MASTER CLASS

What if data is the problem?

DIGIMARCON CANADA 2026
DIGITAL MARKETING CONFERENCE



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COSMO5

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2026 WORLD TOUR

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April 2026

The Great Data Detox.

DigiMarCon 2026, Toronto

Kristin Wozniak, Chief Data + Growth Officer at Cosmo5

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A little about me.



https://marketingltb.com/blog/statistics/data-driven-marketing-statistics

The data obsession is real.

83% of marketers say data-driven marketing is essential to their business growth.

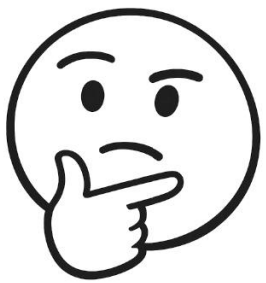
76% of organizations increased their data analytics investment in the last 12 months.

58% of businesses rely on data dashboards for daily decision-making.

69% of marketing leaders expect data usage to grow significantly in the next 3 years.

72% of marketers use AI to automate data analysis.

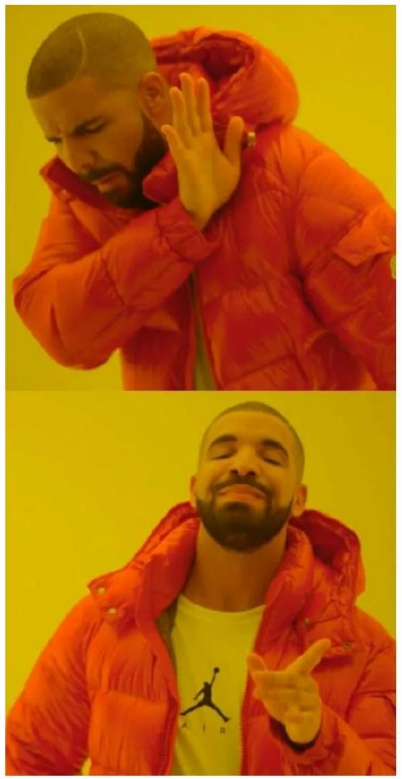
https://marketingltb.com/blog/statistics/data-driven-marketing-statistics



But is all this data actually toxic?

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Data

Control → dictates decisions

Data

Inform → Context + understanding

No, I am not anti-data.

🖤I love data.

But not all data behaves the same way.

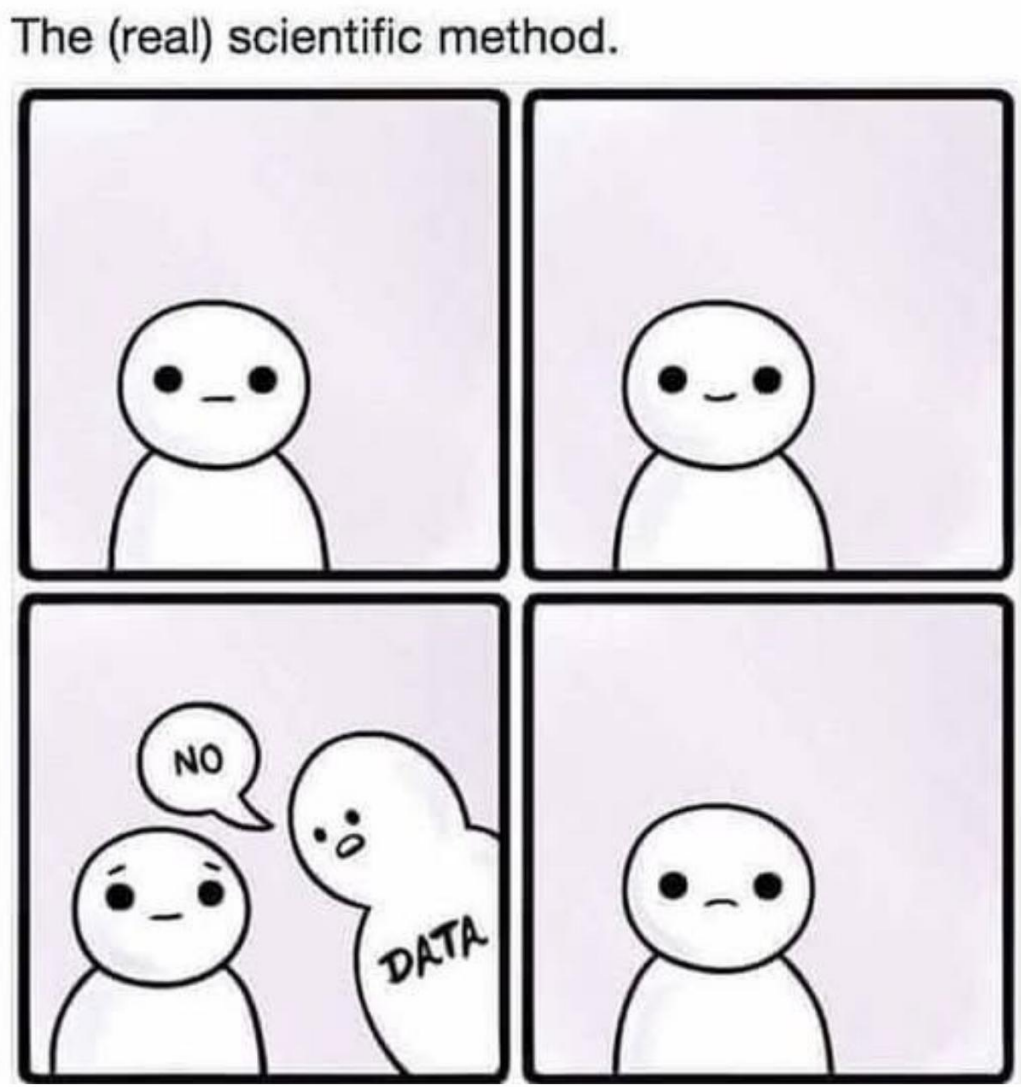
The data we use most is the data that’s easiest to measure, easiest to access, and easiest to optimize.

Not necessarily the data that leads to the best decisions.

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What I’m seeing:

- Marketers are overwhelmed, stressed, constantly trying to prove impact.
- So we’ve been turning to data for help: “data-based decisions for all!”
- Over time though, metrics have stopped telling us the truth.
- And we’ve started doing some weird stuff.



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Goodhart's Law: When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

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GOODHART'S LAW

WHEN A MEASURE BECOMES A TARGET,
IT CEASES TO BE A GOOD MEASURE

IF YOU MEASURE PEOPLE ON...	NUMBER OF NAILS MADE	WEIGHT OF NAILS MADE
THEN YOU MIGHT GET	1000'S OF TINY NAILS	A FEW GIANT, HEAVY NAILS



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THE COBRA EFFECT

A WELL-INTENTIONED MEASURE CAN OFTEN BACKFIRE AND HAVE THE OPPOSITE EFFECT TO INTENDED



INTENTION
REDUCE COBRA POPULATION

ACTION
A BOUNTY FOR DEAD COBRAS!

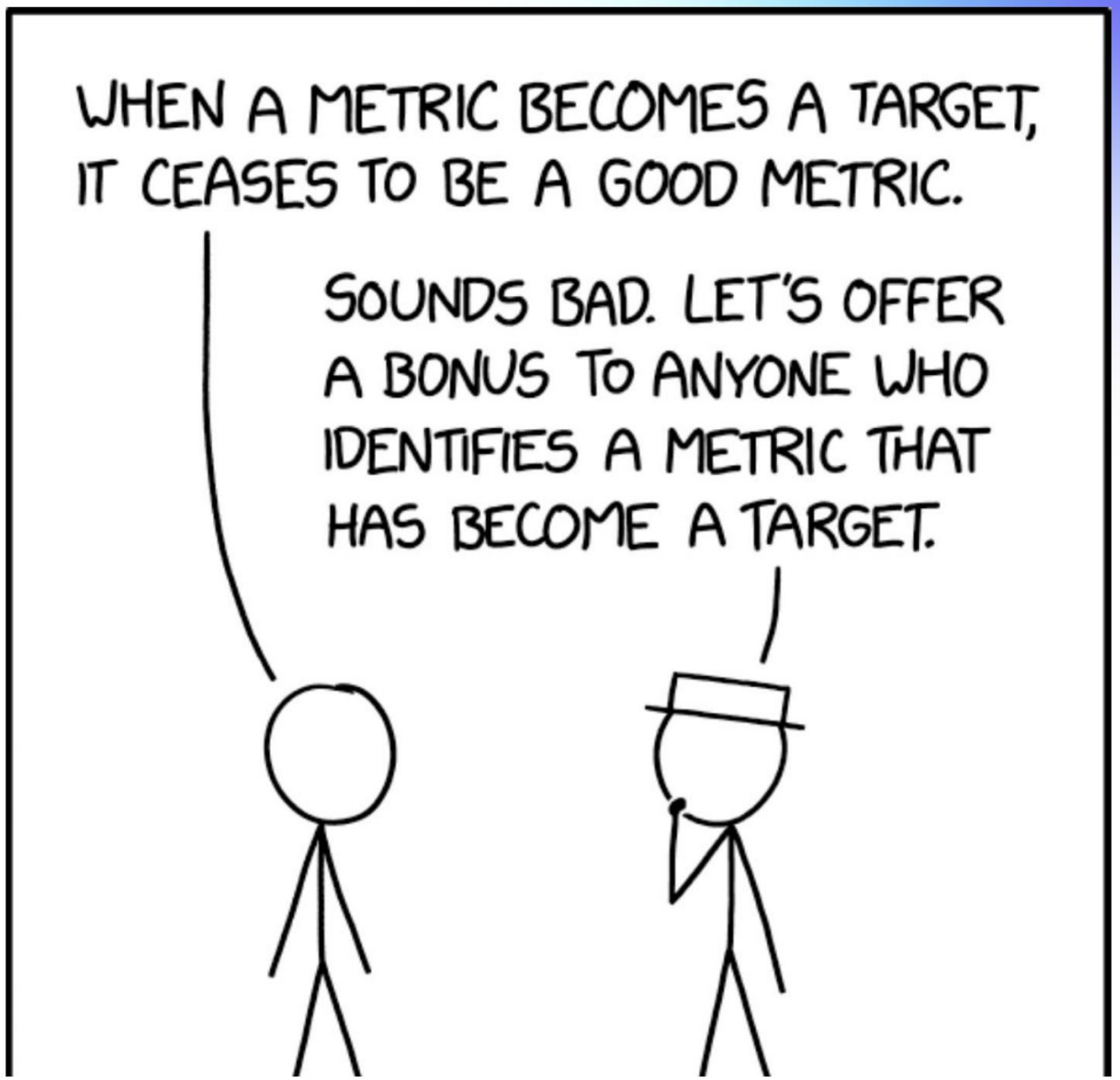
EFFECT
PEOPLE START COBRA FARMING

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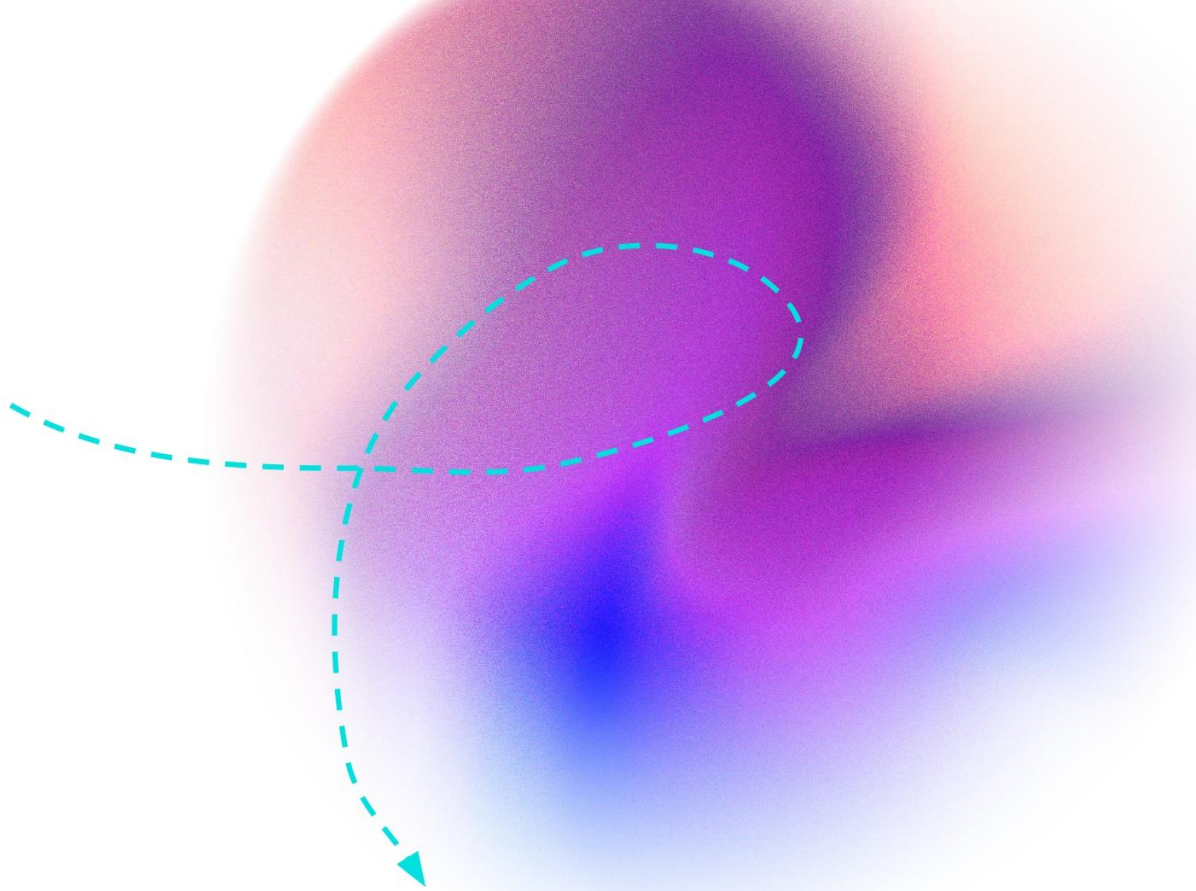
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When people are pressured to meet a target there are three ways they can proceed:

1) They can distort the data
2) They can distort the system
3) They can work to improve the system

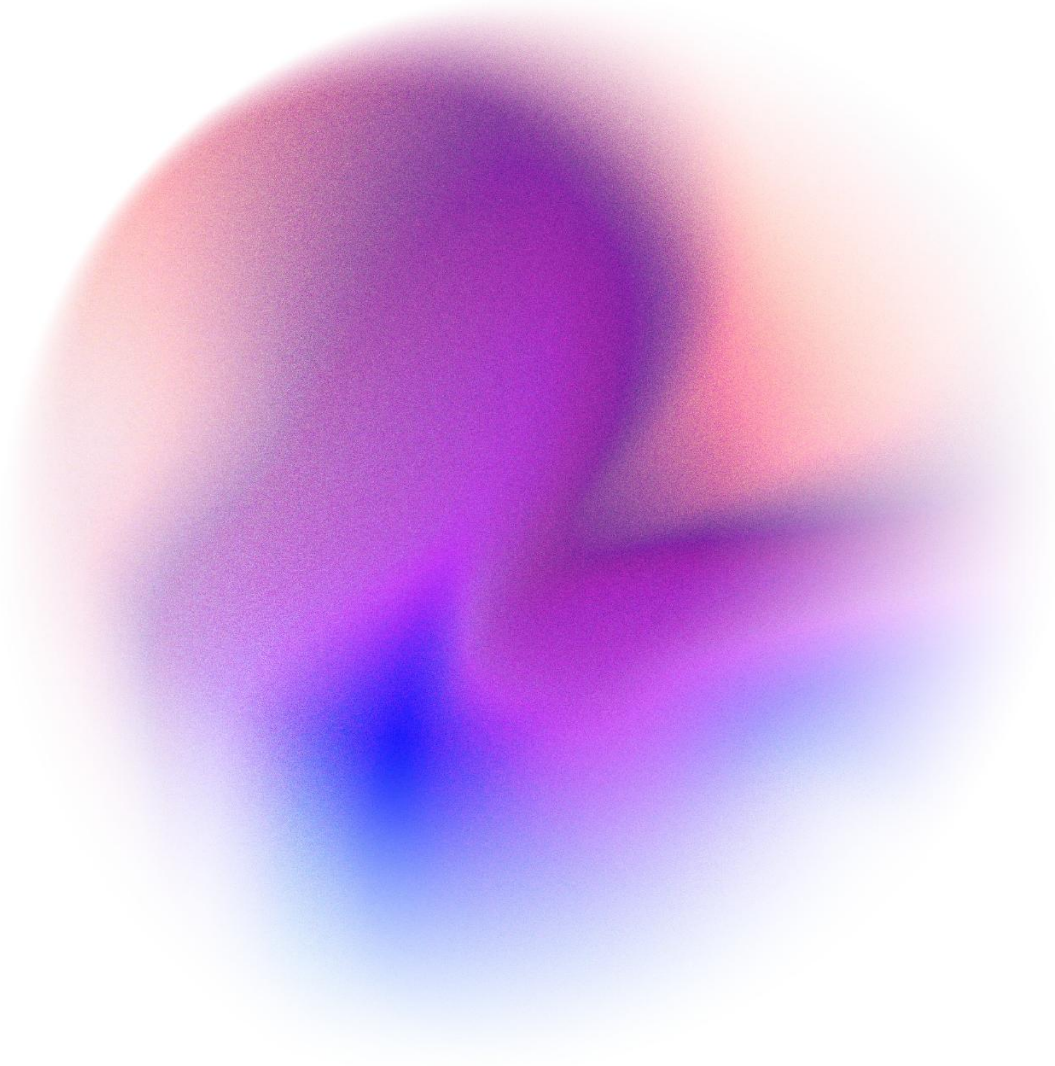


Let’s compare:
Weight loss goals
Lead goals

https://commoncog.com/goodharts-law-not-useful/

Ivice or a binding offer.

We've **obsessed** over the data and accidentally **distorted** the system.



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One: pressure to prove ROI.

We’re not making a bigger impact;
we’ve just narrowed the definition of impact.

Stress Driver:
- “Defend every dollar”
- Constant scrutiny from leadership / finance

Data Reaction:
- Everything must be measurable
- ROI becomes the ultimate truth

Goodhart’s Law:
- ROI metrics (ROAS, CPA) become the target

Outcome:
- Over-optimization of what’s measurable (and what we can prove is working)
- Undervaluing brand, long-term growth

I want to do a “first to market” activation but I need proof it works first…

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Two: data overload.

**We tried to simplify decisions with data,
but instead we optimized for data neatness.**

Stress Driver:
- Too many dashboards
- Conflicting numbers
- Constant analysis

Data Reaction:
- “We just need better / more data”
- Search for a “single source of truth”

Goodhart’s Law:
- Clean, consistent data becomes the goal

Outcome:
- Endless reconciliation instead of decisions
- False sense of clarity

Why don’t these numbers match!? I need perfect dashboards.

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Three: speed + always-on pressure.

Our desire to be fast just meant that we've become short-sighted.

Stress Driver:
- Real-time reporting
- Constant campaign changes
- No pause between decisions

Data Reaction:
- Reliance on live metrics as signals
- Constant monitoring

Goodhart's Law:
- Short-term metrics become the target

Outcome:
- Reacting to noise
- Killing long-term thinking

CPA increased $1 this week. We need to fix it now.

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Four: fear of being wrong.

**In an effort to reduce risk,
we also reduced originality.**

Stress Driver:
- Decisions are visible
- Outcomes are tracked
- Mistakes are measurable

Data Reaction:
- “Let the data decide”
- Need for statistical validation

Goodhart’s Law:
- “Proven” ideas become the target

Outcome:
- Safe, incremental decisions
- Loss of creativity and boldness

Just tell me what the data says we should do.

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Five: platform complexity + opacity.

We outsourced our intelligence instead of gaining our own.

Stress Driver:
- Black-box algorithms
- Lack of transparency
- Constant platform changes

Data Reaction:
- Over-reliance on platform metrics
- Trusting reported performance

Goodhart's Law:
- Platform-defined metrics become the target

Outcome:
- Optimizing for platform success, not business success
- Loss of control

That's what Google is recommending, so let's go with that.

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Six: consumer unpredictability.

We trust the model more than the customer.

Stress Driver:
- Fragmented journeys
- Hard-to-track behaviour
- Declining signal quality

Data Reaction:
- More granular tracking
- More modeling, more attribution

Goodhart's Law:
- Attribution outputs become the target

Outcome:
- False precision
- Misleading decisions

Find me data to support this approach.

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Seven: AI + automation pressure.

In trying to scale performance, we lost differentiation.

Stress Driver:
- Expectation to “do more with less”
- Fear of being replaced
- Increasing output demands

Data Reaction:
- Clear targets for machines
- Simplified success metrics

Goodhart’s Law:
- Optimization goals become the target

Outcome:
- Homogenized performance
- Loss of differentiation

Just set the target and let the algorithm figure it out.

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Eight: performance culture + KPIs.

In our effort to align teams, we constrained them.

Stress Driver:
- Constant evaluation
- KPI-driven roles
- Comparison across teams

Data Reaction:
- Metrics define success
- Targets define performance

Goodhart's Law:
- Hitting the number becomes the goal

Outcome:
- Gaming metrics
- Misaligned incentives

This is the metric leadership cares about.

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We created pressure.
That pressure made us rely on data.
That reliance turned metrics into targets.

And once that happened the system stopped working the way we thought it did.

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We’re not being set up for success.

What we meant to do	What we actually did	How we’re showing up	How we feel
Make marketing accountable	Made marketers afraid to act without proof	Second-guessing decisions unless they’re backed by data	Paralyzed + Anxious
Eliminate waste	Over-optimized for efficiency at the expense of growth	Trapped optimizing the same things, unsure how to unlock new growth	Stuck in a Loop
Learn faster	Focused only on what performs in the short term	Constantly reacting, but rarely stepping back to think long-term	Impatient
Understand our customers	Mistook data for true understanding	Confident in the numbers, but uneasy about what we might be missing	Misguided + unseen
Make marketing more relevant	Fragmented our brand and lost coherence	Fragmented across channels, with no clear identity	Disconnected
Scale growth predictably	Became dependent on platforms to drive performance	Reliant on systems we don’t fully control or understand	Powerless
Build a culture of experimentation	Let testing replace thinking	Busy testing constantly, but unclear on what we’re actually trying to achieve	Directionless
Align the organization	Reduced success to what can be measured	Pressured to prioritize metrics over what we know actually matters	Boxed in

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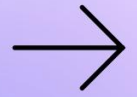


Setting us on a journey toward **offloading responsibility** for decision making, resulting in a **mischaracterization of risk.**

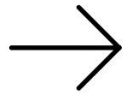
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A history of offloading our decision making.

Discovery
"We can measure things!"



Obsession
"We should measure everything!"



Delegation
"Machines should measure (and decide) things!"

Early 2000s	Mid-late 2000s	2010-2015	2015-2018	2018-2021	2021-Present
Search introduces measurable intent Arguably ground zero for performance driven thinking	**Web analytics becomes mainstream** Measurement moved from post-campaign reporting to real-time optimization	**The "Big Data" era and attribution obsession** "Data-driven" becomes an identity (not just a tactic)	**Platforms become the source of truth** Decision-making begins to move outside the company	**Privacy shock + the illusion cracks** This is where cracks appear in the certainty of data-driven marketing	**Automation + AI replace human interpretation** Marketers become further away from the data than ever

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A mischaracterization of risk. (1)

What we meant to do	What we actually did	How we're showing up	How we feel	Where we're getting it wrong	The consequences	
Make marketing accountable	Made marketers afraid to act without proof	Second-guessing decisions unless they're backed by data	Paralyzed + Anxious	Not launching new channels or ideas because there's no historical data to justify them	Missed revenue from untested growth opportunities and slower time-to-market	Slower top-line growth → downward pressure on valuation multiples
Eliminate waste	Over-optimized for efficiency at the expense of growth	Trapped optimizing the same things, unsure how to unlock new growth	Stuck in a Loop	Cutting upper-funnel or brand investment because it doesn't show immediate ROI	Declining demand generation and rising customer acquisition costs over time	Margin pressure → reduced profitability and market confidence
Learn faster	Focused only on what performs in the short term	Constantly reacting, but rarely stepping back to think long-term	Impatient	Pausing campaigns after small short-term dips instead of letting them build over time	Volatile performance and inability to scale sustained revenue growth	Limits investor confidence and valuation stability

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A mischaracterization of risk. (2)

What we meant to do	What we actually did	How we're showing up	How we feel	Where we're getting it wrong	The consequences	
Understand our customers	Mistook data for true understanding	Confident in the numbers, but uneasy about what we might be missing	Misguided + unseen	Over-targeting narrow audiences and missing broader demand or new customer segments	Slowing customer growth and over-reliance on a shrinking audience pool	Constrained TAM expansion → caps long-term valuation potential
Make marketing more relevant	Fragmented our brand and lost coherence	Fragmented across channels, with no clear identity	Disconnected	Creating dozens of hyper-personalized creatives that don't connect to a single brand story	Erosion of brand equity, lower conversion rates, and reduced pricing power	Long-term revenue and margin decline
Scale growth predictably	Became dependent on platforms to drive performance	Reliant on systems we don't fully control or understand	Powerless	Shifting budget based solely on platform-reported performance without questioning attribution bias	Inefficient media spend and over-allocation to channels that overstate performance	Structurally higher CAC and reduced return on capital

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A mischaracterization of risk. (3)

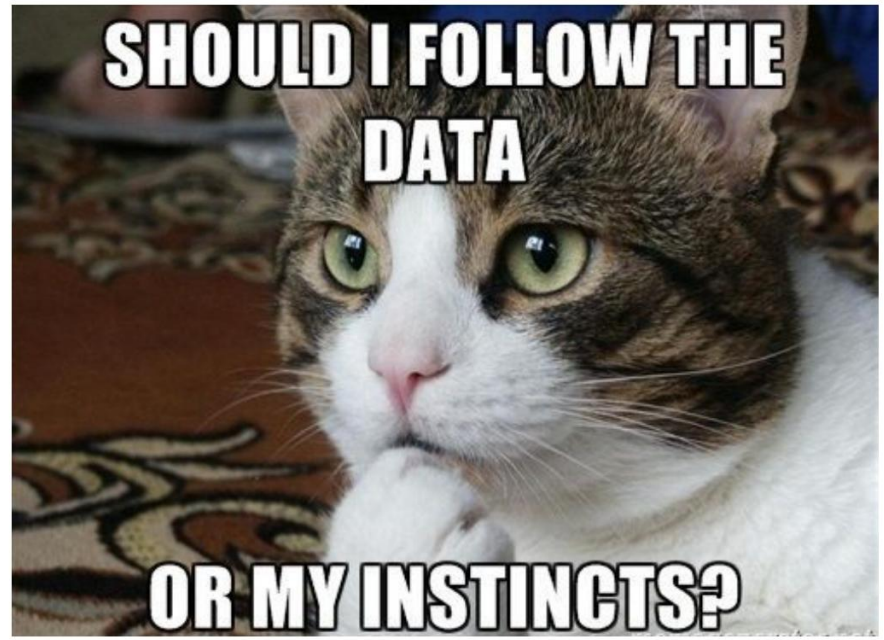
What we meant to do	What we actually did	How we're showing up	How we feel	Where we're getting it wrong	The consequences	
Build a culture of experimentation	Let testing replace thinking	Busy testing constantly, but unclear on what we're actually trying to achieve	Directionless	Running A/B tests without clear hypotheses or learning goals; just chasing "winners"	Diminishing returns from optimization with no step-change growth	Stagnating business performance and valuation
Align the organization	Reduced success to what can be measured	Pressured to prioritize metrics over what we know actually matters	Boxed in	Setting team goals purely on CPA/ROAS targets, even when they conflict with long-term business health	Misallocated budgets and decisions that optimize metrics but hurt overall profitability	Long-term value destruction

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Deep down, we know something isn’t working.

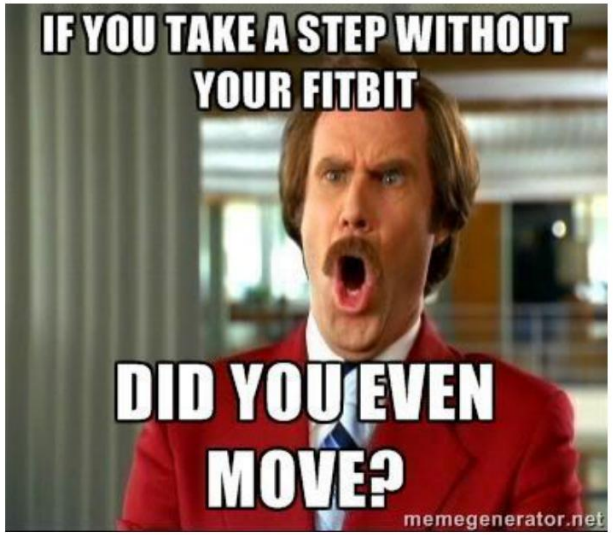


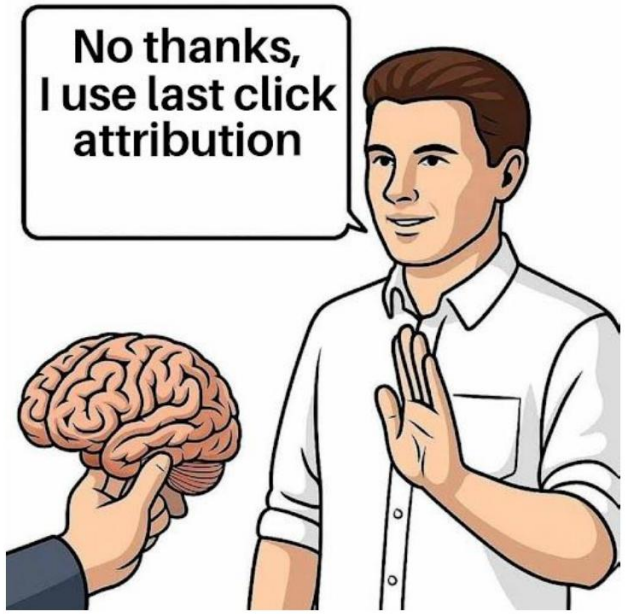


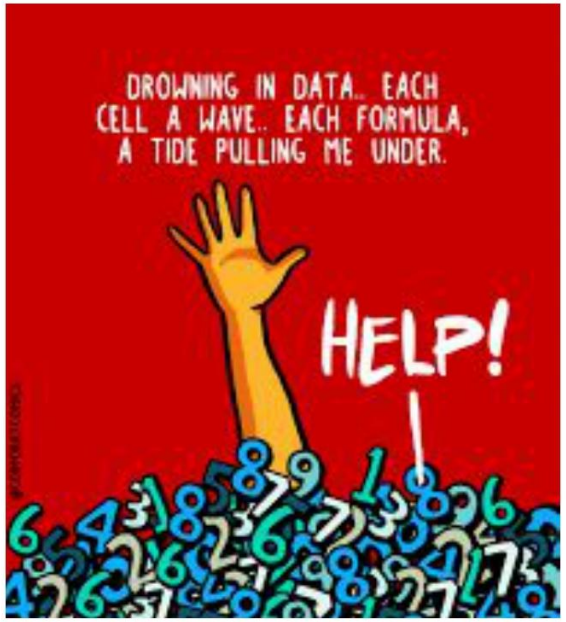


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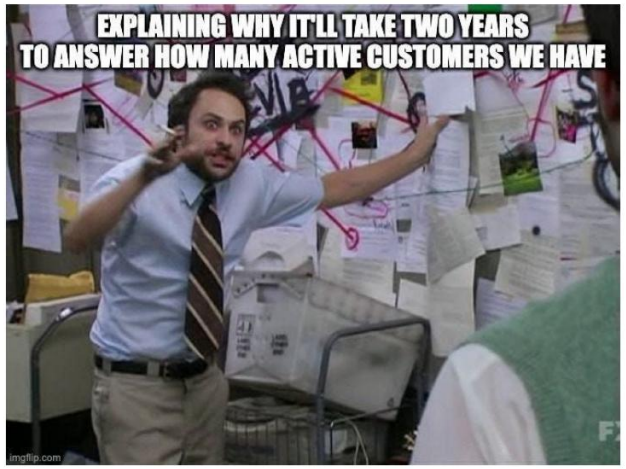




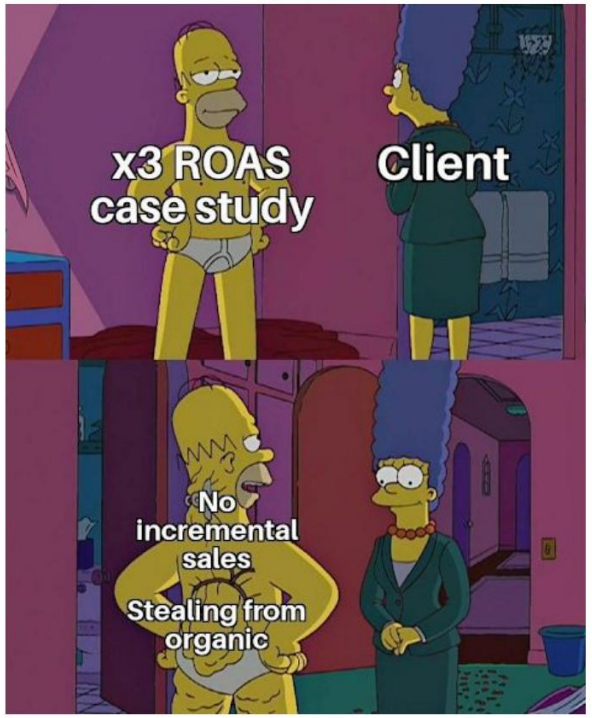












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We don’t feel good.



- Most senior marketers report being stressed most of the time
- More than half feel overwhelmed in their role
- Many report emotional exhaustion in the past year
- Burnout is now the norm, not the exception
- Only a minority feel they have a healthy work/life balance

https://resources.asana.com/americas-anatomy-of-work-burnout-ebook.html
https://resources.asana.com/rs/784-XZD-582/images/PDF-FY23-AMER-EN-EMIM23-AOW23-Burnout-Report.pdf?aliId=eyJpIjoiZnRvXC9lV3l1WUVYbW4weFEiLCJ0IjoienRrcnhib3lnenc1UjU5SVwvbEw1RUE9PSJ9&
https://getvoip.com/news/asana-report-highlights-burnout/

We’re seeing the impact on our work.



https://mediainnovationawards.strategyonline.ca/Winners/Winner/2025

MEDIA COLLABORATION: BEST PARTNERING

SILVER



BEST USE OF DIGITAL

SILVER



BEST USE OF CONTENT

SILVER





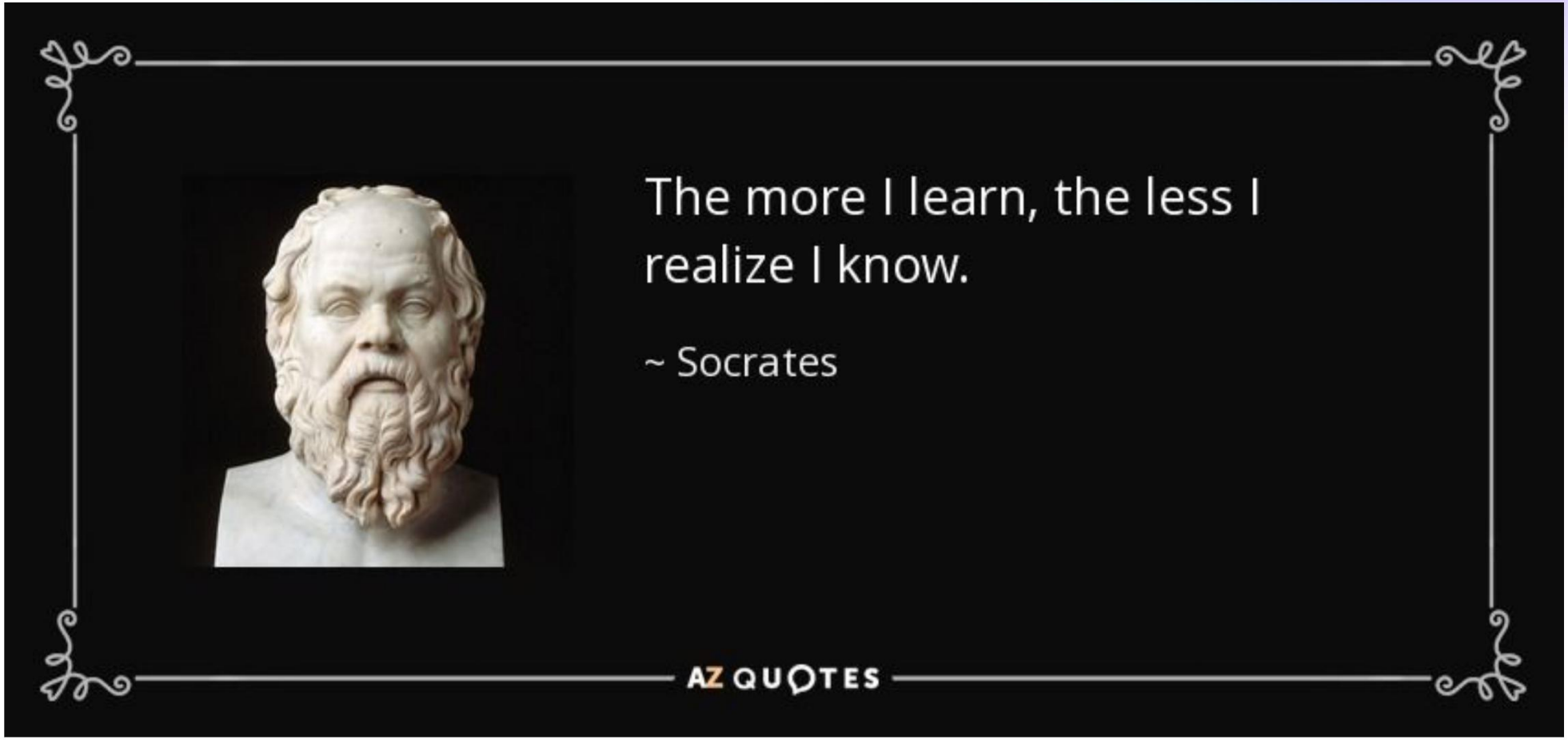
PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

SILVER



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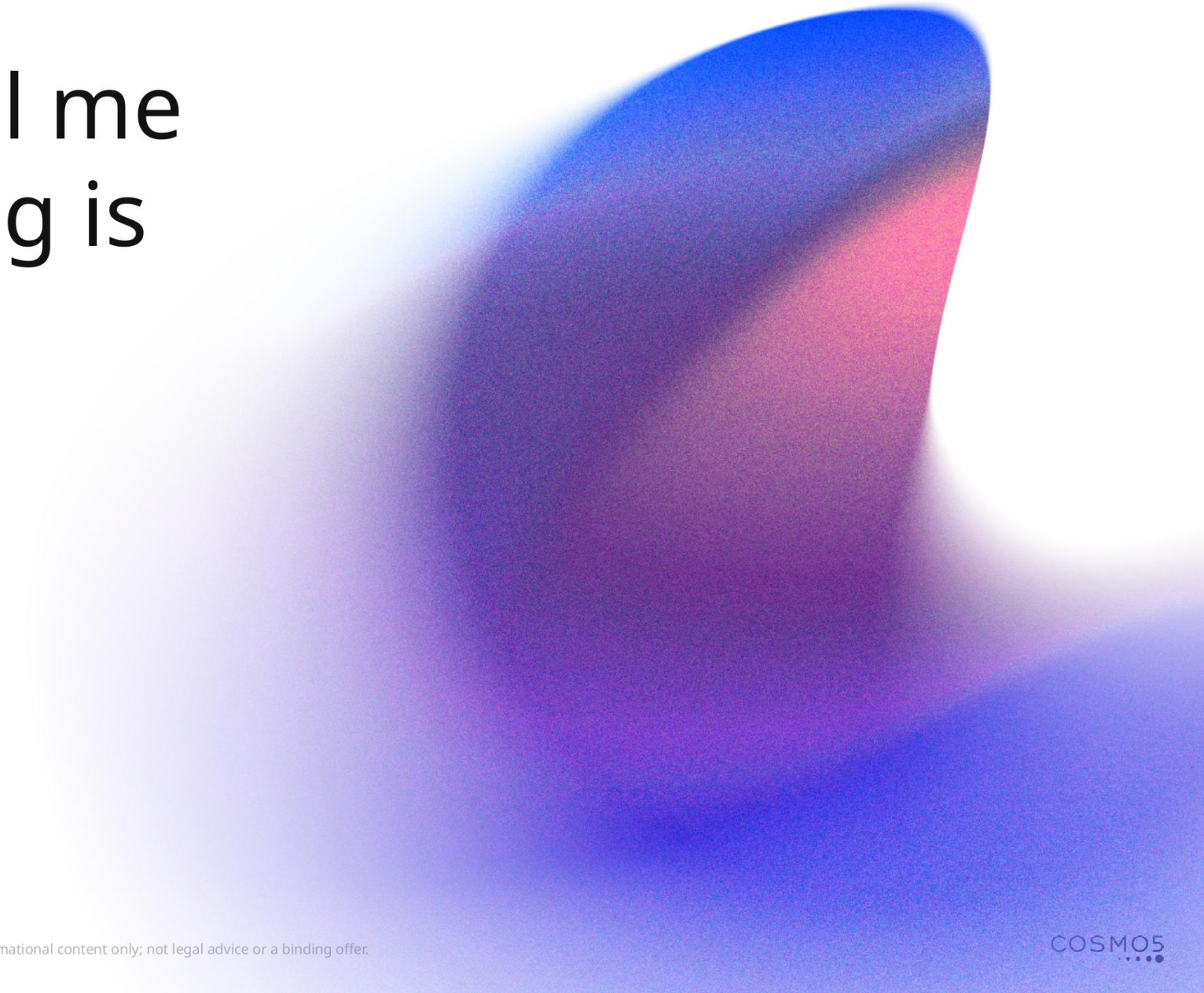
And we still don’t “know the answer.”



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Can you just tell me if what I’m doing is working?

No, we can’t.



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So… what’s happening? We’re stuck in a cycle.



Thomas Kuhn’s model (1962):

1. **Normal science / current paradigm:**
   everyone works within a shared belief system
2. **Anomalies emerge:**
   things don’t quite fit
3. **Crisis:**
   confidence in the system breaks
4. **Paradigm shift:**
   a new way of thinking replaces it

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Current paradigm

We built an industry on measurement, optimization, and scale:
“Data-driven decision making.”

The everyday anomalies

The system still runs, but but strange things are happening…

The emerging crisis

Individually, these weirdnesses are explainable, but together they point to a system that is no longer producing what we think it is.

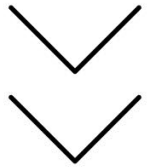
Paradigm shift:
It’s not about better metrics,
it’s better thinking about systems.

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When people are pressured to meet a target there are three ways they can proceed:

~~1) They can distort the data~~
~~2) They can distort the system~~
3) They can work to improve the system



We explore (and strive to understand) what drives outcomes
We use metrics as signals
We focus on learning and growing

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Shift from outputs to inputs. Ask ourselves which inputs might have driven those outputs and how they might relate causally.

Stop treating metrics as targets; treat them as signals instead: For example, CPA as an indicator of brand health versus the health itself.

Stop (over)reacting to noise! Most movement in metrics is just normal variation.

Build a system for learning (not reporting). Focus on structured reviews to discuss metrics instead of reporting and dashboards.

Measure multiple things with purpose. No one metric will ever tell you the whole story. Look at lots; there is no single source of truth.

Ask often: what can we be doing better? Real gains from exploring the system, not the outputs.

https://commoncog.com/goodharts-law-not-useful/

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From → To: Our new data inspirations

Measurement	➜ **Assessment**	“The data doesn’t decide, people do.”
Optimization	➜ **Advantage**	“The best-performing option isn’t always the right one.”
Certainty	➜ **Hypothesis**	“If we wait for proof, we’ll never do anything new. The best ideas *create* new data!”
Control	➜ **Understanding**	“We don’t need to know everything; we just need to understand enough to act.”

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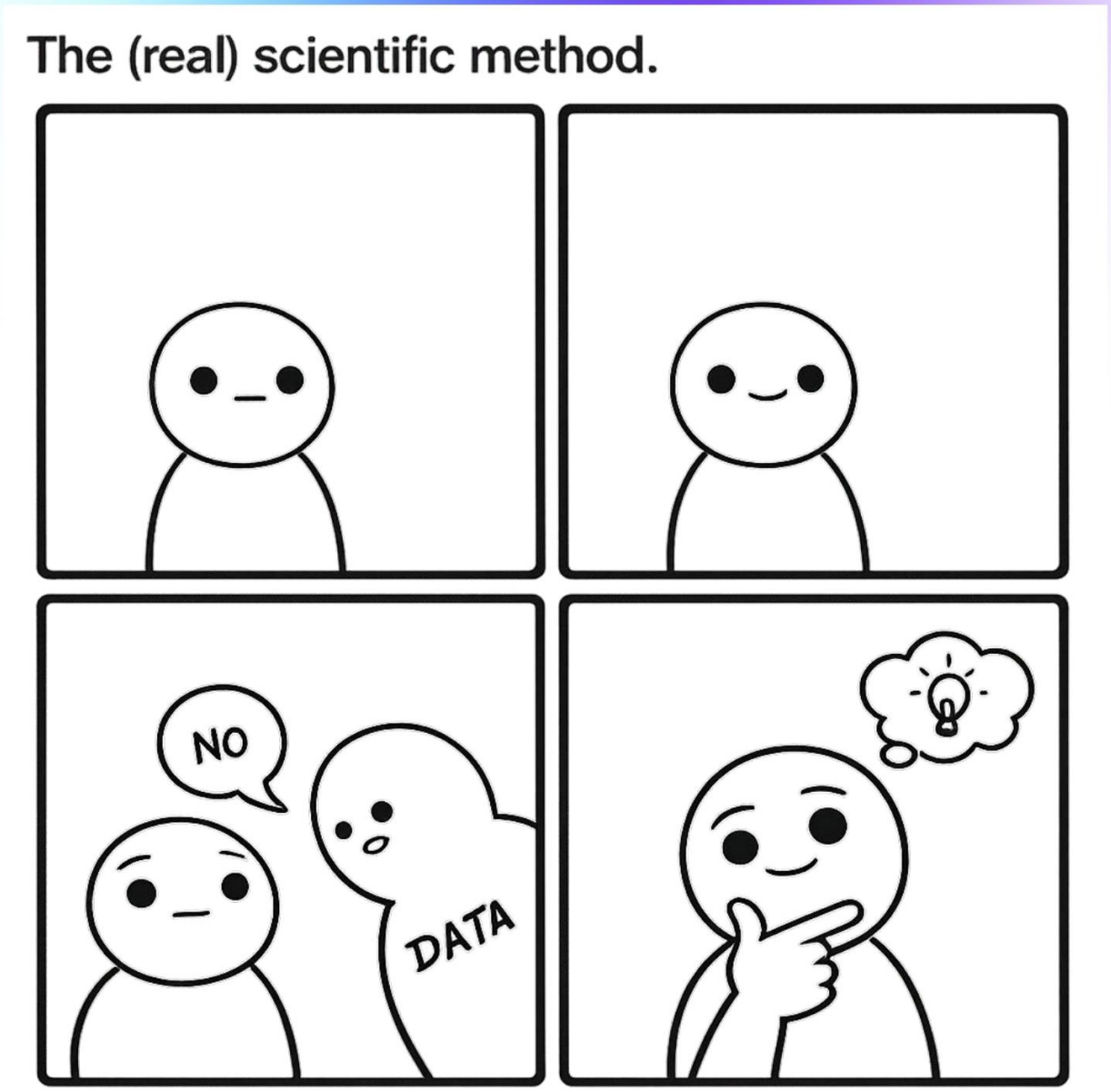
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Let’s

- ☑ Reclaim decision-making
- ☑ Escape sameness
- ☑ Reintroduce risk
- ☑ Accept imperfection

To

- ☑ Unlock new growth
- ☑ Build brands that stand out
- ☑ Act quicker
- ☑ Celebrate *your* impact



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This is a lot… what do I do tomorrow?

Don’t ask:
“What happened?”

Try asking:
What does this mean?
What is this data telling us about the people we’re trying to connect with?
What is this data not telling us?
What assumptions are baked into this data?
Does this matter?
Do we think this is signal or noise?
Is there opportunity here?
What could we have done differently?

Challenge yourself: if I had to make this decision without any data, how would I make it? What would I do?

Kill one **unnecessary dashboard** or report.

Explore Goodhart’s law: what am I actually measuring / what are the unforeseen consequences? Am I marching toward the right goal?

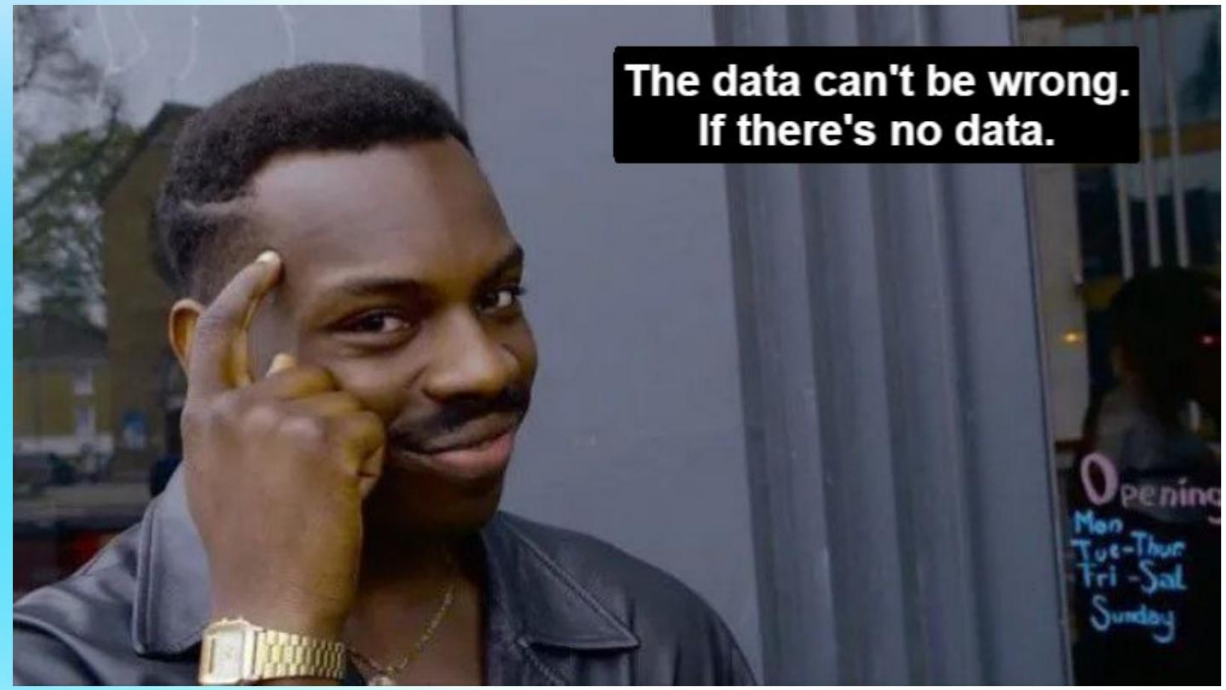
Actually use your innovation budget! Move forward with 70% confidence instead of 100% proof.

What would _____ do?

Ask yourself: what is this metric really telling me? What does this tell me about what we’re doing right or wrong?

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Thank you!

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