Foreword

Confessions of a Dispensable Marketer

by Chad de Lisle

I've been in marketing for nearly twenty years. I’ve worked at a half-dozen agencies on hundreds of businesses and have collaborated with dozens of marketing leaders and CEOs before coming to Disruptive Advertising to work with Jacob, Disruptive’s CEO and the author of this book.

For many of those years, I was guilty of showing up with pleaser energy. A pleaser isn’t a partner. Your CEO needs a partner.

I didn't have a voice of my own or the language to challenge or clarify what we were actually trying to accomplish. I thought I was being supportive when I was actually being useless, or, in the terms of this book, *dispensable*.

An Indispensable Marketer pushes back. They show up with courage and data. They show up with a voice willing to challenge, and they demand clarity. Instead, I was hoping I could figure out what my CEOs wanted through telepathy.

I was a terrible mind reader, and I bet you are, too.

This book is the result of Jacob’s and my yearlong journey to figure out how to systematically transform me into the partner Jacob needed me to be. The framework in these pages is the fruit of that painful, grueling, and very exciting year, during which I finally stopped pleasing and started initiating the hard conversations that would make me indispensable to my CEO.

If you're ready to become indispensable, the pages ahead will show you the way. You'll gain the clarity, confidence, and influence to become a true partner to your CEO, along with the career opportunities that come with it.

I know I did.

Introduction

Marketing had been in the doghouse at my company, Disruptive Advertising, for six months.

Now, we were sitting around the conference table, our executive team listening to our marketing leader, Chad, give another disappointing presentation. The numbers were not there. I dug in, asking pointed questions and watching him come up short. One by one, his colleagues stepped in, offering to rearrange their schedules, shift their priorities, and pick up the slack. Every offer was generous. And every offer confirmed what Chad already knew.

He wasn't leading; he was being carried.

Utterly defeated, he raised his hand, silenced the room, and said the painful words that he'd been thinking at 3 a.m. for months: "I might not be the right guy for this job."

Chad had been at the company for nearly a decade. He'd worked his way up through the agency, knew the clients, and believed in what we were building. But since stepping into the marketing leadership role, he'd been caught in a spiral he couldn't name. I'd review his work and tell him something felt off. He'd ask what I wanted. I'd say it didn't feel right. He'd guess. I'd react. Neither of us could break the cycle of blame and disappointment.

Meanwhile, marketing performance tanked. We missed sales numbers, and I started finding broken systems everywhere. Broken links. Dead phone numbers. And landing pages with the wrong content.

That should have been the end, but it wasn't. I realized that if I fired Chad, he would become the sixth marketing leader I'd burned through in eight years.

Obviously, I kept hiring the wrong person.

Or maybe the common denominator was me.

This insight gave me pause.

After a lot of introspection, executive coaching, and uncomfortable vulnerability, I eventually had to admit that it was my fault. Chad wasn't failing because he lacked talent. He was failing because the environment made it impossible for him to do the job.

The Dispensable Marketer

If you're a marketing leader reading this book, it's likely that some version of this story feels painfully familiar.

You entered your company with momentum. The founder looked at you with desperate eyes and told you that you were the missing piece. For the first ninety days, you were the hero. Then, the energy shifted. Results weren't materializing fast enough. The CEO stopped smiling when you walked into the room. Conversations shifted from praise to interrogation.

You started to feel less like a strategic partner and more like a vending machine. Insert budget. Pull lever. Dispense revenue. When the revenue didn't appear fast enough, you started guessing. You scrambled, hiding bad data and operating from scarcity. You were terrified that if the numbers dipped on Monday, you'd be out by Friday. You stopped building a career and started building a bunker. The job that was supposed to be your big break was slowly breaking you. The best job in the world had turned into the worst. You stopped doing work you were proud of, costing you job security and worse—your soul.

This is what it feels like to be a Dispensable Marketer, and it's not your fault. The average tenure of a CMO has historically been among the shortest in the C-Suite, suggesting that most marketing leaders never escape this dynamic.[1] That pressure doesn't stay in the corner office; it rolls downhill to every marketing role.

The Dispensable Marketer isn't lazy or stupid. Usually, they're talented, hardworking, and committed, just like Chad and the five marketing leaders I'd fired before him. But there's a fundamental disconnect between the founder or CEO who holds the vision and the marketing leader who's supposed to execute it. The marketer is left guessing instead of leading. Both sides feel the misalignment, and neither knows how to fix it. This is the Trust Gap: marketers and CEOs without a common language to discuss their goals, strategies, and execution.

Add to that a new layer of pressure. AI can already do much of what used to fill a marketer's day, and the technology is only getting better. Execution is rapidly becoming a commodity. Drafting copy, building reports, and optimizing spend will be handled by software that costs $40 per month.

Talk about dispensable.

The Indispensable Marketer

There is another way.

Chad didn't leave. And I didn't fire him. Instead, we spent the next year figuring out and documenting why talented marketers kept failing in environments like mine.

During that often-painful year, we both still believed in what we were building. That shared conviction — messy, strained, sometimes barely held together and other times deeply rewarding and, frankly, awe-inspiring — was what kept us going.

We discovered that the Trust Gap is a structural problem, and so it has a structural fix. There must be a system, and if there isn't, the marketer must build it, sometimes from scratch.

In these pages, I'll show you the system we built to close that gap: VSET — Vision, Strategy, Execution, Team:

- **Vision** clarifies the destination.
- **Strategy** creates the map.
- **Execution** proves the vehicle is moving.
- **Team** ensures the journey doesn't depend on one person.

VSET gave us a shared language for solving problems that had previously felt impossible.

We learned how to get the vision out of my head and onto the table. Chad learned how to take that vision and turn it into a strategy he could defend with math, earning my buy-in. We built execution rhythms that replaced anxiety with evidence. And Chad built a team that could run without either of us hovering.

Today, Chad is one of the most trusted leaders in our company.

That's the shift this book will help you make with your CEO, in your company.

Why Listen to Me?

I'm in a unique position to understand how to be an Indispensable Marketer because I've sat in every chair. I started as a data analyst, led marketing for startups and public companies, and now run a marketing agency that I bootstrapped from zero to over $150 million in lifetime revenue. I've worked with more than five hundred marketers and invested over $3 billion in ad spend for clients. I've also invested millions of my own dollars, learning lessons the hard way. I put my money where my mouth is.

I understood what it means to be terrified that this company that I'd built from nothing was going to fail because of a marketing leader who just wasn't getting it.

You can be the one who gets it. By the end of this book, you'll have one of two things:

1. The tools to become an Indispensable Marketer where you are.

2. The clarity to recognize that your current CEO isn't ready for alignment, and the courage to walk away so you can find one who is.

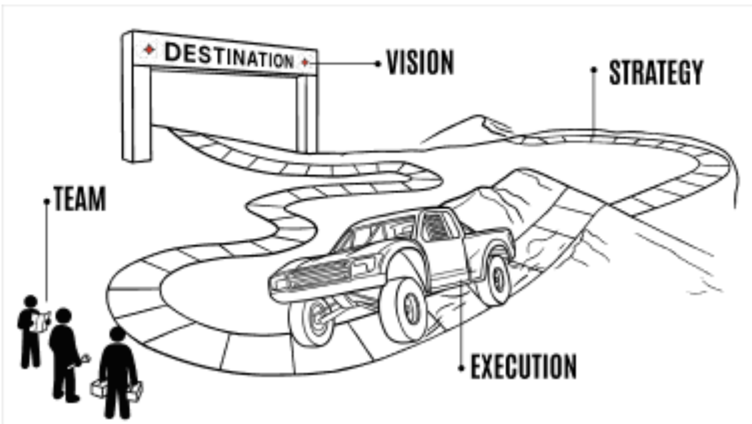
Both outcomes are a win.

And if you're a CEO reading along, welcome. This book will show you how to stop burning through marketers and start building with one. I'm forever thankful Chad didn't walk away that day. And I'm forever sorry to the five marketing leaders who came before him. It wasn't them. It was me.

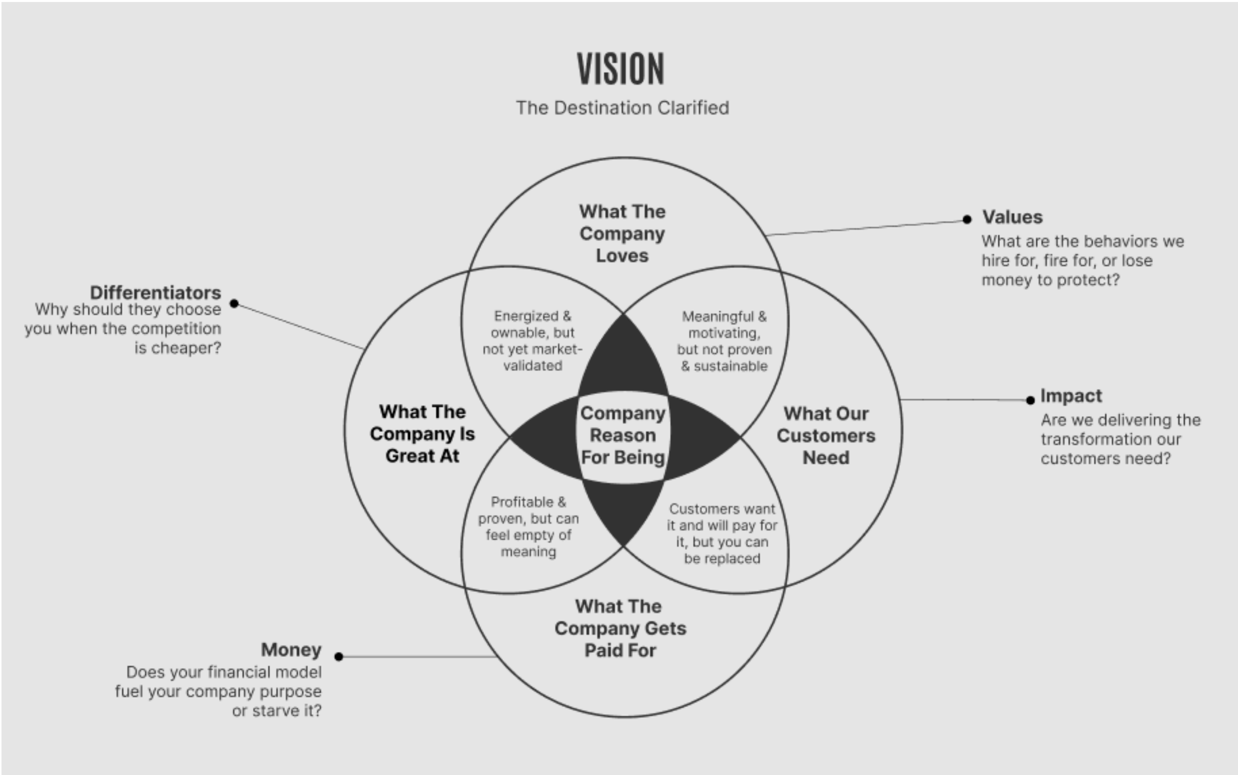
Don’t let it be you, no matter which side of the table you’re on. By the end of this book, you'll know how to close the Trust Gap between marketing and leadership and become the leader you’re meant to be.

That is the greatness I see in you.

Let’s dig in.



PART I: VISION — The Destination



The journey from Dispensable to Indispensable Marketer begins with locking in the destination.

This is the Vision that lives in the CEO's head, undocumented and invisible.

Your mission in Part I is to get it out.

Most marketers wait for the CEO to hand them a perfect brief. Then, they complain that leadership doesn't know what they want. That's a victim mindset. If you want to close the Trust Gap—the misalignment between the marketing leader and the founder—you have to help your CEO clarify what they want.

Your job is not to invent the destination. Your job is to extract it by asking the questions the CEO hasn't asked, so you can get what’s in their head onto paper, making alignment possible.

By the end of Part I, you will have defined the Vision:

1. **The Why:** Why does this business exist beyond making money?
2. **The Values:** What behaviors will your CEO fire for, hire for, or lose money to protect?
3. **The Customer:** Are we delivering the transformations our customers need?
4. **The Differentiators:** Why should they choose you when the competition is cheaper?

5. **The Money:** Does your business's financial model fuel the company's purpose or starve it?
6. **The Goal:** What progress would the company be proud of in one, three, and ten years?

Answering these questions requires honesty. The CEO has to stop hiding behind vague aspirations. And you, the marketer, must push for clarity even when it's uncomfortable.

Once you have the answers to these questions, you'll have the CEO's agreement about where you're headed. Without it, you're driving blind.

Chapter 1
Extracting the Why

Why does this business exist beyond making money?

"People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it."
--Simon Sinek, Start with Why

In March 2020, four years before I started writing this book, I was at a business retreat in Brazil when the world began shutting down. COVID-19, a novel coronavirus that no one saw coming, and no one knew how to fight, was about to change the world as we knew it. Flights were canceled, and borders began closing. I scrambled to get home. Once there, the noise I'd lived in for the past decade went silent.

No airports. No client dinners. It was just me and the thing I'd built, Disruptive Advertising.

At the time, we had 650 clients, record revenue, and a wall of awards. By every measure that mattered, I was winning. But sitting in that silence, I asked myself a question I'd been outrunning for years: *Does any of this still matter to me?*

The answer came as a tightness in my chest and a knot in my stomach. I wasn't living my purpose, and I knew it. I'd always believed I existed to see and activate greatness in others, whether my friends, family, clients, employees, peers, or fellow entrepreneurs. But I wasn't doing that for most of the 650 clients on our roster. Instead, I was processing them. We serviced them, cashed their checks, and hit their metrics.

The idea of growing the business to serve more of them made me physically sick. A secret part of me was hoping COVID would kill the business so I wouldn't have to make the hard decision myself. When it didn't, I couldn't hide anymore.

Gifted by the clarity of quarantine, I pulled up our client list and went through it name by name. For each one, I asked, *where have we actually seen and activated greatness?*

Some names jumped off the screen. I could picture the founder, the success of their business, and the role we played in getting them there. Those were more than accounts. They were partnerships in which both sides were transformed into greatness.

Then I looked at the rest of the list. The contrast was undeniable.

I asked my executive team, “What would it feel like if we had only 200 clients, but they were all the clients we really wanted to work with?” The pushback was real. How would the revenue work? What would the teams look like? Honestly, I didn’t have answers. I just knew that if we truly believed in our clients and our business, we had to start moving toward a future that felt worth fighting for.

Over the next several years, we transitioned 450 clients to great partners at other agencies so we could best serve the remaining 200 with integrity and purpose. It was the hardest business decision I've ever made. Those subtractions represented over 30 percent of our revenue. At a 15 percent margin that was more than trimming fat. It cut to the bone. My head of sales fought me on it, asking, "We’re paid on commission, and you're telling us we have to sell to fewer people?" My head of marketing pushed back. I knew I’d have to start letting people go.

My decision sent shockwaves through the company. Over the next several years, nearly my entire C-suite changed. Revenue dropped before it recovered. Marketing, the function most exposed to the chaos of a company reorienting around a new identity, bore the brunt of it. It was at this point that my head of marketing left, and Chad began to take on more responsibility. He'd watched me reduce our client list. He believed in where I was trying to take us. Given my longstanding tenure with Chad, I expected we would instantly align. We didn’t. I still hadn't given him a way to execute against a vision that, despite my own clarity, lived mostly in my head. That gap would eventually bring us to the conference room conversation I described in the introduction when Chad told me he was ready to walk.

I didn’t realize, when I began implementing my Why, that my own clarity wasn’t enough. Until I could extract my vision, document it, and align our teams around it, Chad was still operating in the dark. That gap between what the CEO knows and what the marketer can use is where most marketing leadership fails. Closing it starts here.

Once we had my Why fully extracted and operationalized, the air in the company changed. It started with leadership, then flowed through the company in stages. It’s still ongoing as new people come aboard and as our vision evolves. I’d always believed that marketing is either the best job in the world or the worst, depending on whether you believe in the product you're marketing. Now, we all believed and understood how to strategize and execute on that belief.

People could breathe freely again. We started growing alongside our clients, driven by a shared clarity and vision. Sales started spending less time on bad deals and improved close rates with the right customers. Fulfillment got more effective with fewer customers to serve.

Your CEO has a Why. They might be acting on it, as I was during the careful process of offboarding non-aligned clients, or it might be lost in the constant chaos of daily survival, as it was for me in the early days of my business before COVID.

Your first step in your role as an indispensable marketing leader is to bring your CEO’s Why to light and document it.

In a new business, it could be hiding in the founding story that the CEO has never fully shared. In a more established company, it might be found in the frustration they face every day but can't articulate.

The author Simon Sinek, in his seminal book *Start with Why,* made the case that every great organization “starts with Why.”[2] This chapter makes the case that every great marketing leader starts there, too. Your first step toward becoming indispensable is to uncover and document your CEO’s Why.

What a Why Is (and Isn't)

Before you can extract your founder’s Why, you need to know what you're looking for.

A Why is not a marketing message. It's not something you brainstorm with your team or borrow from a competitor's About page.

A Why is the emotional reason the business exists beyond making money.

In short, the Why defines purpose, and in this chapter, I’ll use the two terms interchangeably.

Every company runs on two purposes in parallel. The first is economic: generate revenue, create profit, and make payroll. That purpose is real, and we'll get to it in detail in Chapter 5. But the second purpose is deeper. It's the strongly held belief that makes your company unique and not just another player in the market. It's the reason a founder keeps going even when the money temporarily dries up.

At Disruptive, our Why is *to see and activate greatness.* I discovered this about myself after a decade of building the first iteration of my company. That earlier version of Disruptive Advertising was what it needed to be at the time, but my Why had evolved. My next-stage vision was clear. I believe every entrepreneur and marketer has potential blocked by unclear strategy, broken systems, and fear. It’s our job to remove those blocks. When we work with clients who share this belief, the work feels effortless. We'd do it for free, and sometimes we do—I’ll share those stories later in this book. We bring a high level of engagement, so the value we create and the prices we command align. When we work with clients who only want cheap leads and don't care about growth or transformation, both sides end up emptier than when they started.

Your founder has a Why like this. It may be buried under years of "just hit the numbers" thinking. It may have never been spoken aloud. But it's there.

The problem is that it lives in their heart, not their head.

Founders feel their purpose deeply. They experience it as a pull toward certain clients and a resistance to others. They know when marketing work is "off brand" even if they can't explain why. You've felt this gap. You bring the founder a landing page, and they frown and say, "That's not us.” You ask what's wrong. They can't tell you. You revise. They frown again. It's a blind spot most founders aren't even aware they have. They assume you can see what they see. They assume their vision is obvious. When you produce work that misses the mark, they get frustrated. But they've never told you who they are. They expect you to read their mind.

Your job is to ask the questions that uncover their Why. You become the detective who helps them see what has been invisible and unspoken. When the gap between their instinct and their ability to articulate it closes, everyone is on the same page.

This requires patience, thoughtful questions, and an understanding of where your founder is in their journey. This chapter gives you a process for uncovering your founder's Why and turning it into language you can use to develop and evaluate every deliverable.

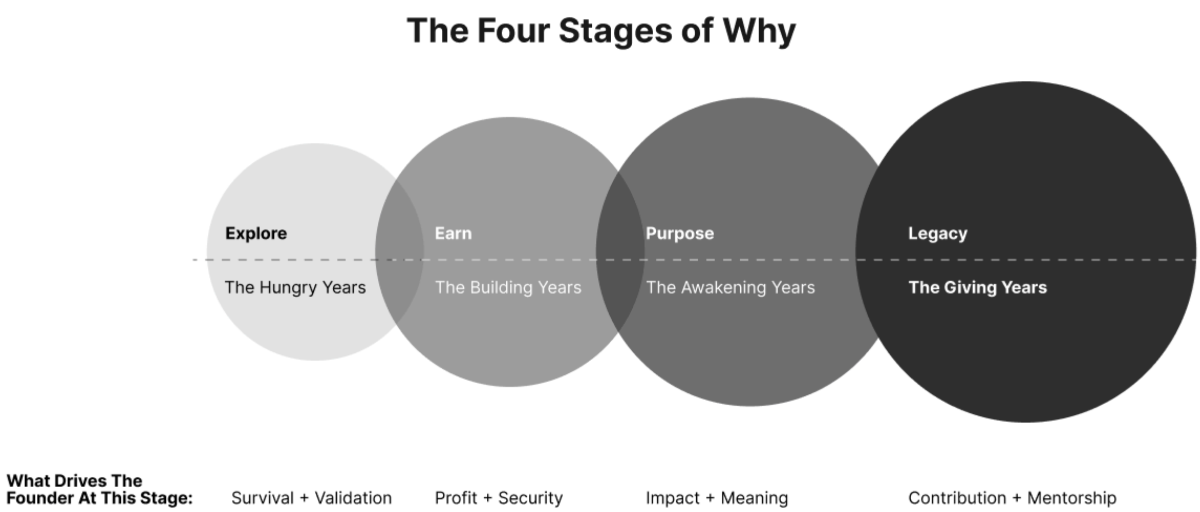
The Four Stages of Why

Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, spent his career mapping human motivation. He identified five motivational stages: survival, safety, belonging, esteem, and finally self-actualization. He was studying individuals, but he might as well have been studying founders. I've observed the CEOs of the thousands of businesses I've worked with over the last fourteen years move through a progression that aligns roughly with Maslow's hierarchy. First, they need to survive. Then, they build. Next, they strive to matter. And, finally, they yearn to leave something behind. Maslow called his five stages of human motivation the Hierarchy of Needs. I call the four stages of CEO motivation The Four Stages of Why:

> **Stage 1: Explore (The Hungry Years)** In the founder's first few years, they're proving they can build something that works. They say yes to everything. The Why at this stage is survival and validation. The business is the purpose, so don't push for deeper meaning here. They're not ready. When their goal is success, your goal is to help them tell a clear story about what the business does and for whom. Clarity is key, not depth.
>
> **Stage 2: Earn (The Building Years)** The business has traction. Now the founder wants profit and security. They measure success in dollars and milestones. Purpose conversations will still feel abstract to them. This isn't because they lack values; it's because safety in business means growth. Your job here is efficiency and scale. Focus on what's working and systematize it.
>
> **Stage 3: Purpose (The Awakening Years).** Something shifts. The founder has enough money, but money alone feels empty. They start asking harder questions: *Who is this for? What are we actually contributing?* The Why at this stage becomes impact and meaning. This is where extraction gets rich. The founder is ready to articulate what they believe, but they've never been asked the right questions. Your job is to help them find the words.
>
> **Stage 4: Legacy (The Giving Years)** The founder's joy now comes from watching others rise. They want to build something that outlasts them. The Why at this stage is contribution and mentorship. Your job here is storytelling. The brand becomes a platform for the founder's values to spread beyond the company.

Note that every stage has a Why; it's just a different kind of Why. Ask a founder in survival mode about legacy, and you'll get blank stares. Ask a founder who's already wealthy about hitting revenue targets, and you'll miss what actually moves them.

Most founders you'll work with are in Stage 2 or 3. I'm in Stage 3 myself, on the bridge between awakening and legacy. I'm still hands-on, still building. When I look back at Disruptive Advertising's evolution, I can see that my purpose had been growing beneath the surface the whole time. But it took years to name it, and even longer to articulate it clearly enough for Chad to build a strategy around it. That's the gap you're here to close.



The 3-Step Extraction Protocol

With the four stages in mind, you can start the extraction. This is a three-step process: an interview to surface the raw material, an audit to test it against reality, and a draft to distill it into language you can actually use. It's not complicated, but it requires you to listen differently. You're not listening for strategy or tactics, but for belief.

Step 1: The Founder Story Interview

You're looking for the spark, the moment something shifted for the founder when they couldn't go back.

Schedule an hour just to talk about the company. Here’s what you’re after:

1. Their Origin Story

Every founder has one. Listen for emotion, not facts. You want to know the gap they saw that nobody else was filling. Good responses sound like a story: "I was frustrated that..."

or "I couldn't believe nobody was..." Unhelpful answers sound like a business plan: "I saw a market opportunity." Keep digging until you hit a personal nerve. At the most basic, you're asking:

"What inspired this business in the beginning? What problem were you trying to solve?"

2. Their Values Beyond Money

What do they value more than comfort or money? If they say, "I'm not a quitter," push deeper. Everyone considers quitting. What pulled them back? You want to know:

"What made you keep going when it got hard? There must have been a moment you wanted to quit. Why didn't you?"

3. What Energizes Them

Watch for the stories that light them up. Their energy will shift when they hit something real. Questions should point toward purpose, not just performance, for example:

"When do you feel most proud of what we do? Not the biggest wins. The moments that felt most right."

4. What They Can't Live Without

If they say "nothing," they haven't thought about it. Offer examples: "What if we had to sell a product you didn't believe in? What if we started over with a team of strangers?" You're asking:

"What would have to change about this company for you to lose interest entirely?"

Take notes. Capture their exact words. The language they use naturally is more powerful than anything you'll craft later.

Some founders will struggle with these questions. They'll give surface answers or deflect with humor. This is normal. They've spent years in execution mode, not reflection mode. Don't push too hard in one session. Let the questions sit. Sometimes the best answers will arrive a week later, so ask, "Can we do this again next week?" Make it something they begin to look forward to.

Chad's Corner

(In case you skipped the foreword and introduction to this book, Chad de Lisle is our marketing leader at Disruptive Advertising. Throughout these pages, you'll hear from him as a counterpoint to my perspective. Take it away, Chad.)

Asking a founder these kinds of questions takes courage. Even after years of working closely with Jacob, I'd still have to take a moment, look in the mirror, and psych myself up before starting these conversations. Asking a founder to step out of execution mode and reflect on why their company exists can feel uncomfortable for them and for you.

But this is the work. If we, the marketing leaders, don't ask these questions, no one will. The conversation may feel awkward at first, but the clarity it creates changes everything that comes after.

You can do this!

Remember that your conversations will take different directions depending on your founder's stage. Here are some sample questions, divided by CEO stage.

The Founder Story Interview Grid

Diagnose the stage first. Then use the matching column.

You Want to Know...	Stage 1: Explorer	Stage 2: Earner	Stage 3: Purposeful Leader	Stage 4: Legacy Leaver
Their Origin Story	"What made you bet on this idea when nobody else saw it?"	"What problem were you trying to solve when you started, and has that changed now that the business is working?"	"If you went back to the day you started this company, what did you believe then that you still believe now?"	"When you tell the story of this company to someone who's never heard of it, what's the part you never skip?"
Their Values Beyond Money	"What keeps you going on the days the numbers don't work?"	"You've hit milestones that would have felt impossible three years ago. What still feels unfinished?"	"What made you keep going when it got hard? There must have been a moment you wanted to quit. Why didn't you?"	"What would you want people to say about this company if you stepped away tomorrow?"
What Energizes Them	"Tell me about a recent win that made you think, 'this is why I'm doing this.'"	"Which client or project this past year felt like more than just a transaction?"	"When do you feel most proud of what we do? Not the biggest wins — the moments that felt most right."	"When you watch someone on your team succeed, what specifically about that moment gets to you?"
What They Can't Live Without	"What's the one thing about this business you'd fight to protect, even if everything else had to change?"	"If a competitor offered you twice your revenue but you had to change the product entirely, would you take it?"	"What would have to change about this company for you to lose interest entirely?"	"If the next generation running this company dropped one thing you built, what would break your heart?"

Tip: You don't need all four questions. Pick the column that matches your founder's stage and use those four as your interview guide. Capture their exact words — the language they use naturally is more powerful than anything you'll craft later.

Step 2: The Outcome Audit

The interview tells you what the founder *believes*. The audit shows you what the company actually *does*. If those two things don't match, you don't have a Why yet; you have a wish.

Purpose isn't what they say, it's what the company does. You're looking for evidence.

Go through your client or customer list with your CEO and ask them three questions:

1. *Which customers are thriving because of us?*

You're looking beyond satisfied for *thriving*. What changed for them? If your founder can rattle off five names with genuine enthusiasm, you're onto something. If they struggle to name one, the purpose may not be showing up in the work yet.

2. When have we walked away from money because it felt wrong?

> If the answer is never, the Why hasn't been tested yet. A purpose that doesn't cost anything isn't a purpose. It's a preference.
>
> *3. What internal wins reflect who we are at our best?*
>
> Look for culture moments, not revenue moments. Promotions that felt right. Hires that elevated the team. Times the company showed up for someone in crisis. These reveal purpose in action.

Document what you find. You'll use these stories later in marketing, recruiting, and sales. But right now, they're evidence that the Why is real.

Step 3: The Core Draft

Now you distill the belief and the action into three sentences:

We exist to... (Purpose — why the company is here)

We envision a world where... (Vision — what the world looks like if we succeed)

We live our purpose by... (Mission — how we do it day to day)

Don't try to be clever. Look back at your interview notes for the phrases that keep repeating. Find the emotion that showed up in multiple stories. The Why is usually hiding in the language the founder already uses, not the language you need to invent.

If your founder said, "I just want to help people stop wasting money on stuff that doesn't work," that's closer to a real Why than anything a branding consultant will produce. Your job is to capture their language, not replace it.

Here's our Core Draft:

> ***We exist to*** *see and activate greatness.* ***We envision a world where*** *everyone has the courage to break through fear and live to their fullest potential.* ***We live our purpose by*** *developing Indispensable Marketers and pairing them with the people and brands they believe in to build something they're both proud of.*

If you're working with a Stage 1 or 2 CEO, don't force this language. A founder who's still proving the model or building toward financial stability will stare at "We envision a world where..." and check out. You'll lose them, and you'll lose credibility.

Instead, distill what actually drives them right now and shift your language:

We're here to... (What problem are we solving, and for whom?)

We win when... (What does success look like in the next twelve months?)

We do it by... (What's our edge — speed, price, expertise, obsession with the customer?)

Here's what that might look like for an early-stage founder:

> ***We're here to*** *help small restaurants stop bleeding money on marketing that doesn't work.* ***We win when*** *a restaurant owner tells us we're the reason they had their best quarter.* ***We do it by*** *running campaigns that we can tie directly to tables filled and orders placed.*

Those sentences don't mention legacy or a world-changing vision. They don't need to. What's there is clarity: who we help, what success looks like, and how we achieve it. That's enough purpose to align a marketing team, craft messaging, and make decisions. Honestly, it's more than most Stage 1 and 2 companies have ever put into words.

Your job is the same no matter where your CEO lives: to get the Why out of their head and into language the team can use. The altitude of the Why changes, but the extraction process remains the same.

Draft this with your founder, not for them. They need to feel ownership of every word. If they can't say it with conviction in a room full of employees, keep refining. This statement becomes your compass. Every campaign, hire, and decision is tested against it.

Purpose and Performance

When we reduced our client list to focus on our purpose, the lesson wasn’t that purpose matters more than performance. That's what idealists say, and it doesn't pay the bills. Purpose without performance is a hobby. Performance without purpose is a trap.

Purpose and performance are partners. Before the pandemic, when I was chasing performance without purpose, I had 650 clients and a business I couldn't stand. When I aligned performance and purpose, I had 200 clients, healthier revenue, and a company I was proud of. This isn’t unusual. A 2024 Deloitte study identified all the business outcomes that improve when decisions are purpose-driven, including brand reputation, efficiency, talent acquisition, revenue growth, higher returns on equity, and measurable improvements in employee retention.[3]

Your role as a marketing leader is to persuade your CEO that their purpose is a competitive advantage and that marketing can be the lever that brings it to life.

The Japanese have a word for the place where profit and purpose meet: *ikigai*, loosely translated as "reason for being." It sits at the intersection of what you love, what you're good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. A business with a concrete Why has found its *ikigai*. Most businesses operate in only one or two of those arenas and wonder why something feels off.

You can see our Disruptive Advertising version of the classic *ikigai* four-circle diagram in the introduction to Part I (page XX)

Company values are essential to this framework. The next chapter explains what they are and why they matter, and answers the question: What behaviors will your CEO fire for, hire for, or lose money to protect?

Your Turn

Before you move on to uncovering value, answer these questions about purpose. As you work through the process, keep in mind that an Indispensable Marketer who helps a CEO articulate their Why for the first time is someone that CEO can't live without:

What stage is your founder? Explorer, Earner, Purposeful Leader, or Legacy Leaver? Your extraction approach depends on meeting them where they are. Are you in the same stage? How might that affect how you work together? Do you think a marketing leader at the Explorer stage of their career can work well with a CEO who is a Legacy Leaver? Why or why not, and how might that inform your relationship with your CEO and your next career steps?

Can you articulate your company's Why in one sentence? If you can't, you haven't extracted it yet. Make a list of questions to ask your CEO, then request a standing appointment to discuss them. It might help to spend some time articulating your own purpose. How might you use that to facilitate the conversation? What will you do if your purpose and your CEO's don't align?

Does your CEO's stated purpose align with their actions? If not, that's a conversation worth having, too. Maybe you'll uncover your CEO's true purpose before they do, making you truly indispensable.

Chad's Turn

Founders spend most of their time executing, so asking them to slow down and talk about purpose can feel abstract, uncomfortable, or even unnecessary. As a marketing leader, you may feel hesitant about bringing these questions to the table.

That's normal. But if you never ask these questions, the company keeps operating on instinct, and you'll keep guessing. You'll never know what the CEO actually wants, which leads you to make decisions based not on who you actually are, but on what worked last quarter or what your competitor is doing. You're always on eggshells, not knowing what your leadership will like or what you're building toward.

Here are a few objections you're likely to hear, and how to handle them:

"We don't have time for this right now."
Reframe the conversation around efficiency.

"This will actually save us time. If we're clear on why the company exists and who we're trying to help, every marketing decision becomes faster, from messaging to campaigns, hiring, and partnerships."

"Isn't this just a mission statement exercise?"
Acknowledge the concern and clarify the difference.
"This isn't about writing something for the website. It's about identifying the belief that's already driving your decisions. The language comes later."

"I don't know how to answer that."
Shift from abstract questions to stories.
"Let's talk about a client you're most proud of helping. What was happening before we worked together? What changed afterward?"

"Why does marketing need to know this?"
Connect it directly to marketing's role.
"Marketing is the voice of the company. If we don't know what you believe, we're guessing—and that's why messaging sometimes feels off."

Starting this conversation takes courage. But once it happens, everything else in your journey from dispensable to indispensable becomes easier.