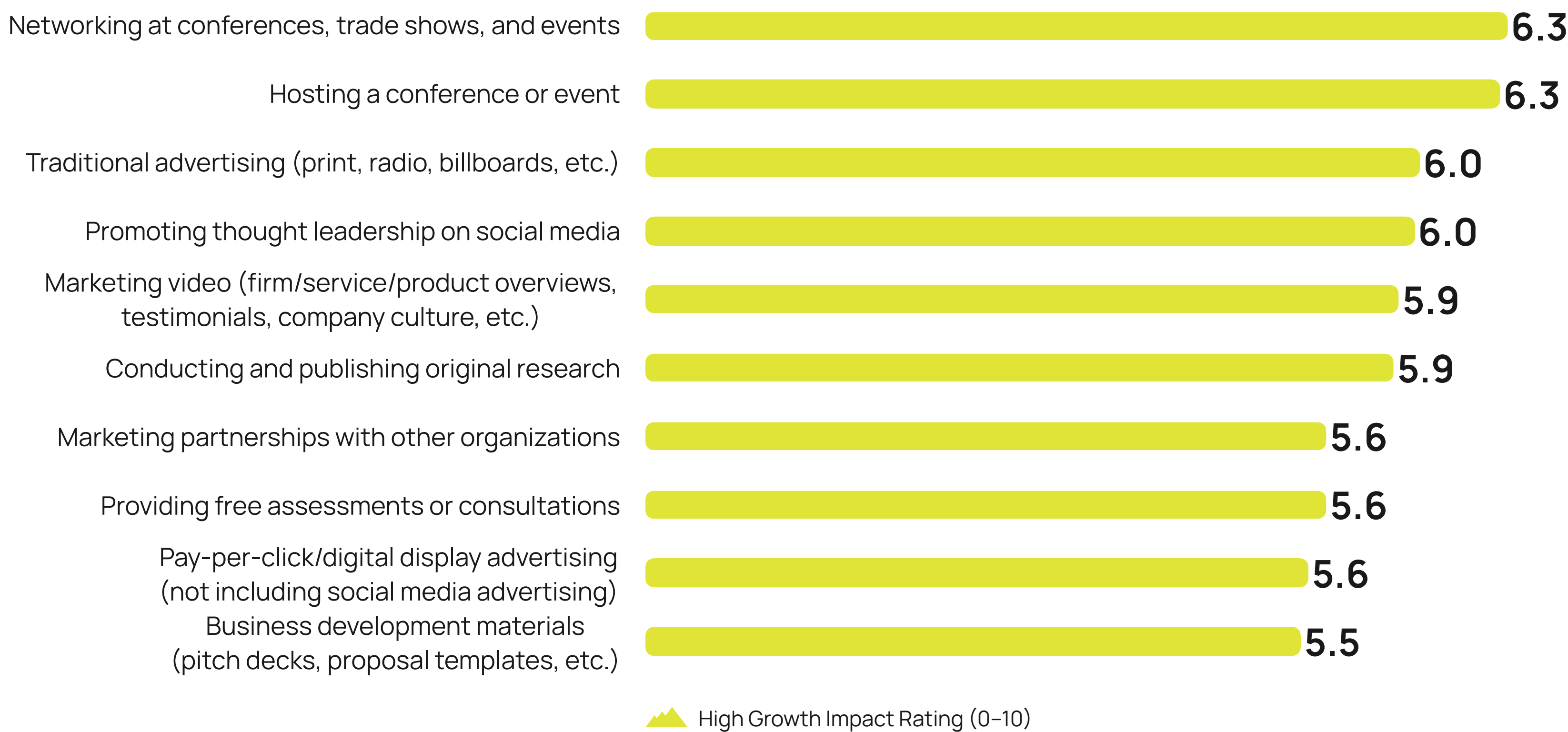
Sending the Right Trust Signals

- › **Visible Expertise:** 21% of High Growth firms have "high activity" subject matter experts producing thought leadership, compared to only 8% of No Growth firms.
- › **The "Seller-Doer" Presence:** High Growth firms engage a significantly higher proportion of seller-doers across all sizes—building trust by ensuring the person who sells the work is the one delivering it.
- › **Integrated Digital Presence:** Achieving Level 4 or 5 Digital Maturity allows firms to provide customized, data-driven experiences that prove you understand the buyer's journey.
- › **Third-Party Validation:** Promoting original research and high-quality marketing videos (testimonials) creates an objective "proof of concept".



Marketing Impact is Shared Across Many Channels

Most Impactful Marketing and Business Development Techniques



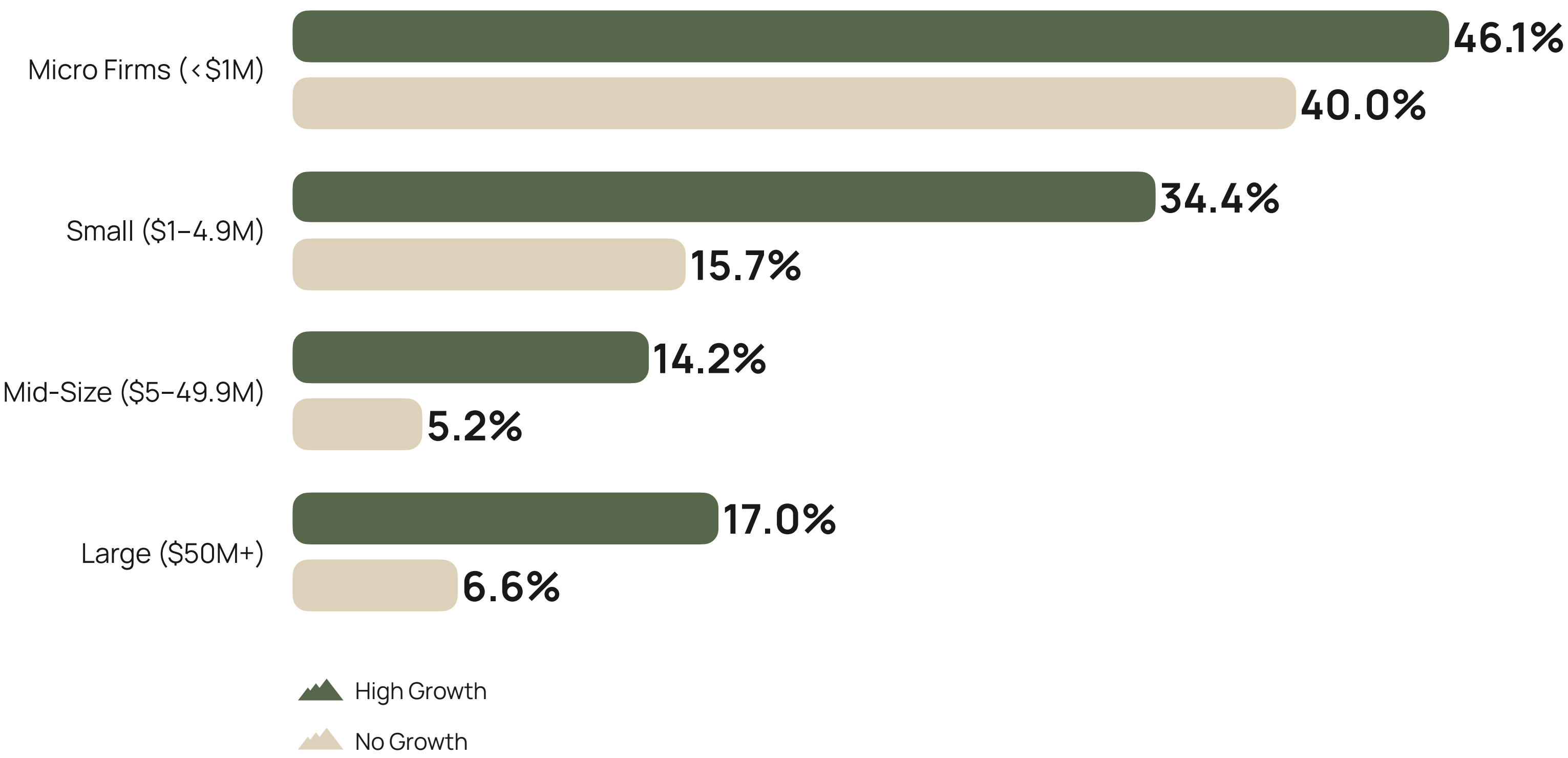


3. High Growth Firms Activate Thought Leaders



High Growth Firms Lead with Seller-Doers

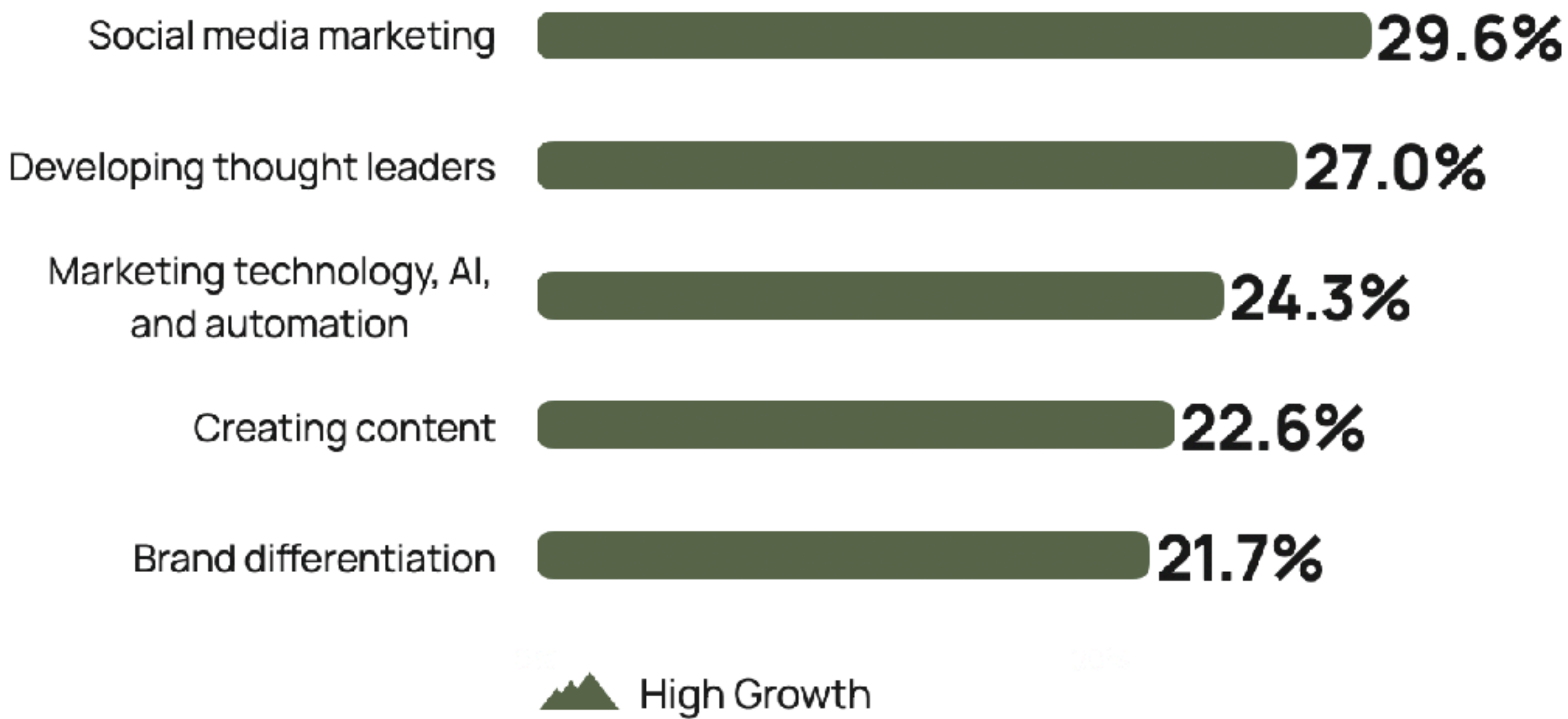
Proportion of Seller-Doers to FTEs





Developing Thought Leaders is a Top Priority

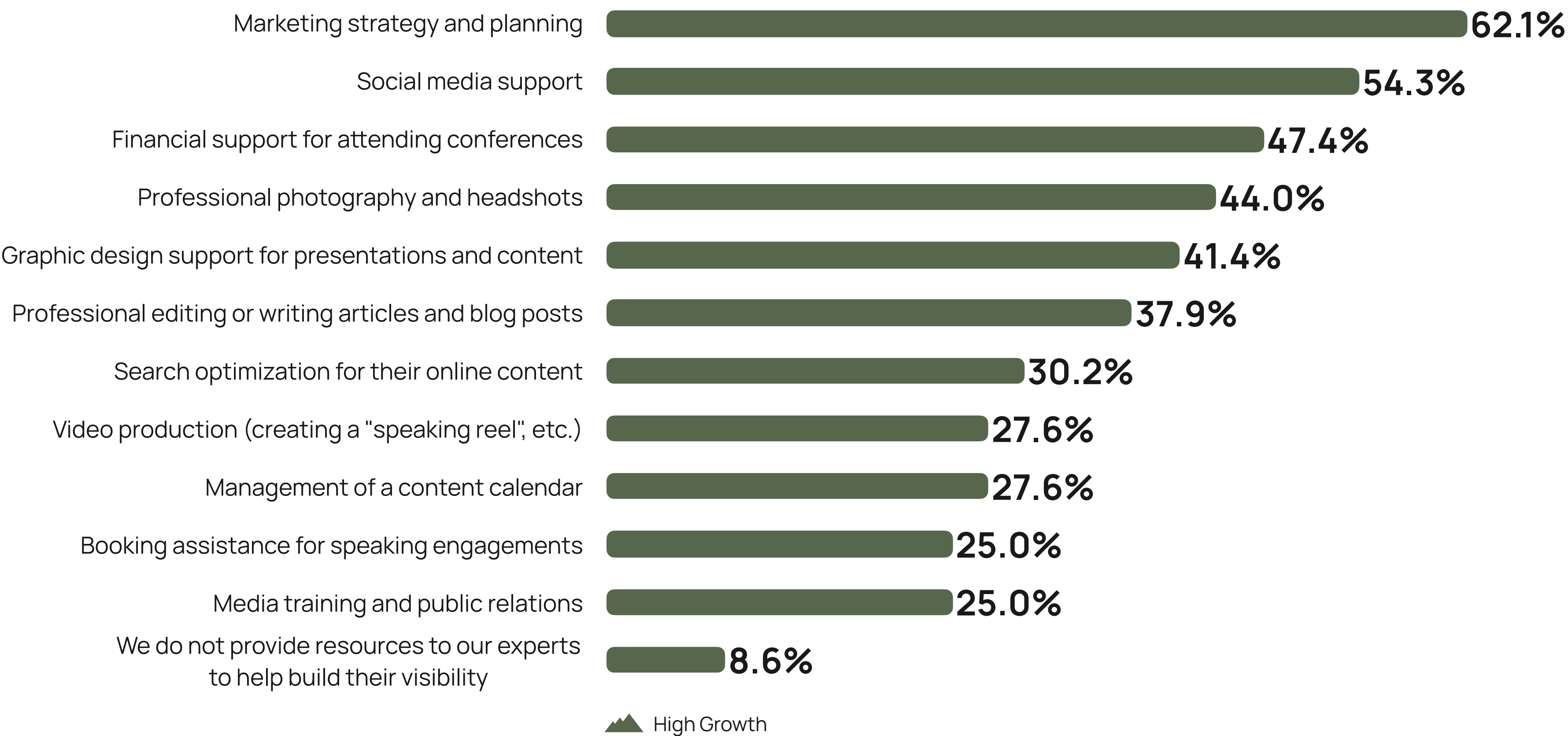
Top Marketing Priorities for 2026





High Growth Firms Support Their Experts

Resources Provided by Firms to Support Visible Expert Activity





Supporting Your Visible Experts in 2026

Do Not:

- › Tell experts to "just write what you're passionate about" and hope it sticks.

Do This Instead:

- › Build a content strategy grounded in relevance, differentiation and company objectives



Supporting Your Visible Experts in 2026

Do Not:

- › Force a prolific speaker to write long-form whitepapers, or a shy writer to host a live stage without investing in coaching and training.

Do This Instead:

- › Conduct a skills audit to capture individual strengths and provide the right support (coaching, editing, or video production).



Supporting Your Visible Experts in 2026

Do Not:

- › Send experts to expensive conferences just to "sit in a booth".

Do This Instead:

- › Give them a VIP list of contacts and a specific Call-to-Action for every networking engagement.



Supporting Your Visible Experts in 2026

Do Not:

- › Move to the next campaign without tracking results; experts will lose motivation if they don't see the "yield" of their effort.

Do This Instead:

- › Schedule regular reviews of visibility and impact metrics to validate their contribution to the firm's growth.



4. High Growth Firms Leverage AI and Technology

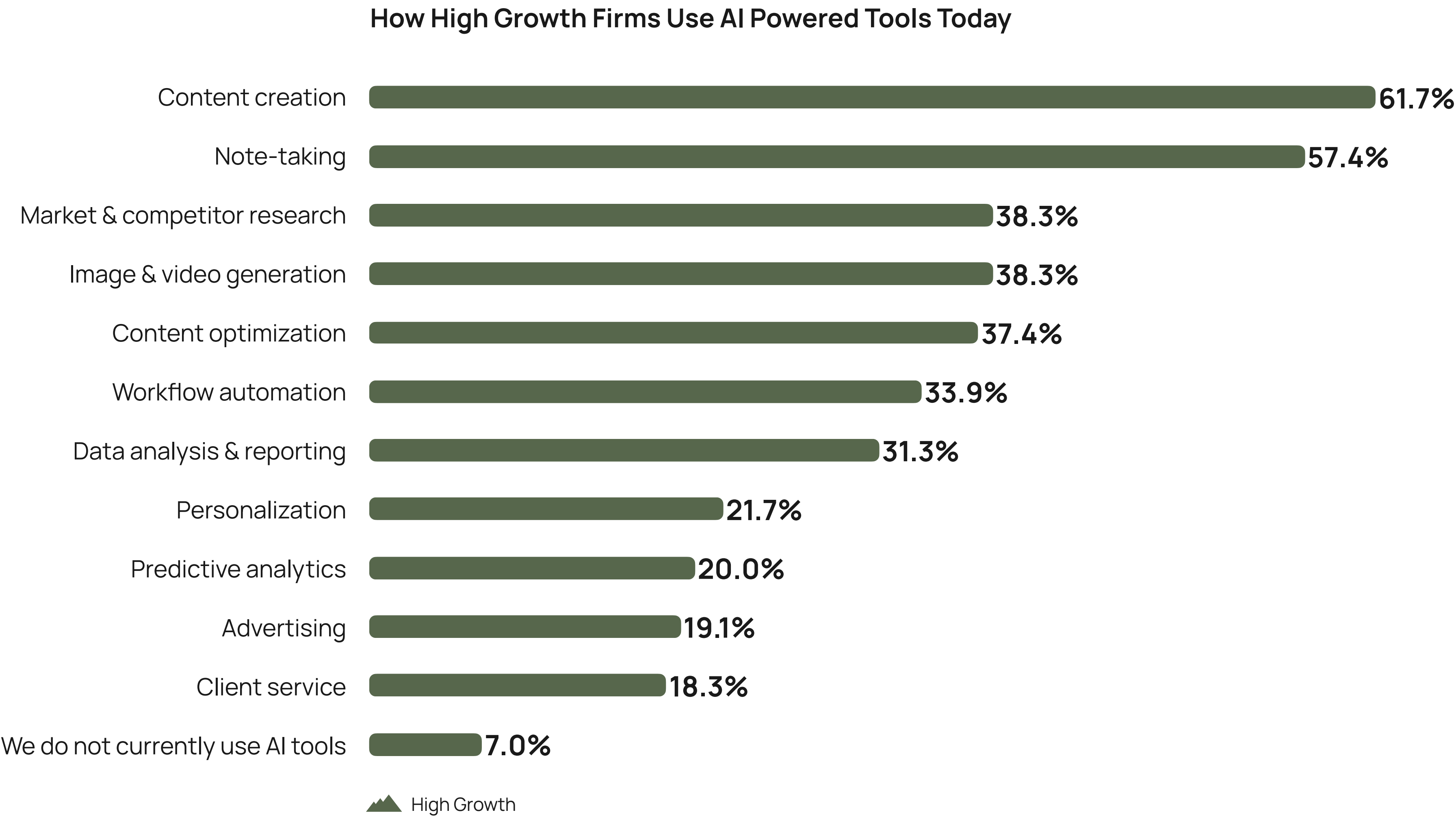


Shifting from Efficiency to Strategy

- › **Near-Universal Adoption:** 93% of High Growth firms are now using AI, but most are stuck in "Administrative Mode" (note-taking and drafting).
- › **The Competitive Gap:** Top performers are shifting AI usage toward Market Research (38.3%) and Data Analysis (31.3%).
- › **Systematic Integration:** High Growth firms are 4X more likely to be "Digitally Intelligent," integrating data across departments to eliminate silos.
- › **AEO/GEO Readiness:** As traditional SEO declines, High Growth firms are pivoting toward Generative Engine Optimization to stay visible in AI-driven search.



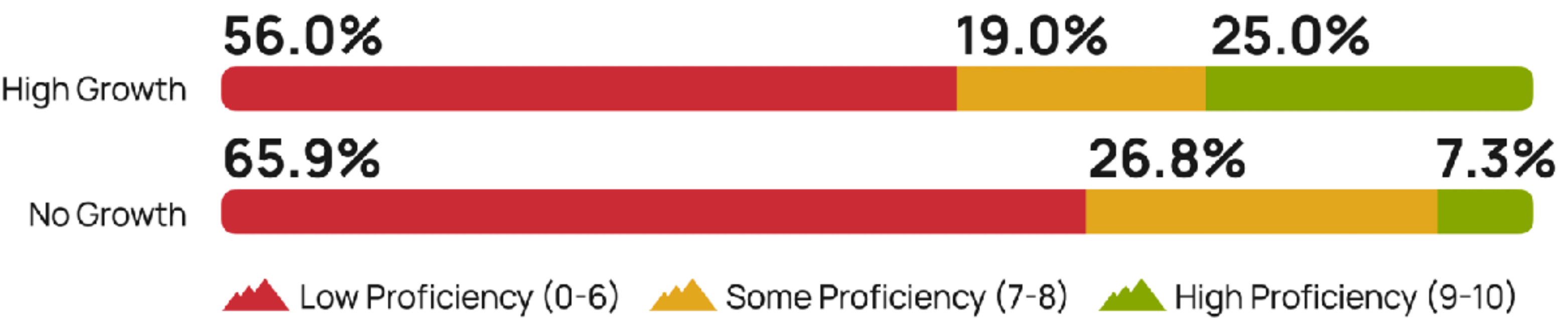
How High Growth Firms Leverage AI





High Growth Firms Capture and Use Data

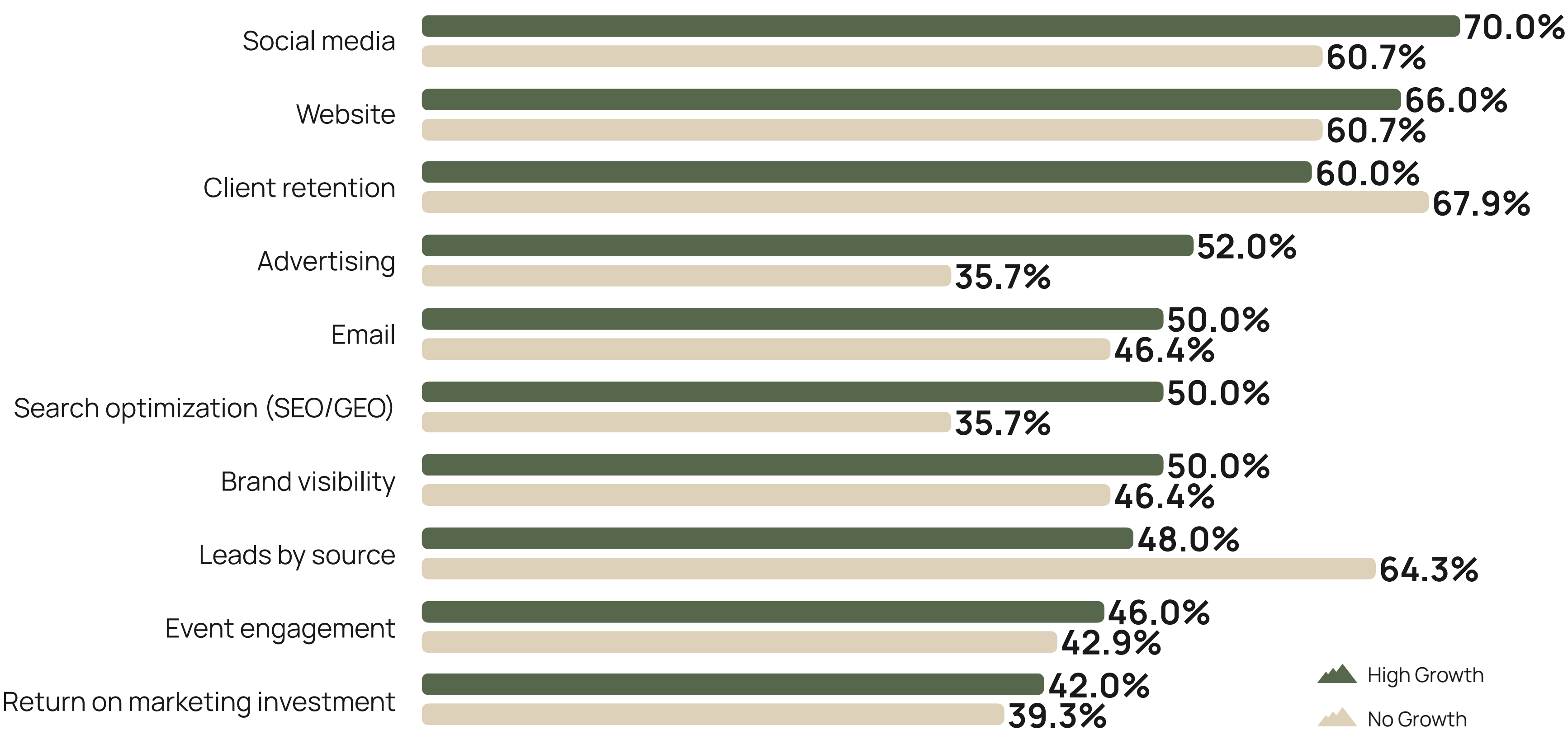
Proficiency in Capturing and Using Marketing and Business Development Metrics





What Metrics Do They Track?

Top Marketing and Business Development Metrics



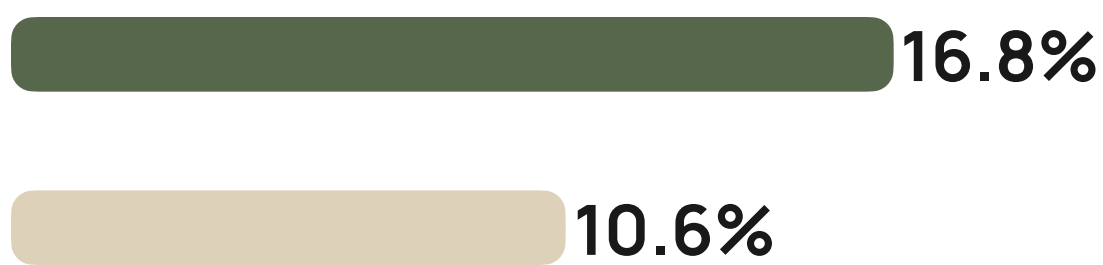


5. M&A is Still a Significant Factor for High Growth Firms





M&A Contributes to Growth

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



Percentage of Revenue Attributed to M&A



-  High Growth
-  No Growth





M&A: The Systematic Scaling Advantage

- › **Built to Scale:** Success isn't just about the deal; it's about having the digital maturity and infrastructure to fold new teams into a systematic go-to-market engine.
- › **The Integration Trap:** Without a methodical plan for culture and operations, M&A becomes an impediment rather than a driver of growth.
- › **Expert Retention:** Talent will leave if acquired experts aren't given strategic marketing support to maintain their visibility and value.
- › **Reputation First:** M&A must balance outward reputation with a strong internal experience; otherwise, you are simply "helping your best talent find a new job".



6. Objective Research is Foundational to Growth

Consistent for a Decade

“High-Growth Firms were over 2X more likely to conduct research on their target client audience as their No-Growth peers.”

The 2016 High Growth Study



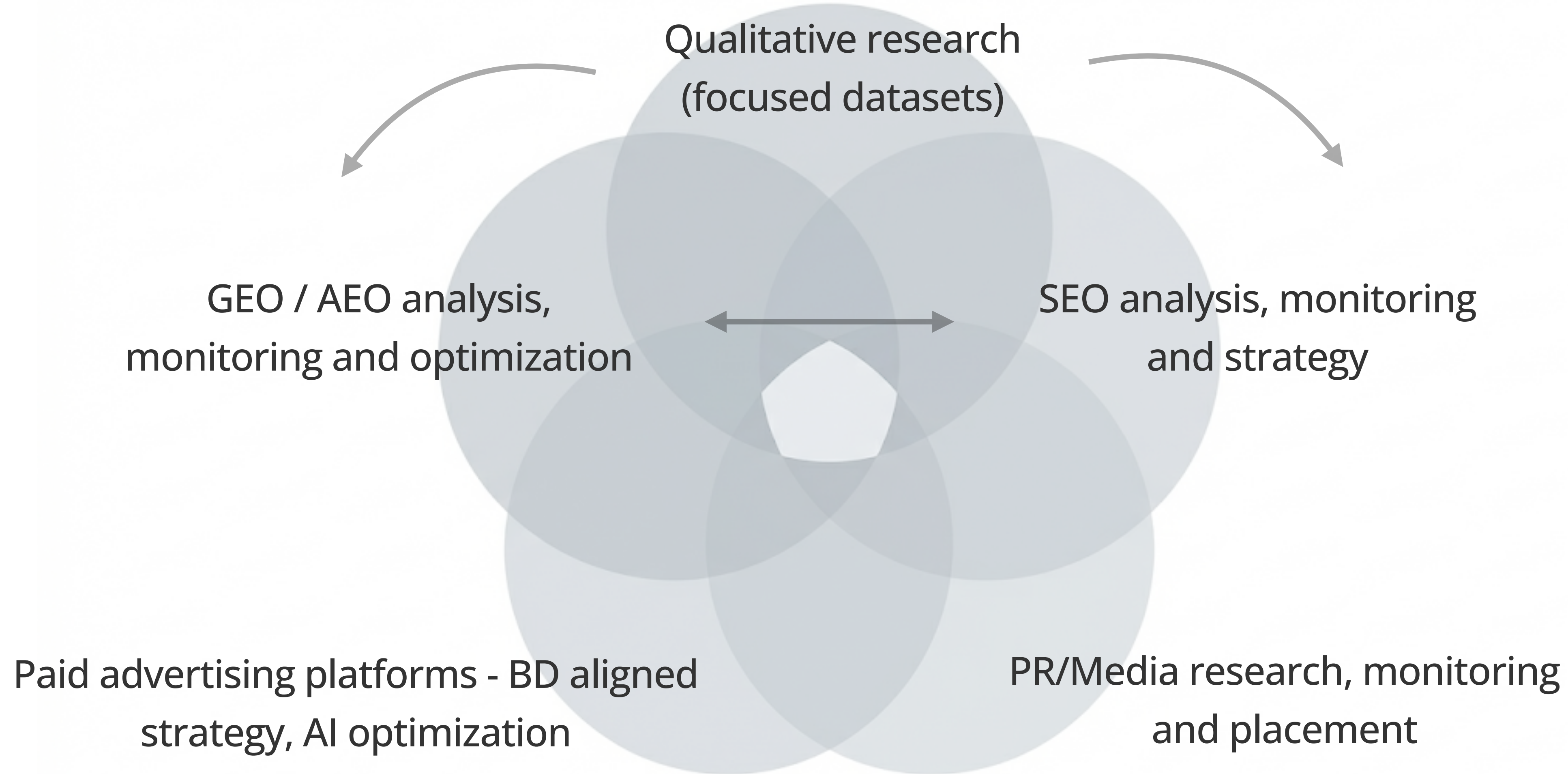
2016 HIGH GROWTH STUDY

Research Summary

 **hinge** RESEARCH INSTITUTE



Objective understanding is the key to performance





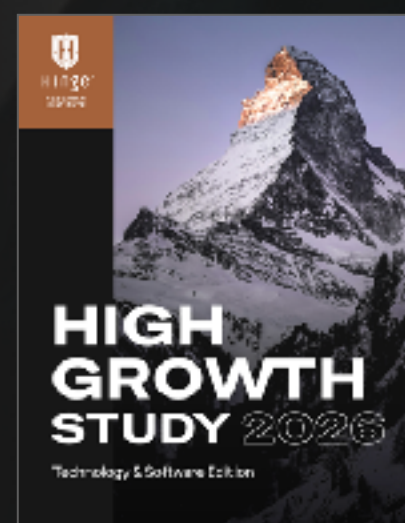
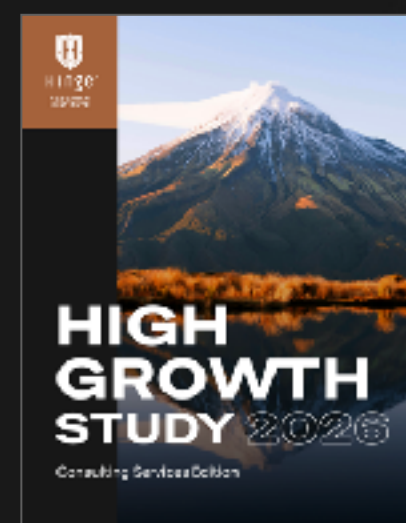
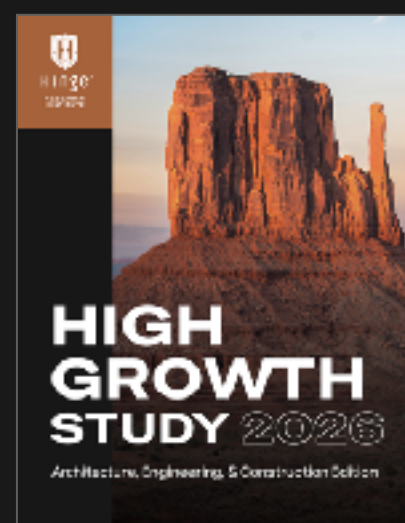
Research Powers Differentiation and Relevance

- › **The 2X Advantage:** High Growth firms are over 2X more likely to conduct research on their target audience than No Growth peers.
- › **Diversity of Insight:** 46% conduct competitive research and 45% conduct marketplace/client satisfaction research to spot gaps competitors miss.
- › **Objective Basis:** Research provides the "Why" behind a diversified strategy, ensuring you aren't guessing where to deploy your experts.



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Join Karl Feldman and Austin McNair as they discuss the latest on how professional services firms should think about AI search.



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Questions?



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