

OPERATING STRATEGY, 2026

Why mid-market CPG brands need a fractional COO before a CEO.

Growth is rarely the problem. The machinery behind it usually is.

THE SHORT ANSWER

A growing CPG brand usually needs operations fixed before it needs a new CEO.

The founder can still set vision and win retailers. What breaks first is forecasting, co-manufacturing, margins, fulfillment, and the weekly rhythm that keeps the team aligned.

THE GAP

Growth without infrastructure.

Demand is arriving faster than the operating system of the business can absorb it. A retailer says yes, and the team spends Friday reconciling spreadsheets instead of selling.

WHERE IT SHOWS UP

The gap hides in five places.

Margin leakage. Promotions, freight, and returns quietly erode gross margin.

Forecast and supply misses. Stockouts on hot items, write-offs on slow ones.

Decision latency. Small issues wait for the founder.

Operating capital strain. Growth consumes cash faster than margin replaces it.

Team capability gaps. More sales means more complexity, and usually more people.

WHY COO FIRST

A new CEO solves a leadership problem. Many brands have an execution problem.

Hiring a CEO into shaky systems often buys an expensive executive who inherits the same fire drills. A COO fixes the root cause, and makes the CEO question far easier to answer with real data.

THE FIRST 90 DAYS

Diagnose. Stabilize. Build.

Weeks 1 and 2, diagnose. Review margins by channel and SKU, map the supply chain, find the three costliest constraints.

Weeks 3 to 5, stabilize. Set a weekly scorecard, fix the biggest supply and trade spend issues.

Weeks 6 to 10, build. Install S&OP routines and a 12-month operating plan.

NEXT STEP

Fix the engine first. Then decide who drives.

Marc Drucker is a fractional CEO, President, COO, and CMO helping food, beverage, and consumer products companies grow profitably.

marc-drucker.com