

The Ecosystem-Fueled Growth Playbook

Once upon a time, I (Jenn Steele, co-founder & CEO of SoundGTM) had to train a partner's sales team on how to sell my company's product. I didn't want to. Yes, I led partner marketing (among many other things), but there were a few others in the company actually dedicated to stuff like this. Unfortunately (not for them), they were all conveniently vacationing somewhere in the Pacific.

So I dragged myself to this partner's sales kickoff in Savannah, GA, where I did a 45-minute session on how to sell my product. Then I wandered around River Street with their partnerships exec, enjoying the lack of open container laws while writing a great case study about how our products work together.

Seems successful, right? Right?!?!

Well, it was successful for me. I made a friend for life and eventually became CMO of that partner company. But, how many sales did it actually lead to?

Zero. (Or close enough).

Why? We did everything "right," but still nada. Nothing. Zip.

So many of our partner programs, affiliate advances, and influencer initiatives consistently underproduced or outright failed that we decided to dig into it. Duh! It turns out not to be as easy as it seems - partner programs take perseverance, affiliate advances take audacity, and influencer initiatives take indefatigability (and/or intestinal fortitude).

We realized: partner programs, affiliate advances, and influencer initiatives often underproduce or fail. Why? Because ecosystem growth is hard-it takes perseverance, creativity, and robust systems. This playbook shares what we learned, so you don't have to repeat our mistakes.

What Is Ecosystem-Fueled Growth? (And Why It Matters)

Ahhh!! Ecosystem-fueled Economy. It has a nice ring, doesn't it? (You'll note that we haven't used the trendy "ecosystem-led growth" (ELG) term.) We are intentionally calling this strategy "ecosystem-fueled growth." Why? Because simply put, it shouldn't lead growth efforts for most companies.

"But wait," you say, "Shouldn't it lead something, somehow?"

Nope.

Quite frankly, ecosystem growth in general will be your most difficult channel. If you lead with it without robust outbound, content, events, and all sorts of other-led growth, then you will fail. This is especially true for companies with less than \$100M in annual revenue. They simply don't have the resources to lead with ecosystem growth.

But why will they fail?

Because it takes:

- Time (that you don't have)
 - Consistency (in effort, in monitoring, in managing)
 - Creativity (always in short supply)
 - Juggling (yet another competing priority)
 - Robust tracking and infrastructure (that you lack time and creativity to build)
- Accepting that most of your external partnerships and contacts will not produce (so you'll go from "we signed a new partner!" to "and we got nothing from it" repeatedly)

When you look at it that way, you'll get a lot more out of ABM or outbound, right?

Well...maybe.

So stop looking at it that way. Look at it this way, instead:

Augmenting your efforts with your ecosystem will create increased customer loyalty and retention. And referrals can convert at nearly 4x the rate of "normal" pipeline (whatever "normal" is these days. But let's focus on that pretty number - 4x).

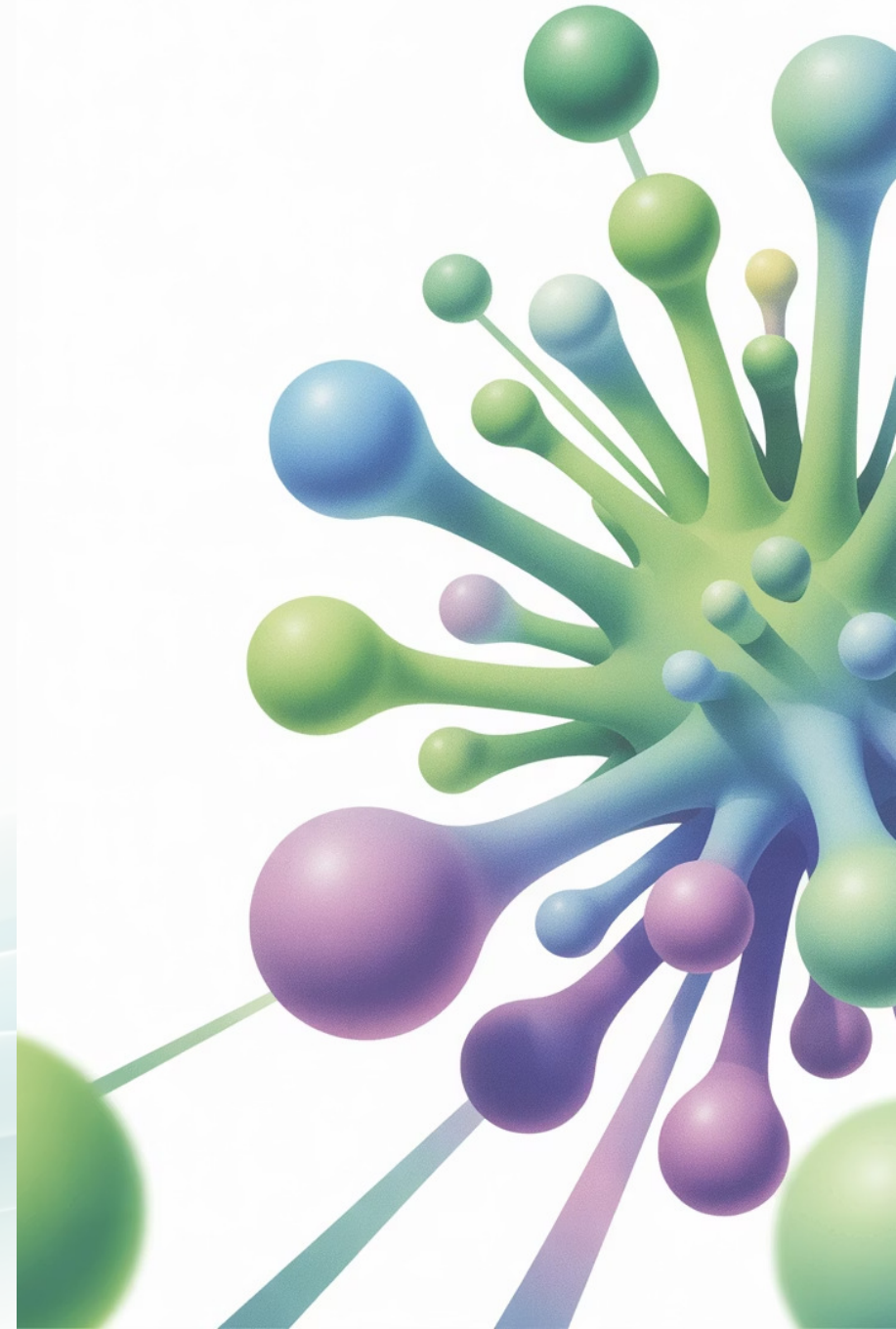
Instead of leading growth with ecosystem efforts, midmarket companies need to fuel growth with their ecosystem. Hence this giant blob of (really important) content.

But back to where we were: What is ecosystem-fueled growth (EFG)?

Simply put, EFG is growing revenue by leveraging people and companies from outside your company's "walls." This can take many forms:

- Reseller partnerships
- Technology partnerships
- Implementation & service partnerships
- Customer referrals
- Affiliate programs
- Influencer marketing
- Outsourced sales

We're probably missing a few of the rarer ones, but these are the ones we'll tackle in this document. Bottom line: if even one of the above is applicable to your company, chances are you can take advantage of EFG.



Building the Foundation: Setting Goals

Most companies launch ecosystem programs without clear goals. If you don't define "success," you can't measure it. We go much more into depth into how to set these in our ebook on Setting & Achieving Ecosystem-Fueled Growth (EFG) Goals.

5 Steps to Set EFG Goals:

- 1** — **Start at the end**
Define revenue goals (net new, retention, expansion).
- 2** — **Gap analysis**
What's missing in your current GTM to hit those goals?
- 3** — **Plug the gap**
Calculate what ecosystem motions need to deliver to fill it.
- 4** — **Set milestones & timelines**
For signups, engagement, referrals, pipeline, and revenue.
- 5** — **Measure progress**
Set a check-in cadence and report on your goals.

Figuring Out Your Ecosystem Mix

Choosing the right ecosystem motions starts with your ideal customer profile (ICP) and pipeline gaps. To learn more, check out our [Activating Your Ecosystem Mix ebook](#) and [Mix Matching Agent](#).

Quick-fit examples:

Reseller partnerships

Good for companies with strong product-market fit and easy messaging. Bad for high-margin or category-creating products.

Technology partnerships

Good for ecosystem-dependent companies with resources for integrations. Bad if you can't prove value to the partner.

Implementation & service partners

Good for complex products needing third-party help. Bad for simple, standalone products.

Customer referrals

High-octane for companies with a large, happy customer base. Less useful if your customer base is small or unhappy.

Affiliate programs

Good for transactional, online sales and rabid fan bases. Bad if you lack tracking or are a commodity.

Influencer marketing

Good for noisy industries with influencers. Bad if your space has none or you can't track ROI.

Outsourced sales

Good for enterprise sales with high ACV. Bad for transactional or low-ACV offerings.

Executing EFG: Tracking & Enablement

We have the basics here, but please check out our ebook on [Tracking, Enablement & Metrics: Making Ecosystem-Fueled Growth Work](#), our [Launch Plan Agent](#), our [Partnership Enablement Checklist](#), our [Tracking Audit Agent](#), and our [Enablement Update Agent](#) (pew!).

Tracking

You need a closed-loop system that:

- Gets referrals into your pipeline
- Tracks what happens to them
- Compensates partners
- Reports on what's working

Avoid spreadsheets and manual tracking. Integrate with your CRM, automate where possible, and make data auditable and actionable.

Enablement

Most companies fail here. Enablement is not a one-time event-it's ongoing, contextual, and focused on your partner's needs, not just your own. Tailor enablement for each partner type (reseller, tech, referral, affiliate, influencer, outsourced sales) and keep communication regular.



Tips & Tricks for EFG Success

This is the stuff they don't put in case studies. The hard-earned lessons, the shortcuts that won't backfire, and the reality checks you'll wish someone had given you earlier.

Pick One Motion to Nail First

Trying to launch a referral program, spin up affiliate links, recruit influencers, and onboard resellers all at once is a guaranteed way to drown in half-built landing pages and unfulfilled promises.

Pick the one motion most likely to:

- Fill your pipeline gap
- Fit your ICP
- Work with the resources you already have

Nail that. Expand later.

Pro tip: if it's hard to decide, pick the one likely to show the quickest progress. (That reduces the number of times you have to say "No results yet, but we're working on it" to your CEO.)

Treat Partners Like Your Best Customers

Would you onboard a high-value customer with one email and a link to your help center?

No? Then stop doing that to your partners.

- Onboard them with care
- Give them personalized content
- Set up regular check-ins
- Celebrate their wins

You'll see better results, and fewer "hey did you see my lead?" Slack messages.

Overcommunicate Outcomes

You don't have to give partners access to your CRM (please don't), but you do have to tell them what happened.

A quick monthly email with:

- Deals they sourced
- Where they are in the funnel
- Wins + payouts

...will make you look 10x more professional and keep them engaged longer. Oh, and yes, this can be automated.

Don't Be Haunted by Inactive Programs

Nothing kills momentum like a dead-looking program.

Set a quarterly reminder to:

- Refresh partner resources
- Rotate featured offers
- Remove expired campaigns
- Send a "Hey, we're still here!" touchpoint

If your partner portal looks like it was last updated when Vine was still a thing, fix it.

Test, Kill, Repeat

Every ecosystem motion comes with a million variables, including offer design, tracking, messaging, timing, etc.

The best programs:

- Run small tests
- Look at hard conversion numbers
- Ruthlessly cut what's not working
- Double down where things click

For the love of everything, don't cling to that influencer program just because it took three months to get contracts signed.

Build Infrastructure Before You Need It

You may only have five partners now. But if you don't build systems that scale, you'll be underwater at fifteen.

Set up:

- Easy partner submission processes
- A referral tracking platform (hi)
- Template decks & onboarding flows
- A Notion or portal hub with all key info

It's way easier to add ten new partners to a well-oiled machine than to reinvent it every time.

Recognition > Rewards (Sometimes)

Cash is great. But in some programs - especially with influencers, service partners, or even happy customers - recognition is a bigger motivator.

- Feature partners in your newsletter
- Share wins on LinkedIn
- Invite them to customer councils or panels

People want to feel like they matter. Make sure they do.

Summary of Key Tips

Pick one motion to nail first

Don't try to do everything at once.

Treat partners like your best customers

Personalize onboarding and celebrate wins.

Overcommunicate outcomes

Keep partners updated on what happened with their leads.

Refresh and prune regularly

Keep resources current and cut what's not working.

Test, kill, repeat

Run small experiments and double down where you see traction.

Build infrastructure early

Systems scale, manual processes don't.

Recognition > rewards (sometimes)

Public praise can motivate more than cash.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

I'm not going to lie. I've made my share of mistakes. But lucky for you (and unlucky for my 3am brain), I obsessively remember them all and can share these with you now.

!

Treating Ecosystem Like a Side Hustle

You wouldn't expect your sales team to crush quota without support, tracking, and enablement. But somehow, we do this to partner programs all the time.

"Let's just spin something up and see what happens!"

Spoiler alert: nothing happens. Ecosystem programs need just as much structure and intention as any other GTM channel.



Dumping Internal Sales Collateral on Partners

Your product one-pager? Your 48-slide sales deck? Your random Loom video titled "v2_final_final_final_use_this_one"?

None of those are enablement.

Partners need content made for them:

- How to talk about you to their audience
- What makes a good fit
- How to pitch in their own words

Train them like you would a new AE, because that's what they are.



Assuming Your Value Prop Is Obvious

Just because your customer loves your tool doesn't mean they can explain it to a friend in a convincing way.

You need to:

- Arm them with language that works for your and their target
- Remind them of use cases that click
- Show them how to tell your story

Referrals don't happen because people like you - they happen because people feel confident they can help someone else by mentioning you.



Going Silent After Onboarding

This one kills even the best-intentioned programs, and it's one of the most common.

If the last thing your partner heard from you was "Welcome!"... they're gone.

You need a cadence:

- Monthly or quarterly partner updates
- Triggered check-ins based on activity
- Occasional "we miss you" nudges

Think of it as lifecycle marketing for your partners, because that's exactly what it is.



Tracking Everything in a Spreadsheet (Forever)

Yes, we've all started with a spreadsheet. It's fine. But at some point, you have to stop.

If you can't:

- See partner performance by deal stage
- Pull a payout report without crying
- Automate status updates to partners

...then it's time to grow up and get some real infrastructure. (You don't want to scale a house of index-card horrors. Ask me how I know.)



Leading With Ecosystem Before You're Ready

We talked about this earlier, but it bears repeating: ecosystem-fueled growth amplifies what's already working; it doesn't replace foundational GTM work.

If you:

- Haven't nailed your ICP
- Can't convert cold leads
- Don't know what messaging works

...you're not ready to hand the megaphone to partners.



Over-Investing in "Cool" Programs That Don't Convert

Influencers, co-branded webinars, and affiliate launches sound great in a slide deck. Sometimes your CEO will fall in love with them.

But if they don't convert (or take twelve months to maybe do something), you're better off pausing and focusing on what drives pipeline.

Run small tests. Kill fast. Invest where the data says. Take a deep breath. Try to stay sane.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Ecosystem-fueled growth isn't easy-but it's worth it. Start with clear goals, pick the right motion, invest in tracking and enablement, and keep iterating. Use the checklists and playbooks here to audit your efforts and troubleshoot when you stall.

Ready to go deeper? Check out our tactical guides on goal-setting, activation, tracking, and troubleshooting-or try our interactive planning tools.

This ebook is your mindset and strategy primer for EFG. For tactical "how-to," see the next guides in the series, starting with [Setting & Achieving Ecosystem-Fueled Growth \(EFG\) Goals.](#)

Other Resources

- [Mix Matching Agent](#): Figure out the top 3 motions that will work for your company and gaps.
- [Ecosystem Tracking Audit Agent](#): Standardize intake, automate tracking, and regularly QA your data.
- [Troubleshooting & Optimizing Ebook](#): Diagnose stalls, simplify asks, reactivate with value, and prune ruthlessly.
- [Emergency Restart Agent](#): For when things stall, partners ghost, and your dashboard is flat.

Resources and Citations (for the series)

1. <https://www.visma.com/resources/content/7-steps-to-building-an-ecosystem-strategy>
2. <https://www.bdo.com/insights/sustainability-and-esg/how-to-set-effective-esg-goals-and-targets>
3. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/set-ambitious-but-realistic-environmental-goals/>
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20. <https://www.smartsheet.com/content/project-goals>

About SoundGTM

We're painfully familiar with the challenges tech companies and workers face today because we've been in your shoes. Normal revenue channels and business development models are bone dry and the law of diminishing returns feels like it kicked in ages ago. Businesses and individuals are both staring down uncertain futures.

We believe that growth-stage companies deserve more control over their own destiny and shouldn't have to struggle with spreadsheets, finance, and administrivia just to drive referrals. That's why we created SoundGTM.

SoundGTM is the only referral platform built specifically for growth-stage businesses to expand their reach, fill their sales funnels, and drive net new revenue. And it's all without the time, expense, and headache of traditional referral programs.

www.soundgtm.com