From Price-Taker to Price-Maker

How Strategic Moves and Narrative Turn Category Followers into Category Leaders

A Field Guide for Founders in the Reset Zone

Mike Brady | Good to Great SaaS | February 2026

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Foreward

I Didn't Know I'd Done It Until It Was Over

In 2016, I joined Piano to build out a three-person customer success team. One person in New York. Two in Bratislava. The product was solid. The customers — digital publishers across Europe and the US — were not.

Within my first few weeks, I understood why. Publishers weren't at risk of churning because the product failed them. They were at risk because they had a business problem no one had solved yet — and a SaaS platform alone wasn't going to solve it for them.

The problem was structural. Digital advertising revenue had been hollowing out for years. Publishers had watched platform companies monetize the audiences they'd spent decades building, while they collected the scraps. The conventional wisdom — the inherited belief of the entire category — was clear: publishers needed to monetize their content. Build better paywalls. Meter more effectively. Lock down the premium material.

But when I sat with those publishers and really listened, I heard something different. Their content wasn't their most valuable asset anymore. It was largely commoditized — too plentiful, too easy to find elsewhere. No amount of clever metering was going to change that structural reality.

What they did have — what most of them hadn't fully recognized yet — was a loyal audience. People who came back every day. Who trusted the brand. Who, if engaged the right way, would pay for something that genuinely served them.

"Don't monetize your content. Monetize your loyal audience."

That reframe didn't come from me alone. In one of my early conversations with a colleague who had deep publishing experience, he said something along those lines — and it immediately captured my imagination. I shaped it into that single repeatable line and started saying it in every customer conversation, every internal meeting, every sales call I could get into. Something shifted. Executives who had been nodding politely at product demonstrations started leaning forward. The conversation changed. Instead of talking about features — meters, paywalls, entitlement logic — we were talking about strategy. About what their business was actually trying to become. About which readers were worth investing in and how to turn passive browsers into a loyal, paying core.

I built out the customer success team. Then a data analytics and science function. Then a strategy department. Twenty-five people eventually, all organized around one idea: prove that this new model worked, and show publishers exactly how to make it work with Piano's platform underneath it.

The results came. A four-year, one-million-dollar partnership with a Spanish publisher — a market not known for large SaaS investments. A seven-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar deal in Ukraine, where that salesperson's average deal had been thirty thousand dollars. Both within a month of each other. Those deals didn't close because of features. They closed because the executives on the other side believed something different about what they were buying — and why it mattered to their business.

Then I left. And Piano went back to selling product.

I watched it from the outside. The reframe never took hold. The sales motion reverted. The narrative that had opened up new deal sizes and new conversations got buried under feature sheets and roadmap presentations. Years later, they fired their CEO and sales leadership, restructured, and prepared to go all-in on the same product-selling approach that had stalled them for years.

I tell you this not to claim credit for something that didn't stick, but because it taught me something I couldn't have learned any other way:
A reframe without proof collapses. A strategic move without someone willing to build the organization around it — as if the new model is already true — reverts the moment the champion leaves the room.

What I had done at Piano, without fully understanding it at the time, was execute the first step of what I now call a Product Category Reset. I changed the inherited belief of the category. But I didn't complete the proof architecture. And because the organization never rewired itself around the new model, it couldn't survive without me in the room.

That experience — what worked, what didn't, and why — is the origin of everything that follows.

The Hypothesis

Most SaaS Companies Are Losing for the Wrong Reason

Here is what this document argues:
Most SaaS companies aren't stalling because their product is weak. They're stalling because they're competing by rules they didn't set — rules that guarantee they will always be evaluated as a commodity, no matter how good they get.

The fix is not better messaging. It's not a rebrand. It's not more aggressive sales hiring or a sharper pitch deck. Those are tactics applied inside a broken frame.
The fix is changing the frame itself.

Companies that break out of category commoditization don't do it by executing better inside the existing rules. They do it by making a strategic move that changes the rules — and pairing that move with a narrative that makes the change feel inevitable. When both reinforce each other, and proof accumulates publicly enough, something shifts: buyers stop comparing features and start choosing direction. Sales stops being a negotiation and starts being a conversation about the future.

That shift — from price-taker to price-maker — is available to more companies than know it. But it requires clarity about which move is actually available, the discipline to build the narrative that makes it travel, and the organizational commitment to build proof before the moment of pressure arrives.

This document is a field guide for founders who are ready to make that move — and for the investors and advisors who want to spot it early, when it is still mispriced.

Start with the diagnosis. Because before you can make the right move, you need to understand why you're stuck.

Part I: The Trap

Most B2B SaaS companies don't stall because their product is weak. They stall because buyers evaluate them the same way they evaluate everyone else.

You can feel it when that becomes the dominant dynamic. Sales turns into comparison and feature confirmation. Procurement shows up early. Discounting becomes the default way to close. Internally, Product, Marketing, Sales, and Customer Success tell slightly different versions of what the company actually does.

That's what it feels like when you're being shopped instead of chosen.
To understand why it happens — and why it's so hard to escape — you need to understand how SaaS companies grow, and where most of them get stuck.

The Three Stages
Stage 1 — Product-Market Fit
A new product enters a category and wins early by selling unique features. The product does something others can't. Buyers are excited by the novelty. Sales is relatively straightforward because differentiation is obvious and visible.

Stage 2 — Grown Up (Where Most Plateau)
The company matures. It stops leading with features and starts selling "business value" — but still ladders down to product features to justify it. The pitch sounds smarter. The decks are more polished. Executives present at conferences about strategy and vision.

But buyers still evaluate them as a product. They still compare feature-by-feature. They still send RFPs written in the language of the category leader. And because every competitor in the category has made the same upgrade — from feature-selling to business-value-selling — the differentiation has evaporated again.

This is the Followers Trap. And most SaaS companies live here permanently.

Stage 3 — Evolved (The Rare Unlock)
The company identifies the critical executive-level challenge in their category — not the product challenge, the business challenge — and ladders up to it with a unique point of view on how it should be solved. That POV changes how buyers evaluate them entirely.

They're no longer being compared feature-by-feature. They're being listened to. Buyers stop asking "how are you different?" and start asking "how could we do this any other way?"
This is price-making. And precious few companies make it here.

The Followers Trap is not a messaging problem. It's a belief problem. Once you accept the category leader's assumptions about what the problem is and how it should be solved, you can only win by being a better follower.

The companies that escape don't do it by outspending or outworking. They do it by changing the terms of evaluation entirely — which requires a move, not just a message.

Understanding the trap is the first step. The second is understanding what the escape actually looks like — and what it requires.

Part II: The Escape

A Product Category Reset is a strategic move paired with a narrative that makes the move feel inevitable, backed by proof that makes the new belief safe to adopt under real buying pressure. Three things. All three required. Any one of them alone is insufficient.

The move creates real leverage. The narrative makes that leverage legible to the market. The proof makes it safe enough for buyers to act on.

When all three align, something that looked like a bold bet starts to feel like the obvious next step. That feeling of inevitability — that sense that the old way is now clearly wrong and the new way is clearly right — is the signal that a category reset has landed.

The Three Strategic Moves
Not every move is available in every category at every moment. The move must match where the category actually is in its evolution. The right move at the wrong time fails. Here are the three moves and when each becomes available.

Move 1 — Reframe the Problem
The most powerful move when a category's inherited belief has become stale. A reframe exposes the assumption buyers didn't know they were making — and replaces it with a sharper, truer understanding of the real executive challenge.

Piano's shift from "monetize your content" to "monetize your loyal audience" is a reframe. Salesforce's "No Software" is a reframe. HubSpot's "inbound" is a reframe. In each case, the move didn't just change messaging. It changed what executives believed they were trying to accomplish — which changed what they were willing to buy, which changed the nature of every sales conversation that followed.

Reframes become available when a category's label has stabilized but the assumption underneath has gone stale. There is enough shared language that a new belief can snap into place — and enough dissatisfaction that buyers are ready to hear it.

Move 2 — Recombine Mature Capabilities
The right move when component capabilities have matured and buyers are paying hidden costs to stitch them together — integration burden, workflow fragmentation, time-to-value gaps. The recombination reorganizes proven pieces around a problem that couldn't be fully addressed until those pieces were ready.

Gong didn't invent call recording. It recombined recording, AI analysis, and revenue intelligence into something that changed what revenue leaders believed they needed to run the business. The whole became meaningfully greater than the parts — and the buying reason shifted from feature adoption to business outcome.

The proof burden for recombination is coherence and leverage — not novelty. If buyers still ask "why not buy these separately," the recombination isn't yet credible.

Move 3 — Shift the Business Model
The highest-barrier move, and often the most powerful when available. Business model shifts reduce friction, risk, or constraint in how buyers commit. They don't just change what you sell — they change how buyers can adopt it.

Business model shifts often follow reframes or recombinations. The belief has to be ready before the buying motion can change. And the proof burden is highest here: buyers need to see early customers renewing and expanding under the new model before they'll accept the risk themselves.

The Narrative
The move creates the leverage. The narrative is how the leverage travels.
A strong narrative contrasts the old belief with the new belief cleanly. It names the executive risk in the old model. It makes the new model feel like the obvious next step. And it can be repeated without slides.

That last test matters more than it sounds. If a CRO can't repeat your narrative to the CEO without showing a deck, it isn't portable enough to travel. Category leadership requires a narrative that spreads through customer conversations, board decks, analyst notes, and eventually competitor copy — none of which happen with a slide dependency.

The narrative is not a tagline. It's a new logic for the problem. One that buyers didn't have language for until you gave it to them — and once they have it, they can't unsee it.

Now you understand what a reset is. The next question is whether one is actually available to you — which depends on where your category is, and where you are inside it.

Part III: Is Your Move Available?

Not every category is ready for a reset. Not every company is positioned to execute one. Getting this wrong — attempting a reset in a category that isn't ready, or from a position that can't support it — wastes resources and erodes credibility.

Two questions determine whether a reset is available to you right now: Is your category narrative-sensitive? And are you in the Reset Zone?

Is Your Category Narrative-Sensitive?
Narrative-sensitive markets are ones where belief has leverage — where changing what buyers think they're solving actually changes who wins and who loses. Not every market is like this. Heavily regulated markets, very early categories, and markets dominated by a single buyer are usually not.

Narrative-sensitive markets share four traits. If your category has all four, a reset is likely available. If it has fewer, look carefully before committing to the move.

Trait 1 — Stable Label, Stale Assumption
Everyone agrees what the category is called and roughly what it does. But the belief underneath is visibly out of sync with how executives now experience the world. The category has a name — CRM, marketing automation, customer success — but the name no longer captures the real problem executives are trying to solve.

Trait 2 — Language Convergence
Vendor websites sound interchangeable. Pitch decks recycle the same nouns and verbs. Deals are won or lost on discount, minor features, or relationships — not on a fundamentally different understanding of the problem. When everyone sounds the same, no one is changing the evaluation criteria.

Trait 3 — Intense Pain, Fuzzy Articulation
Executives feel something is off but keep reaching for old language that no longer quite fits. They know the dashboard isn't the answer. They know the playbook isn't working. But they don't have a new vocabulary yet. This gap between private frustration and public language is where reframes land.

Trait 4 — Metrics Are Right, But the Story Is Wrong
Companies are optimizing to move the number — NRR, adoption, engagement — rather than fixing the underlying business risk. The KPI is correct; the logic for improving it is not. This creates the opening for a company that can name what the metric is actually supposed to represent.

Are You in the Reset Zone?

Even in a narrative-sensitive category, timing matters. The Reset Zone is where the move can actually travel.

Below the Zone — Sub-$5M ARR
The sharper belief can be defined and tested in founder-led sales, but the market mostly experiences it as interesting positioning — not a category shift. The real risk here is lack of product-market fit, not insufficient thought leadership. Until there is repeatable pull, even a brilliant reset is just a hypothesis.

In the Zone — $5M to $50M ARR
Real product-market fit, repeatable sales, executive-level customers — but not yet so large that GTM, partnerships, and internal mythology are frozen. This is where a sharper belief can finally travel. There are enough customers, deals, and channels that a reset can show up in board decks, analyst notes, and competitor copy.

This is where many future category leaders sit today: big enough to matter, still small enough to pivot hard without breaking themselves. A practical diagnostic: if you can rewire pricing, packaging, and sales without triggering an org revolt, you're still in the Zone.

Above the Zone
Large incumbents often cannot afford a true reset, even when leadership sees the need. Sales motions, partner ecosystems, and internal incentives are wired to the old belief. The clearest opening usually belongs to a strong challenger — not the current category king, who has too much to lose by admitting the old story is broken.

You're in a narrative-sensitive category and you're in the Zone. Now you need to find where the old story is already cracking — because that's where your move begins.

Part IV: Where to Look

Category resets rarely come from inventing something out of thin air. They come from stepping into seams — places where the old story has already started to fail in the wild. The move doesn't create the seam. It names it, and offers something better.

Seams are visible if you know where to look. There are three places they consistently appear.

Seam 1 — Executives Talk One Way in Private, Vendors Another in Public
Board decks and off-record conversations describe problems in richer, more anxious terms than vendor marketing does. When executives use language that doesn't map to any vendor's pitch, you're standing at a seam.

This is how the Piano reframe emerged. Publishers were saying privately that content monetization wasn't working — that they were doing everything right and still losing ground. Vendor marketing kept promising better paywalls and smarter meters. The gap between those two conversations was the seam. The reframe stepped directly into it.

Listen for the language executives use when they're not performing for vendors. That language is your raw material.

Seam 2 — Buyers Solve the Real Problem Adjacent to the Category
When buyers use other tools, teams, or budgets to compensate for what the category doesn't address, the official story is already breaking. The workaround is the tell.

Before HubSpot pushed inbound, much of the most effective demand-building lived in adjacent channels — not in the marketing automation decks. Before Gong pushed "operate on reality," revenue leaders were getting better intelligence from enablement tools and BI platforms than from their CRM. In both cases, the workaround pointed directly at the seam.

Find what buyers are doing around your category. That's where the unmet need lives.

Seam 3 — Category Leaders Repeat the Same Story as Context Shifts
When top vendors keep presenting the same narrative year after year while buyer behavior and technology fundamentals move underneath them, the category story is out of sync with reality. The language hasn't updated to match the problem.

This is the most reliable indicator that a reset window is open. The leader's vocabulary is frozen. Their proof points are aging. And buyers are privately wondering if there's a better way to think about this — even if they don't have the language for it yet.

One important note: seams make this framework falsifiable. If you cannot find seams in your category — no language drift, no adjacent workarounds, no executive-vendor gap — then a

Product Category Reset is not the lever. That's a stop signal, not an invitation to wordsmith your way to a new position.

You've found the seams. Now the question is how to turn that into a move — and what to do with it once you have one.

Part V: The Reset in Practice

The framework comes to life through four questions, applied in sequence. Each one answers the question the previous one leaves open. Work through them honestly — with your own category in front of you — and you'll know whether a reset is available and what it looks like.

Step 1 — What Is the Inherited Belief?
Write the category's orthodoxy in one sentence. This is the belief everyone implicitly accepts — what the category is "for." State it plainly, without softening it. It becomes your starting point and, eventually, your foil.

At Piano, the inherited belief was: "Publishers must monetize their content — through paywalls, meters, and entitlement management."

That belief wasn't wrong exactly. It was incomplete. It framed the problem as a functional question — how to lock and meter content — when the real challenge was strategic: how to build a durable revenue relationship with an audience when content itself had been commoditized.

Write your category's version of that sentence. If it feels uncomfortable — if it sounds like what your own sales team says — that discomfort is useful information.

Step 2 — What Is the Real Executive-Level Challenge?
Not the category's label. The question that actually keeps leadership awake at night.
This is usually one layer above what vendors talk about. Executives aren't worried about CRM features — they're worried about implementation debt and organizational agility. They're not worried about email sends — they're worried about whether their demand strategy compounds over time or erodes trust.

At Piano, the real challenge was: "How do we build a durable reader-revenue engine when content is commoditized, advertising is hollowing out, and we don't yet know which of our readers would actually pay — or for what?"

Notice that this question couldn't be answered by a better paywall. It required a different understanding of what the business was building. That gap — between the inherited belief and the real challenge — is where the reframe lived.

Step 3 — Which Strategic Move Is Actually Available?
This is the most important question — and the one most teams skip or get wrong.
The move must match the moment. A reframe is available when the inherited belief is stale and executives are privately dissatisfied. A recombination is available when component capabilities have matured and buyers are paying hidden integration costs. A business model shift is available when the belief is ready and the friction in how buyers commit is visible and painful.

Trying to force a business model shift in a category that hasn't clarified the problem will fail. Attempting recombination before components mature will look like overreach. Timing is not a detail. It is the strategy.

At Piano in 2016, the available move was a reframe. The category had a stable label, a stale assumption, and publishers who were privately dissatisfied but lacked language for what they were actually trying to build. The capabilities for a recombination weren't mature yet. The market wasn't ready for a business model shift. But the belief was ripe to change.

Ask yourself: of the three moves, which one is the category actually ready for right now? Not which one sounds most ambitious. Which one the evidence supports.

Step 4 — What Narrative Makes the Move Inevitable?
The narrative is how the move travels. It makes the shift legible, portable, and repeatable without you in the room.

A strong narrative contrasts the old belief and the new belief cleanly, names the executive risk in the old model, and makes the new model feel like the obvious next step. The test: if your CRO can't repeat it to your CEO without slides, it isn't ready.

At Piano: "Don't monetize your content. Monetize your loyal audience." Six words that changed the frame. Publishers who heard it said "that's exactly what we've been trying to figure out." Sales conversations changed immediately — not because the product changed, but because the problem had been renamed in a way that was truer to what executives were actually experiencing.

The move and the narrative must lock together. The move creates the leverage. The narrative makes it travel. Together, they give buyers a new way to evaluate you — one that isn't available to any competitor still working inside the old belief.

You have the move and the narrative. What determines whether it sticks — or collapses the moment you leave the room — is the proof architecture. And that's where most resets fail.

Part VI: What Makes It Stick

This is the part I learned the hard way.

A well-executed reframe can open doors, change conversations, and win deals that wouldn't have happened otherwise. I watched it happen at Piano. But a reset that isn't anchored in proof — and in an organization that has rewired itself around the new model — will revert the moment the champion leaves the room.

What makes a reset survive is proof architecture: the right kind of evidence, accumulating in the right places, fast enough to sustain the new belief under real buying pressure.

Proof Architecture — Matching Evidence to Move
Not all proof is the same. Different moves require different kinds of evidence. Bringing the wrong proof to the right narrative is one of the most common failure modes.

Proof for a Reframe
Buyers are being asked to abandon a familiar mental model. The proof they need is recognition — not technical depth. You need evidence that the new framing of the problem is true, before you ask anyone to believe your solution.

Executives saying "That's exactly what we're struggling with" before you describe your product
Customer stories that emphasize changed thinking, not feature usage
Buyers repeating the reframe back to you in their own words
Reduced feature comparison in late-stage deals

If your best proof is feature adoption charts, the reframe hasn't landed yet. The belief hasn't shifted — just the vocabulary.

Proof for a Recombination

- Buyers are evaluating coherence and leverage. They need to believe that the whole is meaningfully greater than the parts.
- Customers consolidating spend or workflows
- Integration complexity becoming an explicit buying reason
- Shorter time-to-value for cross-functional outcomes

The common failure mode: showing that everything works, without showing why it should exist together.

Proof for a Business Model Shift

- The highest proof burden. Buyers need to see the model survive real commitment cycles before they'll take the risk.
- Early customers renewing and expanding under the new model without renegotiation
- Customers defending the model internally on your behalf

- Clear alignment between pricing, value, and executive incentives

Why Resets Fail — The Four Traps
Even with the right move, right narrative, and right proof strategy, resets fail. Here are the four most common reasons — and what each one looks like in practice.

Trap 1 — Internal Mythology Is Too Rigid
The founding story is wrapped around the old belief. Changing it feels like self-betrayal to the people who built the company. Leaders resist a reset that implies the old story was limited — even when the evidence is clear. The reset never gets off the ground internally because the organization can't agree it's necessary.

Trap 2 — GTM Muscle Reverts Under Pressure
Sales, CS, and partners are compensated and trained on the old story. In a tough quarter, a skeptical prospect, or a late-stage competitive deal, they quietly revert to what they know. The reset needs to be wired into comp plans, training, and sales playbooks — not just the CEO's keynote — to survive without the founder in every room.

Trap 3 — Product Doesn't Support the Claim
The narrative is right, but capabilities lag too far behind. The reset wins the first cycle of deals, then credibility erodes as customers discover that the product can't yet deliver on the new belief under real conditions. Proof accumulates in the wrong direction.

Trap 4 — Founder Conviction Is Thin
Leadership is trying on a story they don't deeply believe. It works when the founder is in the room. It collapses the moment someone pushes back — in a board meeting, a sales call, or a pricing negotiation. A reset requires the founder to behave as if the new model is already true, before the market has confirmed it. That takes genuine conviction, not performance.

The highest signal of a real reset is not eloquence. It is whether the company is already behaving as if the new model is true — in its pricing, packaging, sales compensation, and product roadmap.

The Piano reset worked in the room. It produced deals that shouldn't have happened by the old logic. But it wasn't wired into the organization deeply enough to survive my departure. No proof had accumulated publicly. The GTM muscle was trained on the old model. The founder conviction wasn't there at the leadership level.

When I left, the reset left with me.

That's the lesson. And it's why the proof architecture has to be built before you need it — not after the narrative has already started to travel.

You understand the move, the narrative, and what makes it stick. The last question is: what do you do next?

Part VII: Your Next Move

If you've read this far, one of two things is true.

Either you recognized your company somewhere in these pages — in the Followers Trap, in the gap between private executive frustration and vendor marketing, in the seams that are already showing in your category. Or you read it as a framework for evaluating others — companies you're building, funding, or advising. Either way, the next move depends on where you are.

If You Are a Founder in the Reset Zone
Start with the inherited belief. Write it down in one sentence — not your version of the category, the category's version. The orthodoxy everyone accepts, including you.

Then ask honestly: are you competing inside that belief, or have you found a move that breaks from it? If you're inside it — even if your messaging sounds strategic and your deck looks polished — you're in the Followers Trap. Better execution inside the wrong frame doesn't change the frame.

If you can feel the seams — the private conversations that don't match vendor marketing, the workarounds buyers are using, the executives who nod at everyone's pitch but sign with no one — you have a real option. The question is whether you'll take it before a competitor does.

The move is available. The proof architecture takes time to build. Start now.

If You Are an Investor or Banker
The first underwriting question is not "What's their message?" It's "What is the current orthodoxy in this category, and what do they think the new one is?"

Judge the belief, not the metaphor. Teams that can only talk in features, tangibles, or taglines will collapse under deal pressure. Look for four things:

1. The move is available — not forced, not premature, matched to where the category actually is
2. The proof matches the move type — recognition proof for reframes, consolidation proof for recombinations, endurance proof for business model shifts
3. The company is already behaving as if the new model is true — in pricing, packaging, and sales compensation
4. Adjacent pressures are reshaping buyer expectations in the direction of the reset

Category resets are most mispriced in the Reset Zone — big enough to travel, early enough to be undervalued. That's where the narrative premium hasn't been priced in yet.

A Note on Category Design vs. Category Resets
This framework is not about naming a new category from scratch. In most cases, you win faster by resetting the logic of an existing category than by trying to escape it entirely.

The market already has language, budgets, and buying motions. Your job is to redirect those flows — not invent new ones. The reset makes your main competition the old story, rather than the adjacent logo. When that happens, pricing power, deal shape, and strategic options shift in your favor.

In public and private markets, those are exactly the levers that show up as valuation premiums.

How Good to Great SaaS Works

I work with a small number of Reset Zone founders each year — companies between five and fifty million in ARR that are ready to stop competing on someone else's terms.

The engagement begins with a conversation. Not a pitch. A diagnostic discussion to understand your category, your position, and whether a reset is actually available to you right now. If it is, we build it together — the move, the narrative, and the proof architecture that makes it survive without me in the room.

The output is a Reset Memo: a company-specific application of this framework to your category, your competitors, and your moment. The strategic call that turns "we should probably rethink our positioning" into a decision your whole leadership team can act on.

If you recognized your company in these pages — reach out. A forty-five minute conversation costs nothing, and it will tell us both whether there's a reset available.

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