Ground CONSULTING Up

Built to Last.

A startup's playbook for marketing through uncertainty.
What to keep, what to pause, and how to show up as a brand that endures.

Brand Strategy | Budget Allocation | Crisis Comms | Acquisition



WHY THIS PLAYBOOK EXISTS

How startups react in the face of uncertainty can make them or break them.

When the ground shifts, startups default to one of two extremes: panic and cut everything, or push harder on tactics that no longer fit the moment. Both are understandable. Neither is a strategy.

There are no clean, universal answers. Every startup is different. What we offer is a framework for thinking clearly when clarity feels scarce. Use it as a compass, not a script.

WHO THIS PLAYBOOK TARGETS

01

Founders

Who need to make fast decisions without losing sight of the long game.

02

Marketing Teams

Who need a clear filter for what to keep running and what to pull back.

03

Startups Across All Stages

Your situation differs whether pre-launch, early or established, and this playbook reflects that.

A KEY PRINCIPLE

In a crisis, how you show up is remembered long after the crisis ends.

Brands that invest in trust during hard times build equity that compounds for years. The ones who go quiet lose ground quietly: and it shows in the numbers later.

SECTION 01

Where to put your money and where to pull back.

The distinction is not brand vs. awareness. It is how you build brands that changes. Owned channels and consistent behaviour compound over time. Paid broadcast awareness is what you pause.

KEEP INVESTING

Brand behaviour and positioning
How you act now defines your brand for years.

Owned channels: email, content, community
No algorithm. No spend required.

Retention and customer success
Far cheaper than acquiring new customers.

SEO and organic presence
Compounds quietly. Works when paid stops.

Word of mouth and referrals
Your most powerful free channel.

PAUSE OR REALLOCATE

Paid broadcast awareness campaigns
High CPM, low intent, hard to measure.

Top-of-funnel paid acquisition
CAC spikes in uncertainty. ROI drops fast.

Experimental new channels
Not the time for unproven bets.

Event sponsorships
Unless direct pipeline is proven.

High-production content
Scale back cost, not consistency.

Not sure where to reallocate? We can map your current spend against what is actually working right now.

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A KEY PRINCIPLE

The budget decisions you make in a downturn are a statement about your brand. Make them deliberately.

Brands that protect presence and communicate honestly in a downturn come out ahead. Owned channels compound. Paid broadcast can wait.

SECTION 02

Brand is a long-term asset. Treat it like one.

Brand is not just advertising. It is how your company behaves when things are hard. Consistency, honesty and generosity during a crisis build the kind of trust that advertising cannot buy.

There are three specific ways brands can show up beyond their campaigns. They do not require big budgets or perfect timing. They require intention.

Give Back

Use what you have to genuinely help. Not as a campaign but as a reflex. The gesture does not need to be large. It needs to be real. A startup that waives a fee, extends a deadline or offers free access during a difficult period sends a message no ad can replicate.

Take a Stance

Silence is a position. When uncertainty rises, people look to the brands they follow for signals. Know what you stand for and say it clearly. Values that only hold up in good times are not values.

Be Human

Drop the polished voice. Speak honestly about what your audience and your business are going through. People do not expect perfection in a crisis. They expect honesty and they remember who gave it to them.

A KEY PRINCIPLE

The brands that show up consistently in hard times earn trust that outlasts the crisis.

Brand equity is not built in good times. It is protected and compounded in bad ones. The decisions you make about brand now will shape how your audience remembers you long after the uncertainty has passed.

SECTION 03

Your playbook depends on where you are in your journey.

Not all startups face a crisis from the same position. Where you are shapes every decision below.

STAGE 01 · PRE-LAUNCH

You were about to launch. Should you still?

No customers yet, no equity. Both vulnerability and freedom.

ACT ON THIS	STOP OR PAUSE	USE THIS TIME TO
• Launch if product is relevant now	• Paid launch if timing feels off	• Refine your positioning now
• Build owned audience first	• Broad awareness spend	• Show up with a point of view
• Deepen beta user relationships	• Unproven new channels	• Test messaging organically

Key question: Can you deliver on what you are about to promise?

STAGE 02 · EARLY LAUNCH

Early users, little equity. The most fragile position.

One bad experience lands harder now than at any other stage.

ACT ON THIS	STOP OR PAUSE	USE THIS TIME TO
• Personal outreach to every user	• Paid acquisition if disrupted	• Earn word of mouth organically
• Make the product indispensable	• Broad growth campaigns	• Be honest about your situation
• Protect every public promise	• New channel experiments	• Turn users into advocates

Key question: Would your early users recommend you right now?

STAGE 03 · ESTABLISHED

You have equity. Now decide how to spend it.

A track record that can absorb pressure. Use it wisely.

ACT ON THIS	STOP OR PAUSE	USE THIS TIME TO
• Activate your owned audience	• Coasting on your reputation	• Maintain consistent visibility
• Recognise and reward loyalty	• Tone-deaf or salesy messaging	• Lean into lower cost channels
• Take a visible authentic stance	• Cutting brand investment	• Compound your trust advantage

Key question: Are you using your equity to lead or waiting it out?

SECTION 04

How to communicate. And how not to.

Every message you send right now carries more weight than usual. Choose how you show up.

Audiences are paying closer attention during uncertainty, to what you say, what you don't say, and how you say it. The brands that get this right build durable trust, and a head start when things stabilise.

✓ DO THIS

- Acknowledge the environment. People know what is happening.
- Lead with utility. What can you do for your audience right now?
- Use a calm, grounded tone. Not cheerful. Not alarmist.
- Give something free or reduced. Access, content, support.
- Let founders speak. Authenticity beats brand voice right now.
- Align all channels. Inconsistency kills trust.

✗ DON'T DO THIS

- Don't use crisis as a sales hook. 'In these uncertain times...'
- Don't go silent. Disappearing reads as instability.
- Don't over-promise. Under-delivery now has lasting consequences.
- Don't use fear or urgency. Your audience is already anxious.
- Don't flood inboxes. Every touchpoint must earn its place.
- Don't pivot brand entirely. Sudden repositioning erodes trust.

Want a messaging audit? We will review your current comms and flag what needs to change before your audience does.

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SECTION 05

On acquisition, and when to stop it entirely.

Not all acquisition is equal. When and how you pursue growth right now depends entirely on whether you can back it up. Acquiring the wrong customers at the wrong time costs more than it gains. The guidance below will help you decide when to pause, when to push, and where to put your energy instead.

NON-NEGOTIABLE

If your service is disrupted, pause acquisition. Full stop.

Running acquisition while your product is degraded means paying to disappoint people. In trust-driven markets every bad first experience becomes a lasting detractor.

The rule: if you cannot deliver a great experience, do not bring new users in. Pause paid, pause outbound. Focus on the customers you have.

IF YOU DO RUN ACQUISITION

Focus on intent signals, not volume.

Now is not the time to cast wide. Prioritise people who are already looking for what you offer. Search-based channels, high-intent keywords, warm retargeting audiences. These convert better and put your budget where interest already exists.

Quality of fit matters more than quantity of leads right now. One well-matched customer who stays is worth more than ten who churn because the timing was wrong.

SHIFT BUDGET HERE

Word of mouth is your acquisition channel right now.

One loyal customer telling their network is worth more than a hundred paid impressions. In relationship-driven markets this multiplies dramatically.

Practical move: create a referral incentive that means something. A discount, a feature unlock, priority access. Keep it personal, not programmatic.

SECTION 06

Before any marketing decision ask these questions.

If you cannot answer yes to most of these, pause and rethink.

These questions are not a checklist for perfection, they are a filter for integrity. The brands that ask them before acting are the ones their audience remembers when the dust settles.

- Does this serve our audience, or just our pipeline?
- Would this message feel tone-deaf if sent today?
- Are we protecting our brand or sacrificing it for short-term numbers?
- Have we heard from customers recently. What do they need?
- Are we equipped to deliver on what we are about to promise?
- Is service quality good enough to bring new users in right now?
- Would our current customers be proud to see this?
- Will we look back in 6 months and be proud of this decision?

WORK WITH US

Need a strategy built for your reality?

This playbook gives you the framework. A consult gives you the specifics, tailored to your stage, your market, and what is actually happening on the ground right now.

- **Brand and positioning review**
  Is your brand built for this moment?
- **Messaging audit**
  What are you saying and how does it land?
- **Budget reallocation**
  Where should your money go right now?
- **Growth roadmap**
  When and how to turn acquisition back on.

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Built to Last.
A startup's playbook for marketing through uncertainty. A free resource from GroundUp Consulting.
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