I Tested TikTok Ads for My Business — These 5 Things Shocked Me



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Key Takeaways

- TikTok ads now offer low-budget, AI-optimized campaigns that generate affordable, high-quality leads.
- The platform’s new search ads and short-form content focus make it a major marketing channel.
- Raw, creator-style videos and micro-influencer UGC outperform polished production for engagement and conversions.

When it comes to digital marketing and advertising, the rules

have changed. Up until recently, businesses in order to scale didn't have to rely on social media advertising, and TikTok advertising was seen as being non-essential, with the view that it only reaches younger audiences.

But that has all changed.

More than seven years after TikTok exploded in popularity in the U.S. and worldwide, its largest user base remains adults ages 18 to 34. With many companies wanting to target this age set, here are five things that surprised me when starting to run TikTok ads and what you need to know now about them — whether you're a professional services-based business, tradesperson, e-commerce brand or small business.

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1. You don't need a big budget

Initially, TikTok ads had a minimum ad spend limit of $50 a day, which I found was quite hefty for a business that just wanted to test the water. Now, thanks to their Smart+ lead-generating campaigns, you can spend a minimum of just $20 a day to start getting leads. The great thing about TikTok is that I do find that the cost per lead is less than when you run your ads across Meta (Facebook & Instagram).

Another great feature is that you can indicate how much you're prepared to pay per lead, too.

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2. More than a scroll feed

TikTok, in its latest rollout of advertising strategies, is taking a leaf from Google Ads' playbook and now positioning

itself as more than a scroll feed. The platform just launched “search ads” campaigns, where advertisers can leverage keywords that their target audience may be using.

This is a game-changer. Up until now, Google was the main player for any keyword ad campaigns but with the rise of Google AI and people relying on ChatGPT more, Google is holding less power when it comes to search. In fact, in a recent study, TikTok says that 86% of its Gen Z users now use TikTok for search, which nearly matches the usage across traditional search engines.

Enter TikTok’s search campaigns that will trigger your cut-through reels and static image ads when your selected keywords are entered.

Related: ‘More Than Marketing Tools’: Some Business Owners Are Worried About the Possible TikTok Ban

3. Use AI-powered campaigns with Smart+

Competing with Meta’s Advantage+ campaigns, TikTok has now rolled out its new Smart+ campaigns that can be used across a wide range of objectives from awareness, sales and even lead generation. The advertiser can now leave it in the hands of AI when it comes to optimizing their campaigns and how their creative is shown to your audience.

When it comes to best practices, TikTok says for these campaigns, it’s best to upload at least six video variations per ad set so you can see what works best. Using AI and TikTok’s algorithm, the platform endeavors to deliver the right ad to the right audience at the right time.

Related: Who’s Buying TikTok? Here’s What We Know About Who Gets the Algorithm.

4. Size does matter

Our attention spans are always shrinking, and with that, the length of our advertising content. TikTok's algorithm thrives on micro-moments with advertising reels less than 15 seconds, proving to be more successful than longer formats. You no longer need to shoot a monologue or a mini feature film to get noticed – in fact, this could be doing more harm than good. Make sure that you grab your audience's attention in the first three seconds and keep them engaged, and then outline your strong offer within 15 seconds.

TikTok is a platform where viewers don't often engage with content with their sound off, so your ads need to ensure you use music to your advantage. Having voice-over audio clips or catchy music is a sure-fire way to keep your audience engaged.

5. Raw is reel

When shooting your video ads, the good news is raw is real. You no longer need to hire a professional videographer. A few years ago, it was all about your dance moves – now it's all about who has the best content, and often, if you're sitting in a stationary car while recording your reels, this works a treat!

If you're not a fan of putting yourself in front of the camera, then I suggest you engage with a micro influencer, a person who specializes in your niche and has 10,000 followers or fewer. You can even engage with influencers on TikTok's marketplace to select the right talent for your campaign.

Having influencers create content (UGC, user-generated content) can also act as further social proof and a testimonial for your product or service.

And if you're not a fan of editing videos, no problem! TikTok now has inbuilt AI features to even help you edit your videos

to make it all seamless.

If you’re looking for another way to generate leads and increase sales, TikTok should be on your radar. The platform isn’t just for kids — and starting in December 2025, users under 16 will be banned from it in Australia. When your account is set up correctly and paired with creative, high-performing content, TikTok advertising can become a powerful channel for driving traffic, leads and sales for your business.

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Still Debating a 9-to-5 vs. Side Hustle? That’s the Wrong Question to Ask



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Key Takeaways

- The hybrid freelancer model is gaining traction as professionals seek job security through multiple income streams.
- Effective organization and time management are critical for hybrid freelancers to maintain balance and prevent burnout.

In the current job market, one thing is abundantly clear: Stability is an illusion. Even the most established companies are facing layoffs and restructuring. Meanwhile, freelance work (once seen as a riskier, less reliable path) has proven to offer flexibility and resilience during times of change. As a result, many professionals are embracing what I call the hybrid freelancer model: maintaining a traditional job while building a freelance business on the side.

This approach isn't just about earning extra income. It's a deliberate strategy for diversification and security in a volatile economy. By spreading their income streams across both employment and self-employment, hybrid freelancers safeguard themselves from putting all their eggs in one basket.

Why hybrid freelancing is on the rise

After a wave of layoffs across industries from tech to media, more people are realizing that a single employer can't guarantee financial security. Freelancing offers an alternative path — but for many, it's intimidating to go all-in. The hybrid model gives professionals a way to enjoy the best of both worlds.

In fact, Upwork's Future Workforce Index 2025 highlights the rise of "skilled moonlighters" — professionals who freelance alongside their full-time jobs — noting that these workers earned an average of $40,000 in additional income beyond their primary salaries.

Some keep their jobs for the benefits — health insurance, 401(k) matching or predictable paychecks — while using freelance projects to explore creative passions or new industries. Others use freelancing as a low-risk way to test an entrepreneurial idea before leaving their 9-to-5.

In many cases, side hustles become the perfect complement to a full-time role. Copywriters, designers, marketers and consultants often find that freelancing allows them to express creativity, work on projects outside their company's scope and build a personal brand along the way.

Related: How Side Hustles Are Redefining Careers and Shaping the Future of Work

The balancing act: Time management and boundaries

The biggest challenge for hybrid freelancers isn't motivation; it's time management. Juggling two sets of clients (or one employer and multiple freelance clients) requires precision scheduling, clear boundaries and self-awareness about how much you can realistically handle.

Meetings are often the hardest part to coordinate. For example, when I was an early freelancer on the East Coast, I scheduled calls with West Coast clients during my lunch hour or in the early evening. I even took meetings from my car when necessary. Flexibility is essential, but so is structure.

One useful approach is to break your work into blocks throughout the day:

- 1-2 hours in the early morning before your day job begins
- 1-2 hours in the late afternoon or early evening
- Lunch hour admin time/meetings
- A short weekend work session to tie up loose ends

This rhythm helps prevent burnout from marathon evening sessions while keeping projects on track. The key is to experiment with what feels sustainable. For some, 10 hours a week of freelancing feels energizing; for others, increasing to 15 or 20 hours pushes them past their limits. You'll only

find your ideal balance by testing and adjusting.

The tools that keep hybrid freelancers sane

Organization is the backbone of hybrid freelancing. When you have dual responsibilities, clarity becomes your greatest productivity tool.

- **A reliable digital calendar** (such as Google Calendar) is non-negotiable. Schedule blocks for both job and freelance tasks, and include personal time to avoid overbooking.
- **A project management system** – whether Asana, ClickUp or even a well-structured Google Sheet – helps track deliverables, client communications and deadlines.
- **Task lists and automations** can also make a big difference. Automate invoices, recurring reminders and social media scheduling to free up mental space for actual client work.

Most importantly, give yourself generous buffers. Life happens – whether that's a demanding work project, sickness, a child's appointment or simple exhaustion after a long week. If you think something will take five days, budget seven. Delivering early makes a great impression; delivering late, especially while juggling two careers, adds unnecessary stress.

How to know if hybrid freelancing is right for you

Not everyone thrives in the hybrid model – but everyone can learn something from trying it. The best way to start is simple: experiment. Take on one or two freelance projects to test the waters. See how it feels to balance them alongside your current role.

If you find yourself energized and creatively fulfilled, you can build from there. If you feel stretched too thin, scale back to a level that works for your lifestyle. Hybrid freelancing isn't about hustling endlessly – it's about finding the equilibrium between security and freedom.

It's also important to check your company's policies. Some employers have non-compete clauses or restrictions around outside work. Transparency and professionalism go a long way in maintaining trust while you pursue both paths.

Related: **How to Balance a Full-Time Job With a Side Hustle**

The future belongs to the hybrid worker

We're entering an era where career stability doesn't come from a single employer but from a portfolio of professional identities. The hybrid freelancer represents the next stage of the modern workforce: diversified, adaptable and self-reliant.

Balancing traditional employment with freelancing is no longer a stopgap measure. It's a strategic career move that allows professionals to take ownership of their income, creativity and career trajectory. Whether you're preparing for a future career shift or simply creating a safety net, hybrid freelancing might just be the smartest move you make.

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Automate Your Job Search and Triple Your Interviews for Just $39



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The average corporate job posting receives 250 applications, making it increasingly difficult for qualified professionals to stand out, LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends report says. However, you can significantly increase your chances of landing interviews by automating your job applications. You can do this throughout the rest of your career with a lifetime subscription to LoopCV's Premium for only $39.

Turn hours of daily applications into minutes

LoopCV Premium connects to more than 30 job platforms, including LinkedIn, Indeed, Monster Jobs, and Dice. The system searches for positions matching your criteria across all platforms simultaneously, then automatically applies on your

behalf or gives you one-click manual control. This consolidation can save a great deal of time while maximizing reach.

The platform applies to up to 300 positions a month and manages up to 50 different job title searches at a time. You can set specific parameters for job titles, locations and company preferences. The advanced filtering system lets you exclude certain companies or focus on remote opportunities anywhere in the world, which is particularly valuable for anyone seeking flexible work arrangements or targeting specific industries.

An automated email outreach feature identifies recruiter contact information and sends personalized messages using customizable templates. This proactive approach helps you stand out from candidates who only submit applications through standard portals. For professionals in competitive fields, direct recruiter contact can make the difference between getting noticed and getting lost in the pile.

You can even optimize your resume performance by using the CV Builder and A/B testing features to track which versions generate the most responses. The platform collects statistics on email open rates, company replies and resume effectiveness. This data-driven approach allows you to continuously improve your application materials based on real results rather than guesswork.

The LinkedIn Apply extension streamlines applications on the platform where many professional opportunities appear first. High-priority application processing ensures your submissions reach employers quickly. Custom email addresses maintain a professional appearance throughout your outreach efforts.

Get a lifetime subscription to the LoopCV Premium Plan for just $39.

StackSocial prices subject to change.

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The Best Buyer for Your Business Isn’t Always the One With the Biggest Checkbook — Here’s What to Watch For



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Key Takeaways

- Experienced operators bring a perspective to acquisitions that goes beyond spreadsheets and financial models.
- Understanding people, processes and industry context

often outweighs the biggest financial offer.

In the world of business acquisitions, buyers tend to fall into two broad camps. Some rely on spreadsheets, debt models and market comps. Others rely on lived experience. Both perspectives matter, but only operators have felt the weight of running a business from the inside, not just analyzing it from afar.

That is why operators so often make the strongest business buyers. Not because they are inherently smarter than finance-driven acquirers, but because they have boots-on-the-ground experience running and operating a business. They've carried payroll, fixed broken workflows, calmed angry customers, coached struggling employees and watched small decisions ripple through an entire organization. That kind of pattern recognition doesn't come from a model — it comes from doing the work.

Related: Why Investors With an Entrepreneurial Past Are Crucial to Startup Success

Operators see what the numbers miss

There is a misconception that successful investing is mostly about numbers. Of course, financials matter, but they rarely tell the whole story. Operators see beyond what looks good on paper.

Years of managing teams, solving problems and navigating regulations build instincts for what truly drives performance. Operators know where value creation levers exist and where hidden risks lie. I've seen countless deals that looked perfect on paper but fell apart in real life. One healthcare business I evaluated boasted extraordinary margins thanks to a government reimbursement program. However, that revenue stream was under legislative review. A finance-only buyer might have celebrated the numbers. An operator familiar with the policy

landscape knows better.

Operators understand nuance. They can spot when a business model runs on assumptions that won't hold under pressure. They recognize the practical realities that never appear in a slide deck: the workforce gaps, the "scalable" system held together by one irreplaceable employee, the growth plan that collapses once you talk to the people actually doing the work. On paper, it all makes sense. In real life, it doesn't move.

Operators win the trust game

When acquiring founder-led companies, the highest bid is rarely the deciding factor. Sellers want to know their people will be cared for, that customers will stay loyal and that the next owner will not destroy what they spent a lifetime building. Operators understand those pressures. When a seller hands over their "baby," operators can immediately show they grasp that responsibility.

This credibility extends to lenders and investors. Capital partners know an operator has already made hard decisions inside a business. They're not funding theory — they're backing someone who has already executed.

Operators flatten the learning curve

Every acquisition comes with a learning curve. Even capable operators face surprises in the first six to twelve months of ownership — a dip in performance often called the "J-curve."

Operators tend to have a shallower and shorter J-curve than financial buyers. They've already made many rookie mistakes, so they can anticipate operational and personnel challenges early. This practical experience also builds instant credibility with employees. When a new owner understands the

team’s work and world, respect comes quickly, which translates into faster alignment, stronger execution and fewer early setbacks.

Operators understand that people drive performance

Finance, leadership and strategy can be learned at the best business schools, but nothing replaces hands-on experience with people. People are the most challenging and important part of any business. Processes can be redesigned and technology replaced, but leading human beings requires empathy, decisiveness and integrity.

Looking back on my journey from operator to owner, the moments that mattered most had nothing to do with spreadsheets. They were about people: helping an employee through a hard season, celebrating a win together or creating a culture where everyone feels seen and valued. These investments rarely appear on a balance sheet, but they often deliver the fastest and largest returns.

Related: I Was a Founder Before I Became an Investor — Here’s How It Shaped My Investment Strategy

Operators play to their strengths

Acquisition entrepreneurs often debate whether to stay within their industry or explore something entirely new. The best results usually come from staying close to what’s familiar.

Industry experience is often underestimated. Existing networks, earned credibility and deep insight into customer pain points are powerful advantages. Walking away from that expertise is like forfeiting a head start. High-performing professionals sometimes buy businesses outside their field — attorneys buying lawn care companies, physicians purchasing

laundromats — only to discover that industry familiarity matters more than expected.

Burnout is rarely caused by the industry itself. It's usually the pace, red tape or environment. Jumping into a completely foreign industry often replaces one pressure with another. Staying in or near your field lets you leverage your expertise, networks and instincts while building something fresh.

Related: Not All Buyers of Your Business Are Created Equal — Here's What to Consider

The buyer's edge

The best buyers aren't always the ones with the biggest checkbook. They are the ones who know how to run what they buy. Operators see a business as a living system, held together by people, decisions and daily execution. They have already done the hard part. They know what it takes. When they step into ownership, they aren't stepping into leadership for the first time — they are applying experience that is real, earned and repeatable.

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Strong Leaders Use This Creative Strategy to Come Up With the Best Ideas



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Key Takeaways

- Discover why some of the world’s most famous innovations didn’t come from the boardroom.
- Learn how everyday employees can spark breakthroughs you might be overlooking.

What do Post-it notes, Gmail and Slack have in common? It’s not just their stickiness. They were all born from employees solving their own problems — innovating at the edge of their organizations with minimal oversight but huge creativity.

In 1974, Art Fry was frustrated when his bookmarks kept falling out of his hymnal during choir practice. He remembered a “failed” adhesive his 3M colleague had created during their “permitted bootlegging” time (now known as 15% time). Fry applied the adhesive to his bookmark, and it never fell out again. That simple idea eventually became the billion-dollar

Post-it® note product line.

Fast-forward to 2003: Paul Bucheit, an engineer at Google, was annoyed by storage limits and slow speeds of existing email services. Using Google's famed "20% time," he built Gmail, which would go on to become the world's most widely used email platform.

In 2009, Facebook engineers Justin Rosenstein and Leah Perlman were participating in an internal hackathon. Their challenge was helping users interact with content more easily, a problem they solved elegantly: the "Like" button. Today, it's a standard feature across social media.

These examples have become part of corporate lore — but they illustrate an important truth: the best innovations rarely come from boardrooms. They come from people on the front lines, solving problems they actually face.

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The problem with top-down innovation

Consider a Monday-morning standup where a CEO announces a new project management tool "to improve collaboration." The team groans because no one asked the people who actually use these tools daily. Or think about AI-powered updates to apps and services that solve problems no one really has — classic innovation theater.

Well-intentioned, top-down initiatives often waste time and money. They lack the context, urgency, and personal buy-in that drive adoption. Both internal innovation and customer-facing products suffer when leadership is disconnected from day-to-day realities.

Why grassroots innovation works

People on the front lines see friction points daily. They notice patterns and pain points that leadership often misses, giving them insight into the problems that truly need solving.

Take the night-shift cleaning crew at Tokyo Station, Japan. Averaging 68 years old, they clean a 1,000-passenger train in seven minutes, precisely and with pride. When they request better equipment or workflow changes, management acts quickly. This team exemplifies bottom-up innovation: motivated, empowered, and constantly improving.

Bottom-up innovation allows people to create solutions to their own challenges, which is faster, iterative and more motivating than top-down directives. Knowledge compounds like interest – the quicker the cycles of experimentation, the faster the learning. But it only works if the right people, culture, and freedom are in place.

Creating the conditions for grassroots innovation

Hiring is your first step. Look for curiosity and initiative. Seek people who question the status quo and solve problems beyond their job description. These are the employees most likely to drive meaningful change.

Next, create psychological safety. Small failures should be learning opportunities, not career setbacks. Give teams budgets and freedom to test ideas without excessive approvals, while tracking insights and outcomes. Celebrating attempts – even unsuccessful ones – keeps confidence and creativity high.

Finally, remove friction. Provide fast-track approvals, democratize access to tools and data, break down silos and equip teams for rapid experimentation. Train managers to

champion rather than gatekeep these efforts and create pathways to scale successful ideas.

Related: How to Build an AI-Driven Company Culture – Without Overwhelming Employees

Getting started

Start by identifying people already solving problems creatively. Give them time, resources and autonomy. Encourage small experiments, track engagement and iterations and celebrate learning – even from failures. Scale the solutions that work.

Bottom-up innovation consistently beats top-down approaches because it's organic, authentic and informed by real problems. As a leader, your role is to enable innovation, not dictate it. Clear the path, remove barriers and give credit where it's due.

This week, challenge yourself to identify one person in your organization who's already solving problems creatively, and empower them to do more. The people closest to the work often know best how to improve it – and your job is to give them the freedom to act.

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The Quiet Revolution Making Business Ownership More Attainable Than Ever



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Key Takeaways

- Fundless sponsors and fractional funds are democratizing business ownership. Together, they're redefining what it means to invest, acquire and scale businesses.
- Fundless sponsors go out, source deals, negotiate terms and bring in investors on a deal-by-deal basis. It offers transparency to investors and flexibility to deal-makers.
- A fractional fund bridges the gap between a one-off sponsor and a traditional PE fund. The model preserves the entrepreneurial spirit of the fundless sponsor while adding structure and sustainability.

Not long ago, buying a company meant one of two things: You were either a private equity giant with billions in committed capital or a strategic acquirer expanding your empire. For everyone else, operators, small firms or ambitious

professionals, the acquisition world felt like a closed room.

But the doors are opening. A quiet revolution is taking place across the lower and middle markets, led by a new class of deal-makers who are rewriting how ownership transitions happen. They're called fundless sponsors and fractional fund managers, and together, they're redefining what it means to invest, acquire and scale businesses.

Related: Think You Need Millions to Buy a Business? Think Again. Here's How to Do It Without Raising Any Capital.

The rise of the fundless sponsor

The fundless sponsor model started as a scrappy workaround. Instead of raising capital first, sponsors go out, source deals, negotiate terms and then bring in investors on a deal-by-deal basis.

It's a reversal of the traditional fund model: no long fundraising cycles, no blind pool commitments and no expensive fund administration. Sponsors get to move fast, stay independent and prove their value through execution.

For years, this approach flew under the radar, used mainly by independent sponsors, ex-operators or boutique advisors who didn't have institutional capital. But as private capital markets expanded and LPs grew frustrated with slow-moving funds, the model found its moment.

The fundless approach offered transparency to investors and flexibility to deal-makers. Yet it also carried growing pains: unpredictable income, credibility gaps with sellers and the constant need to re-raise capital for each deal. That's where the fractional fund comes in.

The evolution: From fundless to fractional

A fractional fund bridges the gap between a one-off sponsor and a traditional PE fund. It's smaller, nimbler and laser-focused, built around a clear investment thesis and a trusted group of LPs.

Instead of a $100 million blind pool, a fractional fund might raise $5-10 million from a handful of limited partners to pursue a defined set of opportunities. Think micro-rollups in B2B software, acquisitions of niche healthcare providers or buying regional logistics firms ripe for technology upgrades.

This model preserves the entrepreneurial spirit of the fundless sponsor while adding structure and sustainability. Fund managers now earn small management fees, build recurring income and gain more credibility in the eyes of both investors and sellers.

Why it works now

Three shifts have converged to make fractional funds not just viable, but strategically superior for the next decade of deal-making.

1. Access to tools and talent:

Technology has flattened the field. From sourcing deals through online platforms to running diligence with freelance analysts and virtual CFOs, small operators now have the same infrastructure once reserved for big funds.

2. LP preferences are changing:

Investors today want control and visibility. They're tired of paying 2-and-20 fees and waiting a decade for liquidity. Fractional funds let them pick specific theses and see exactly

where their dollars go.

3. Operators are turning into owners:

Former founders, CFOs and growth executives are realizing they can buy and scale businesses using their operational expertise without relying on a massive PE firm to back them.

Put simply, the middle market has matured. The systems, investors and expertise that once powered billion-dollar firms are now accessible to those playing at the $1-10 million level.

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How small firms now think like PE funds

Fractional funds are not mini versions of private equity; they're smarter versions.

They're rethinking the capital stack, deal flow and post-acquisition playbook in ways that mirror the sophistication of PE firms, but without the overhead or bureaucracy.

- **Sourcing:** Instead of brokers and investment banks, they rely on direct outreach, niche communities and LinkedIn-based networks to find deals others miss.
- **Underwriting:** They apply data tools and fractional diligence teams to quickly screen opportunities, without wasting months on analysis paralysis.
- **Financing:** They combine equity, SBA lending, seller notes and mezzanine debt to craft innovative deals that optimize returns and minimize dilution.
- **Operations:** Post-acquisition, they often act as "active

owners," stepping in to improve margins, introduce automation and professionalize financial systems.

This operational intensity, combined with capital discipline, enables them to create real value rather than chase valuation.

Move away from "buy and flip" to "build and compound"

Classic PE has been all about financial engineering and calendar-year exits for decades. But the newer crop of sponsors is playing a different game. They are builders, not flippers.

Their orientation is toward permanently acquiring businesses to own and compound, not simply to sell. This model prioritizes consistent cash generation, operating improvement and incentives aligned with management teams.

Rather than emphasizing speedy IRRs, fractional funds are focused on:

- **Systemic growth:** Creating long-lasting revenue engines
- **Cash efficiency:** Driving growth with profits, not debt
- **Cultural fit:** Keeping the individuals who made the business great to begin with

By doing so, they're blending two worlds: the agility of the entrepreneur and the discipline of the investor.

Why founders are embracing this new buyer class

For founders looking to sell, traditional PE can feel impersonal, numbers-first, empathy-second. Fractional funds

flip that experience.

Their managers are often operators themselves. They understand the fatigue of building a business, the responsibility of employees and the pride behind a founder's legacy. That shared DNA creates trust.

Deals close faster. Terms are often more flexible. And post-close, sellers frequently stay involved in advisory or profit-sharing roles. The transaction feels less like an exit and more like a partnership.

In an age where reputation travels fast, that matters. Sellers now care as much about *who* they sell to as how much they sell for.

The emerging playbook for fractional funds

As this model matures, a distinct playbook is emerging among high-performing fractional fund managers:

1. **Start narrow:** Pick one vertical like SaaS, healthcare or home services and become the go-to buyer in that space.
2. **Build recurring LP relationships:** Treat investors like long-term partners, not deal participants. Regular updates, transparent reporting and shared wins create stickiness.
3. **Operationalize value creation:** Develop repeatable frameworks for improving businesses' cash flow dashboards, pricing systems or CRM automations.
4. **Create your flywheel:** Each acquisition should feed the next through shared back offices, data insights or cross-portfolio synergies.

This is how small funds punch above their weight. They don't try to outspend the big players; they outthink them.

Related: Buying a Business? Make Sure It Checks The Boxes On This Checklist Before You Pull The Trigger.

What comes next

The coming decade of deal activity will not be characterized by how much capital you raise, but rather how successfully you put it to use.

Fractional ownership and fundless sponsors are a philosophical change as well as a financial one. They're democratizing ownership, rewarding operators and connecting investors with real-world constructors.

In this new world, the old capital hierarchy is disintegrating. Networks, execution and expertise are more important than size or pedigree.

It is an open invitation for new GPs.

Stop waiting to raise $50 million before you act. Start with $1 million, one deal and one strong thesis. The infrastructure exists, the investors are willing, and the opportunity window is wide open.

Because the future of private equity won't belong to the biggest firms — it'll belong to the boldest builders.

And in this new era of deal-making, you don't need to own a fund to operate like one.

Key Takeaways

- Fundless sponsors and fractional funds are democratizing business ownership. Together, they're redefining what it

means to invest, acquire and scale businesses.

- Fundless sponsors go out, source deals, negotiate terms and bring in investors on a deal-by-deal basis. It offers transparency to investors and flexibility to deal-makers.
- A fractional fund bridges the gap between a one-off sponsor and a traditional PE fund. The model preserves the entrepreneurial spirit of the fundless sponsor while adding structure and sustainability.

Not long ago, buying a company meant one of two things: You were either a private equity giant with billions in committed capital or a strategic acquirer expanding your empire. For everyone else, operators, small firms or ambitious professionals, the acquisition world felt like a closed room.

But the doors are opening. A quiet revolution is taking place across the lower and middle markets, led by a new class of deal-makers who are rewriting how ownership transitions happen. They're called fundless sponsors and fractional fund managers, and together, they're redefining what it means to invest, acquire and scale businesses.

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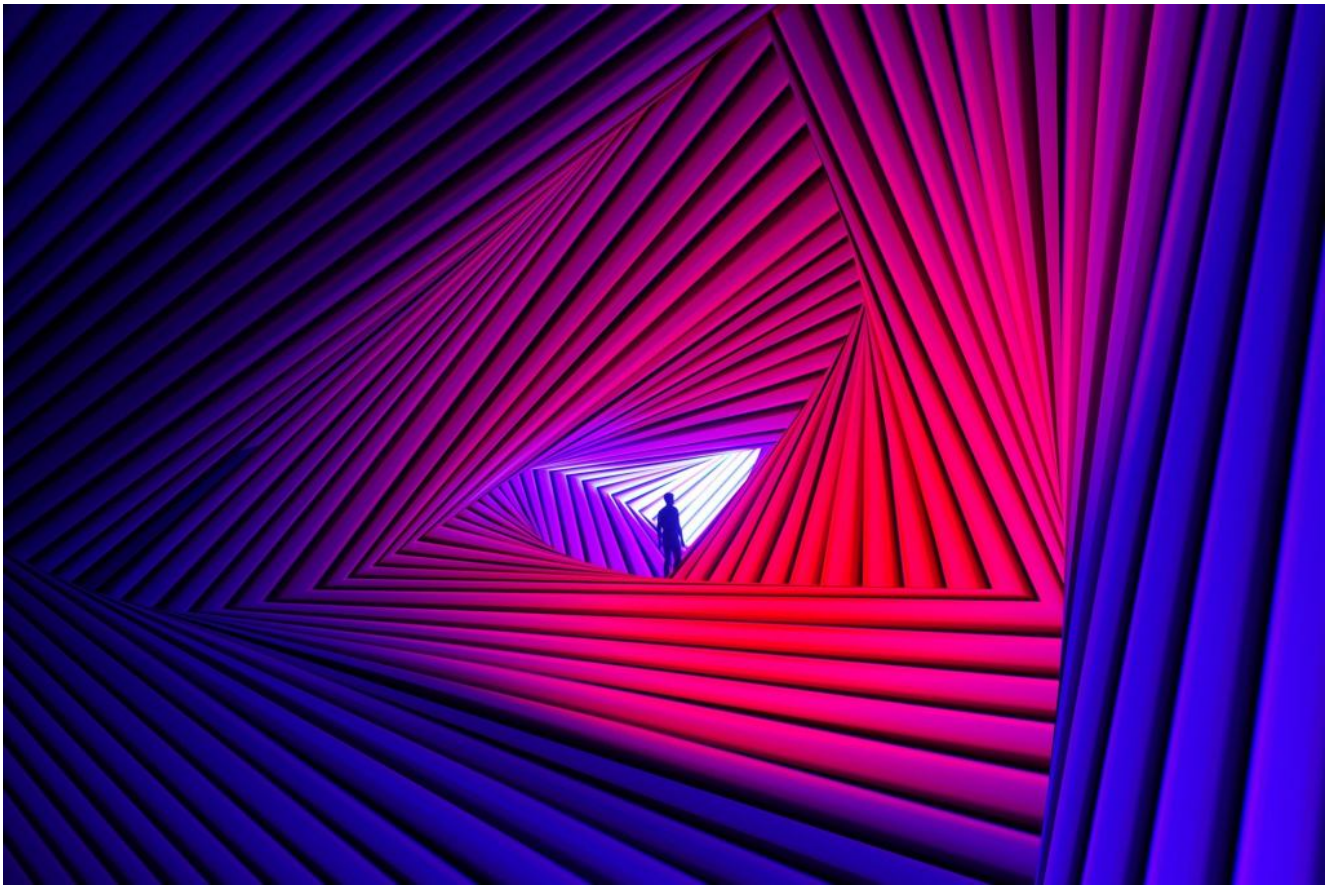
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5 Moves Every CEO Should Make

to Create a Winning Strategic Plan for 2026



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Key Takeaways

- Think big, not incremental. Focusing solely on the short term could come at the expense of long-term success.
- Integrate external trends strategically. Have a clear plan before you experiment with trends.
- Communicate mission, vision and values relentlessly. Effective communication is constant, clear and specific.
- Balance growth ambitions with focused investment, and prioritize the metrics that truly matter.

As CEOs plan for 2026, uncertainty and rapid change can make it easy to get stuck in incremental thinking. From persistent

economic volatility to shifting workforce expectations and the acceleration of AI adoption, many business leaders are defaulting to caution. CEOs lean toward playing it safe and can be hesitant to make big moves.

Caution is understandable, as the past few years have been unpredictable. However, that mindset can be dangerous. Incremental progress might feel secure, but it rarely leads to real growth. Now is the time to think big — to revisit the long-term vision and ensure every part of the strategy supports it.

Below are five considerations for best-in-class leaders as they map out their strategic plans for 2026 and beyond:

Related: Strategic Planning Doesn't Have to Be Complex — This Simple, 3-Part Framework Delivers Faster Results

1. Think big, not incremental

Right now, many leaders are frozen by uncertainty. They're so focused on surviving the next quarter that they've lost sight of the bigger picture. Hitting a few short-term targets might feel like progress, but focusing solely on the short term could come at the expense of long-term success.

Incremental thinking can quietly stall growth. When leaders lower their expectations or assume the next year will be a "reset" period, they stop challenging their teams to innovate. Employees pick up on that mindset immediately. If leaders tell their team it's going to be a tough year, they'll take that as permission to play it safe.

The best leaders keep their long-term vision front and center, even in uncertain times. These long-term goals drive every decision.

2. Integrate external trends strategically

One of the biggest mistakes I see leaders make is tinkering with trends without a clear strategy. Take AI, for example. Some companies are experimenting with tools and calling it a strategy. But the most successful CEOs develop a clear plan for how AI fits into their business, enhances their operations and strengthens their value proposition. Otherwise, AI becomes a distraction rather than a driver of growth.

The same principle applies to workforce strategy. Hybrid and flexible work arrangements are here to stay. According to our recent Vistage research, CEOs are increasingly settling into stable workplace models: 43% report a hybrid workforce, 45% are fully onsite, and 8% are fully remote. Retention now depends on giving workers choice and autonomy. In many industries, leaders are adapting how they communicate, manage and engage teams to make flexibility work without sacrificing alignment or culture.

Supply chains and geopolitics are other critical areas where leaders can’t afford to be reactive. Businesses with connections to global supply chains are proactively planning to manage tariffs, regulations and potential disruptions. Waiting until a problem hits is too late. Strategic leaders anticipate these risks and build their plans around them, rather than hoping for their preferred outcome.

Related: How Strategic Planning Transforms Chaos Into Confidence

3. Communicate mission, vision and values relentlessly

Leaders may assume their teams understand their organization’s

mission, vision and values because they shared them at a past employee meeting. In reality, people forget. They get caught up in day-to-day tasks and lose sight of why the work matters. Especially in hybrid or decentralized work environments, effective communication is constant, clear and specific.

And, great leadership isn't just about talking. It's about listening and empowering others. The people closest to the frontline often have the best ideas. Great leaders encourage them to speak up, take ownership and contribute solutions.

4. Balance growth ambitions with focused investment

Ambition is essential, but so is focus. Great leaders filter every decision and new initiative through the lens of their core business purpose. They ask: "Does this move us closer to being the very best at what we do?" If the answer is no, then it's a distraction.

Focused investment may mean saying "no" as often as "yes." Growth doesn't come from piling on more initiatives. It comes from concentrating energy, resources and attention on the few things that truly drive value.

5. Prioritize the metrics that truly matter

One common pitfall in strategic planning is focusing on too many metrics. When everything feels important, nothing really is. Successful leaders identify the single key success metric that drives their business forward. This metric helps track whether a company is fulfilling its purpose and moving the organization in the right direction.

Once that metric is defined, dashboards, reports and meetings

are simplified. Too often, teams get bogged down in secondary metrics that create noise but don’t drive impact. In effective organizations, every initiative, KPI and project supports the primary goal.

Related: How To Create A High-Performing Strategic Plan

If there’s one piece of advice I would give CEOs planning for 2026, it’s this: Lead the strategic planning process. Great leaders don’t delegate strategy to someone else or treat it like a box to check. They know they need to be in the room, asking the tough questions, shaping the direction and ensuring the team is aligned with the vision.

They are also disciplined about where they invest their time, energy, and resources. The companies that succeed will be the ones that combine bold vision with relentless focus, clear priorities and leadership that actively guides the path forward.

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I Barely Posted on LinkedIn. Then I Reached 735,000 People in Less Than a Year.



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Key Takeaways

- Consistent, honest insight builds trust faster than polished content or viral spikes.
- Don’t teach — translate complex change into clear, human language people can act on.
- Visibility grows when you balance foresight with vulnerability and show your real process.

A few years ago, I didn’t post on LinkedIn.

Not because I didn’t have ideas, but because I didn’t think anyone cared to hear them. I was focused on building my business quietly, keeping my head down, doing great work.

Over time, I noticed something: the people who were talking about their ideas were creating opportunities I was still working behind the scenes to earn. Their voice was scaling

their credibility faster than their output.

So I started showing up, at first inconsistently, then intentionally. That decision connected me to thousands of professionals, clients and brands I could never have reached otherwise, including some my firm now works with directly.

Here’s the part most growth stories miss. It didn’t happen because of content calendars, SEO tricks or trendy hooks. It happened because I started saying what everyone else was too afraid to say.

Most creators post to teach. I post to translate.

I translate what people are really thinking but never say out loud: the fear of being left behind by technology, the exhaustion of pretending to love hustle culture, the quiet pressure of constant reinvention.

When I write, my goal isn’t to sound smart. It’s to sound human. Because underneath every professional title is someone trying to stay relevant, valued and seen.

What resonated most were posts that blended honesty with optimism, where I named an anxiety most people feel, then flipped it to show the strength underneath it.

In less than a year, my content reached 735,296 people, and grew my following by 64% year over year. Nearly 65% of that reach came from just five posts. Those weren’t random hits. They followed a pattern.

The posts that traveled farthest weren’t the most polished. They were the most real. I shared milestones and client wins, but I also wrote about uncertainty, transformation and the weight of leading through change. People weren’t just following the success; they were following the process. When you humanize achievement, people trust the insight behind it.

Related: She’s a LinkedIn Top Voice — Here Are the Tips That

Keep Her at the Top of Everyone's Feed

The content that scaled my audience wasn't written to impress. It was written to land. I learned that in an attention economy, clarity is currency. When you can explain something complex, like the future of AI or new technologies, in a way that makes people feel informed, not inferior, you build trust at scale. The clearer the message, the faster it spreads.

September 2025 alone accounted for a third of my annual reach. That wasn't luck. It was the result of six months of consistent, insight-driven posting. I stayed early on emerging technologies, breaking down AI trends before most people were even talking about them. Consistency builds rhythm, but foresight builds credibility. The more I shared ideas that helped others see what was coming, the more momentum I created.

My strongest posts combined thought leadership with empathy, the tension between what's changing and what people fear about it. When I show professionals they're not falling behind but actually ahead for noticing the shift, they engage, share and reach out. That balance of realism and optimism converts attention into real relationships and real business.

We're in a new era of visibility. Every founder now leads two companies: the one that builds products and the one that builds perception. Your voice is no longer marketing collateral. It's market intelligence. It shapes how clients perceive your credibility, how partners decide to collaborate and how talent chooses where to work.

Related: 6 Reasons Why Successful Entrepreneurs Need to Be on LinkedIn

If you're an entrepreneur trying to grow your brand online, here's what matters most right now.

Build trust before you build traffic. Audiences can tell the

difference between content created to connect and content created to perform. Trust compounds faster than reach, and it's the algorithm that truly matters.

Stop teaching. Start translating. People don't need another expert. They need someone who can interpret change for them. Translate what's happening in your space into language people can act on. That's what builds loyalty.

Treat consistency like currency. Posting once a week for a year built more momentum than any viral spike. Consistency doesn't just feed algorithms, it trains your audience to listen.

Lead with curiosity, not certainty. When you show your process, your questions and your evolving perspective, people see you as a builder, not a broadcaster. Transparency invites collaboration.

Stay human in the data. The metrics matter, but they're not the mission. Behind every impression is a person. Behind every follower is trust. When you speak with clarity, empathy and foresight, your numbers take care of themselves.

My journey on LinkedIn was never about going viral.

It was about learning how ideas spread when they're anchored in honesty. I didn't grow by chasing perfection. I grew by being early, being real and being relentlessly consistent.

That's what works now, and it's what will keep working long after the algorithms change.

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Get More Done with Costco’s $65 Gold Star Membership Plus a $40 Digital Shop Card



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Target ‘Really Struggling’ as Sales Miss the Mark

Target sales are way off target. The company reported a 2.7% drop in comparable-sales in the third quarter, its fifth straight quarter of decline. Meanwhile, its stock has falled nearly 35% this year. “Target is really struggling and does not seem to be able to climb out of the hole it has dug itself into,” Neil Saunders, an analyst at GlobalData Retail, told CNN.

The retail behemoth has been slipping for nearly four years, as its once-reliable “cheap chic” mix of clothing and home goods has fallen out of step with what inflation-wary shoppers want. Earlier this year it cut its global workforce by 8% to rein in costs as sales continue to slide.

Target plans to invest about $1 billion more in 2026 for new stores, remodels and an improved digital business, as part of a turnaround effort. The company also said it will slash prices on 3,000 everyday items.

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Frontier Airlines Offering $349 Pass for Unlimited Flights Into 2027



Photo by Michael Yanow/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Here’s a bit of good news for air travelers who’ve had to endure weeks of headaches. Frontier Airlines has cut the price of its GoWild! All-You-Can-Fly Annual Pass to $349, a limited-time discount from its usual $599. The pass gives travelers unlimited flights to more than 100 destinations through April 2027.

The offer comes with notable limits. Passholders must book close to departure — typically one day before domestic flights and ten days before international trips — and several blackout dates apply. Each trip carries a one-cent base fare, but taxes, airport fees, seat assignments, and bags cost extra. Frontier also warns that availability is capacity-controlled, so not every flight will have pass seats.

The move reflects how budget airlines are experimenting with subscription-style travel to keep planes full and court price-sensitive customers.

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Adobe Snaps Up Semrush for $1.9 billion



Photo by Smith Collection/Gado/Getty Images

Adobe is making a big move in digital marketing, buying Semrush for $1.9 billion. The deal gives Adobe deeper reach into search, social, and AI-driven content tools. Semrush shareholders will receive $12 a share in cash.

Semrush built its business on SEO software, audience insights, and competitive research tools used by millions of marketers. Adobe plans to fold those capabilities into its Experience Cloud and expand how brands track their visibility across search engines and AI platforms.

The acquisition comes at a crucial moment for Adobe, which has faced investor pressure to show momentum in its AI strategy. Adding Semrush gives Adobe a bigger footprint in marketing tech and a clearer path to selling more AI-powered tools.

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Elon Musk Lands Major Saudi Deal for Massive New Data Center



Photo by Brendan Smialowski / AFP) (Photo by BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images

Elon Musk's xAI struck a deal with Saudi Arabia's state-backed AI firm Humain to build a large data center in the kingdom. The facility is expected to use as much as 500 megawatts of electricity, which would make it xAI's biggest data center outside the US.

For Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the partnership is part of an effort to diversify the Saudi economy and turn the country into an AI and tech hub. U.S. officials also reached an agreement this week that will allow Saudi Arabia to buy the American-made semiconductors needed to power the project.

For Musk, the deal gives xAI a powerful financial partner. He has also been in advanced talks to raise roughly $15 billion in new equity funding, which would push xAI's valuation to about $230 billion.

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A Top Fashion Influencer Is Facing Five Years in Prison



Photo by Carlos Alvarez/Getty Images

A fashion star, with over 28 million Instagram followers, is in hot water for alleged fraud. Chiara Ferragni is accused of selling pricey Christmas cakes and Easter eggs for charity, but prosecutors say the money went to her companies instead of the children's hospital she promoted.

Ferragni is a frequent attendee of major international fashion events such as New York Fashion Week and many red-carpet premieres. Her estimated networth is $30 million.

If she's found guilty, Ferragni could face as much as five years in prison. Her case is now working its way through a court in Milan, where she's already been fined once for a similar advertising scam.

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Gen Z Says This Is the Ideal Age to Retire



Photo by Janina Steinmetz/Getty

In a new survey, Gen Z said the ideal age to retire is 59, much earlier than millennials, Gen X, or boomers. The cohort, born between 1997 and 2012, shared this view in the Manulife/John Hancock Financial Resilience and Longevity Report 2025.

But they also expect they'll actually retire at 67, reflecting the gap between what they want and what they think they can afford.

Many say their finances are shaky, with more than half rating their money situation as fair or poor, thanks in large part to debt. Nearly six in ten worry about inflation and rising

living costs. Forty-two percent feel their retirement savings are already behind schedule, and only 29% have a real plan in place.

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AI Bubble? What AI Bubble. Nvidia Beats Earnings Expectations



Photo by BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images

For all the Wall Street forecasters calling the AI boom a bubble, Nvidia had other plans. Earnings beat expectations and calmed nerves across the market. The strong showing arrived during a stretch of market volatility and heightened debate over whether AI valuations have outpaced reality.

Revenue and profit both came in ahead of expectations, driven by steady demand for Nvidia’s chips, which power data centers and AI development across the industry. Investors continue to view the company as a key indicator of AI’s overall health.

While the numbers don’t put the bubble debate entirely to rest, they signal that AI spending remains strong. The coming quarters will show if that momentum can last.

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