FRACTIONAL CEO, COO & CMO INSIGHTS

# Food and Beverage Marketing in 2026

How small brands win without big budgets

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THE SHIFT

# A retail buyer will probably look at your Instagram and TikTok numbers before they try your product.

None of this is brand new. Creator marketing, social commerce and data-driven retail pitches have been building for years. What has changed in 2026 is how fast they now compound.

The path from kitchen table to national shelf used to take four to six years. Now the fastest brands make that trip in about 18 months. This favors fast-moving, nimble brands that stay highly attuned and responsive to customer trends.

It also means that marketing, which once had months to strategize and launch, now has weeks.

STEP 1

# Creators now open the door to retail.

The old sequence was farmers markets, regional distribution, then a broker pitch. The new sequence often starts with creator content, social commerce and Amazon reviews. Retailers look for brands that are generating real momentum.

For a small brand the lesson is not to try to “go viral” (it’s nearly impossible without a huge budget). It is to build authentic content that informs and builds the brand, while driving conversions with both incentivized (affiliate marketing) and fixed-fee creators.

STEP 1, CONTINUED

# Talent and focus, not spend, decide who wins.

Managing creators and driving post performance is a full-time craft, and it is where a talented marketing leader earns their keep.

I work with two beverage brands. One struggles to build awareness, while for the other it seems to come easily. The difference is not the budget or the product.

At the first company, the CEO leads marketing on top of everything else. The second has a fractional CMO who owns it.

STEP 2

# AI search is the new first impression.

Shoppers increasingly ask a chatbot what to buy. Those answers draw on creator content, press coverage and reviews more than on your own marketing copy. If your brand is absent from those sources, you are absent from the answer.

Generative engine optimization (GEO) draws on some of the same sources as SEO, but it places more weight on third-party reviews, structured website data, and retailer and social communities, especially Reddit. Outbound PR and community engagement are key here.

STEP 3

# Buyers want data, not a dream.

Retail buyers are reported to review social velocity and Amazon review metrics before a pitch meeting. That flips the traditional deck. Lead with the numbers: repeat purchase rate, review count and rating, creator-driven sales trends. Then tell the story.

Operations matter here too. A buyer who sees demand building will ask whether you can supply it. Fill rates, lead times and cost to serve are marketing assets when you can show them. This is where marketing and operations stop being separate conversations.

THE 90 DAY PLAYBOOK

# A plan for brands doing under $5 million.

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| DAYS 1 TO 5 | **Foundation.** Choose one content format and one hero product. Audit your AI search presence. Set up a claims library and disclosure rules, because FDA and FTC rules apply to creator content. |
| DAYS 6 TO 19 | **Build the engine.** Recruit your first 20 to 30 creators with clear guidelines. Create tracking links or affiliate codes so every post ties to sales. Publish a first batch and review results weekly. |
| DAYS 20 TO 30 | **Generate brand content.** Film your own behind-the-scenes clips, recipes and ingredient stories, and repurpose the best creator posts with permission. Build a monthly calendar and a library of approved claims and visuals. |
| DAYS 31 TO 60 | **Scale and measure.** Double down on the creators and formats that drive purchases, not just views, and cut what does not. Keep collecting reviews on Amazon and your own site. |
| DAYS 61 TO 90 | **Convert and prove.** Add a simple post-purchase email flow, since repeat buyers drive margin. Then send retail buyers a short monthly velocity brief with your numbers. |

LET’S TALK

# Ready to plan your next 90 days?

Fractional CEO, COO and CMO leadership for food, beverage and consumer brands.

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