

PLACEMENT IS NOT DEMAND

The Emerging Brand Execution Manual

A commercial operating guide for founders, commercial leaders, wholesalers, and investors navigating the U.S. three-tier system.

CRAFTED ADVISORS

Route-to-Market Advisory for Emerging Beverage Alcohol Brands

INTRODUCTION

The System Has Changed. Most Brands Haven't.

The U.S. beverage alcohol market is in the middle of a structural reset that most emerging brands are not equipped to navigate. Consolidation at the distributor tier has compressed rep bandwidth. Supplier rosters have ballooned. Chain buyers are rationing shelf resets. And every category — spirits, wine, RTD, hard seltzer, non-alcoholic — is overbuilt on brand count relative to actual consumer demand.

“Most emerging brands do not fail because they couldn’t get distribution. They fail because they were not operationally prepared for what happens after placement.”

And yet the conversation in most founders’ pitch decks, board meetings, and investor updates is still about doors. States. Authorizations. Placements. These metrics have become proxies for traction — but they are not traction. They are table stakes. The work begins after the first purchase order.

This guide is not about how to get distribution. There is no shortage of advice on that topic. This guide is about what happens next — and why the brands that get it wrong rarely get a second chance. It is organized around the commercial realities that separate brands with genuine velocity from brands with impressive-sounding placement counts and disappearing runway.

The writing is direct because the subject demands it. The three-tier system does not reward good stories. It rewards repeatable execution.

SECTION ONE

Distributor Economics

How Wholesalers Actually Think About Your Brand

Distributors are logistics and margin businesses. They make money by moving product from suppliers to accounts and multiplying velocity by gross profit per case. The math is simple. The implications for emerging brands are not.

Every brand in a wholesaler's book requires real organizational resources: warehouse space, carrying costs, sales rep attention, delivery scheduling, marketing coordination, administrative overhead. Most brands generate GP dollars that do not come close to covering what they actually cost to carry. The brands that survive portfolio rationalization are the ones where the math works. The ones that get cut are the ones where it doesn't.

Route Economics and Rep Bandwidth Realities

A distributor sales rep managing a territory typically carries 150 to 400 SKUs across 50 to 80 accounts on a weekly or biweekly route. Do the math: at eight hours of actual selling time per day, accounting for drive time, check-ins, and administrative tasks, a rep has roughly six to ten minutes of meaningful selling attention per account per visit.

Inside those ten minutes, the rep is pitching the brands that generate commissions, the brands that managers are tracking, the brands with active programming and samples, and the brands with chain authorizations that need to be placed. Your emerging brand — with its compelling backstory and its craft provenance — is competing against all of it. And it is competing without the incentive structures that move the needle.

WHAT WHOLESALERS SEE

A rep with 200 SKUs and a weekly route has approximately 3 minutes per SKU per week in market attention budget. New, unproven brands rarely make the cut unless the supplier is physically present creating demand.

Distributor sales incentives compound this reality. Reps are compensated on commissions tied to case movement. They are measured on depletion targets for priority brands, programming execution, and chain compliance. The internal management pressure they face is almost entirely oriented toward established, high-velocity brands. An emerging brand generating 15 to 20 cases per month in a territory is effectively invisible in those conversations.

GP Dollars vs. Complexity

Here is how a distributor portfolio manager actually evaluates a brand: gross profit dollars generated per month, divided by the operational complexity that brand requires. Complexity includes how often the supplier calls, how many samples are requested, how frequently pricing changes, how much hand-holding the brand needs from the sales team, how many market visits they require, and how many distribution gaps they flag that the rep has to explain.

High-GP, low-complexity brands get attention. Low-GP, high-complexity brands get quiet deprioritization, followed eventually by a portfolio review conversation that never goes the way the founder expected.

Most emerging brands are low-GP and high-complexity by definition. This is not a character flaw. It is the math of being small in a system built around scale. The only corrective is to generate enough pull-through demand that the GP number improves faster than the complexity does — and to keep supplier-side demands reasonable enough that the relationship stays manageable.

Portfolio Rationalization: How Tail Brands Get Cut

Distributor portfolio rationalization is not a dramatic event. It is a slow deprioritization that looks, from the outside, like nothing is happening. The sequence goes like this:

- Month one through three: the brand gets initial placement energy, some rep attention, a few market visits.
- Month four through six: depletions plateau. Rep attention moves to newer priorities. Market visits slow.
- Month seven through twelve: the brand becomes a fulfillment item. Reps fill orders when accounts call, but are not actively selling.
- Month twelve to eighteen: portfolio review. The conversation usually starts with “we love the brand, but...” and ends with a mutual decision to consolidate distribution or suspend the relationship.

Founders almost always see this coming and choose not to act on what they’re seeing. The warning signs are clear: reorder rates slowing, rep calls going unreturned, market visit requests being deferred. By the time the portfolio review happens, the outcome has already been determined.

WHAT WHOLESALERS DISCUSS INTERNALLY

“That brand calls us three times a week and moves eight cases a month. We’re carrying it for the relationship but it’s costing us more than it’s making us. If they don’t get velocity up in the next 90 days, it’s coming off the route.”

What Makes a Brand Easy to Sell

Distributors have an informal internal rating for every brand. Easy brands have consistent, explainable velocity with clear consumer or operator demand. They have a supplier team that does not require constant management. They have simple, competitive pricing. They have marketing support that generates pull-through without requiring distributor labor to execute. And they have a field presence that creates demand before the rep shows up, not one that relies on the rep to create it.

Hard brands have the opposite profile. Inconsistent movement. Pricing structures that confuse buyers. Geographic ambition spread thin across markets with no density anywhere. Supplier teams that generate meetings without generating depletions. And an expectation that the distributor will solve the demand problem the brand itself hasn’t solved.

OPERATOR TAKE

The best predictor of how a distributor will treat your brand at month eighteen is how your brand looked on paper at month three. Wholesalers form conclusions fast. They rarely reverse them without hard evidence.

THE DIAGNOSTIC

- If your distributor cut 30% of its portfolio tomorrow, would your brand survive the review?
- Are you generating GP dollars that justify the complexity you add to their operation?
- Are you creating pull-through demand, or relying on the relationship to carry you?
- Do your depletions tell a story of sustainable growth, or one-time spikes followed by flat lines?

SECTION TWO

Dead Placements

The Framework Founders and Investors Get Wrong

A dead placement is an account where your product is authorized, possibly even physically present, but is not generating active, recurring demand. The account ordered once. The bottle is on the back bar or the shelf. Nothing is moving. No one is selling it. The account shows up in your distribution count but is not contributing to your commercial health.

Dead placements are the single most dangerous metric distortion in the emerging brand world. They inflate door counts. They create investor confidence that is not grounded in commercial reality. And they mask the underlying demand problem until the brand is out of runway to fix it.

“A brand with 300 placements and 90 active buyers is a worse business than a brand with 120 placements and 105 active buyers. One of these brands has demand. The other has a list.”

Fake Velocity and Inventory-Loading Illusions

Inventory loading is a specific and particularly destructive form of fake velocity. It happens when the initial depletion numbers from a new distribution relationship or chain authorization look strong — because accounts are stocking the product for the first time. The cases move from the distributor warehouse to the account. Technically, those are depletions. Practically, they are not demand. They are inventory transfer.

Six to eight weeks later, if real consumer pull has not materialized, the sell-through stalls. The account’s back bar has a bottle with a quarter inch of product in it that hasn’t moved in three weeks. The shelf has a facing that isn’t turning. At that point, the account is not going to reorder. They are going to wait until the inventory clears — which may take months — and then they are probably not going to reorder at all.

WHAT FOUNDERS MISS

Initial depletion numbers from a chain authorization are almost always inventory loads, not demand signals. Real velocity shows up in weeks four through twelve, after the initial stock-in. Most founders report the initial load to investors as traction before the sell-through data exists.

Why Investors Get Fooled

Investors in the emerging beverage alcohol space are frequently presented with metrics that sound like commercial traction but are not. Door counts are the most common. “We are in 400 accounts across three states” is a statement about authorization, not about demand. Without the corresponding data on reorder rates, active buyer counts, and depletion velocity per account, that number tells an investor almost nothing about whether the brand has a business.

State counts are a close second. Being available in eight states is a distribution achievement. It says nothing about whether consumers in any of those states are purchasing the product with any regularity, or whether the brand has the operational infrastructure to support those markets without distributor dependence.

The most sophisticated investors in this space now ask for active account rate as a percentage of total placements, reorder frequency by account, and depletion-per-door averages. These metrics are harder to inflate. They are also far more predictive of whether a brand has real commercial traction or just a well-negotiated distribution agreement.

The Chain Authorization Trap

Getting a 200-location chain authorization feels like a breakthrough. The founder gets excited. The investor update features it prominently. The press release goes out. And then the real work begins — work that most emerging brands are completely unprepared for.

Chain authorizations are only as valuable as the sell-through they generate. Chains measure velocity per SKU per store per week. If your velocity is below their threshold — typically measured at the item level against category benchmarks — the item goes on the reset list and gets pulled at the next reset cycle. That cycle may be 90 days away. It may be 180. But it is coming.

The brands that succeed with chain authorizations are the ones that treat the authorization as the starting gun, not the finish line. They activate field teams to visit store locations. They run manager education. They build in-store visibility. They track scan data weekly. They identify the 15 highest-velocity stores and concentrate resources there to build proof of performance before the reset conversation happens.

The brands that fail treat the authorization as the achievement. They celebrate the door count. They report the states. And 120 days later, they are out of that chain with a depletion history that makes it nearly impossible to get back in.

THE DIAGNOSTIC

- What percentage of your total placements reordered in the last 60 days?
- Are your initial depletion numbers driven by inventory load or consumer pull?
- Do you know your active account rate — active buyers divided by total placements?
- Are you tracking sell-through at the store level in chain accounts, or just the PO?

SECTION THREE

The Conversations Suppliers Never Hear

There is a version of every distributor relationship that the supplier never sees. The formal meetings are cordial. The market visits are curated. The monthly calls are optimistic. And then the rep gets off the call and tells the manager what they actually think.

WHAT WHOLESALERS SAY INTERNALLY

"The founder was in market last week. Great energy, but they spent the whole time in accounts that already buy. They didn't open anything new. I don't think they understand how the system works."

"Their pricing is upside down in this market. We've told them three times. They keep saying it's a positioning decision."

"They want us to build their brand for them. That's not our job."

"I pulled the numbers this morning. Thirty-two accounts authorized, seven active buyers. That's not a brand. That's a sample program."

"If they hit 10 cases this month I'll be surprised. We're not cutting them yet but we should."

"Nice people. No commercial infrastructure. I give them 18 months before they come back and ask us what went wrong."

These conversations happen constantly. At every distributor. In every market. The brands they're being had about are not bad brands. They are brands that did not understand the operational demands of the system they entered.

The information asymmetry is significant and structural. Distributors have access to your depletion data in real time. They know exactly how you're performing against every other brand in their portfolio. They know which accounts haven't reordered. They know which reps have stopped pitching you. They know your cost of carrying versus your GP contribution.

You probably don't know any of that with the same precision. And they are unlikely to volunteer it until the relationship has already deteriorated past the point of easy recovery.

OPERATOR TAKE

Demand depletion data monthly, not quarterly. Build a relationship with the brand manager and the rep separately. The rep's view of your brand is often more honest than what the manager will say in a formal meeting. Ask hard questions early and often. Silence from a distributor is rarely good news.

SECTION FOUR

Account Execution

What It Actually Takes to Drive Reorder Behavior

There is a consistent gap between how much field activation founders think is required and how much is actually required to drive reorder behavior. That gap almost always costs brands money, velocity, and distributor relationships.

An account that places your product has made a small bet. They have given you a slot on the back bar or a facing on the shelf. What happens in the next 30 days determines whether that bet pays off. If a bartender recommends the product, if a floor staff member can speak to it, if a consumer finds it and likes it — the reorder happens. If none of that occurs, the bet expires.

Distributors cannot drive this activation at the scale or frequency an emerging brand needs. A rep managing 150+ SKUs across 60 accounts on a weekly route has roughly six to ten minutes of selling time per account per visit. That time is allocated to priority brands, chain compliance, and active programming — not to educating a bartender about your brand story.

The Field Cadence Standard

The practical implication is direct: emerging brands need a physical presence in market that is systematic and non-negotiable. Someone — whether it's the founder, a regional manager, or a field activation hire — needs to be in accounts every week. Not occasionally. Not when there is budget. Every week.

The work itself is not complicated, but it is specific. Every account visit should accomplish at least one of the following:

- Staff education: pour behind the bar, explain the product, leave a tasting note card.
- Menu strategy: identify the opportunity for a cocktail feature or menu placement and pitch it to the buyer.
- Visibility improvement: improve bottle position, add a tent card, request a speed rail slot.
- Reorder prompt: if the bottle is running low, prompt the account to reorder before they run out and forget.
- Intelligence gathering: understand why the product is or isn't moving in that account, and use that information to improve activation elsewhere.

WHAT GOOD EXECUTION LOOKS LIKE

A brand with 40 on-premise accounts and a one-person field team running a weekly visit cadence, documented call reports, and a monthly account health review will consistently outperform a brand with 150 accounts and no systematic field presence. Every time.

The Lighthouse Account Activation Model

The most operationally sound commercial strategy for an emerging brand is not broad distribution. It is deep activation of a concentrated account base. The Lighthouse Account Model is built on a simple premise: identify the 20 to 30 accounts in a market that have the right consumer profile, the right operator culture, and the right visibility to build real brand traction.

These accounts become proof. They generate word of mouth, trade advocacy, and consumer familiarity. They produce the depletion data that makes the distributor conversation easier. And they create the density — geographically and operationally — that makes field activation economically sustainable.

Lighthouse accounts have explicit activation criteria. A fully activated lighthouse account has staff who can describe the product without prompting, a cocktail or feature on the menu, visible bottle position, a 30-day or better reorder cadence, and documented visit history. Getting 25 accounts to that standard is worth more commercially than getting 150 accounts to a one-time placement.

Why 300 Doors Can Be Worse Than 25

Broad, shallow distribution is one of the most common early-stage traps in beverage alcohol. The instinct to say yes to every distribution opportunity — every market, every account, every region — is understandable. It feels like momentum. It is not.

What 300 inactive accounts creates: a distributor that has 300 line items with minimal movement, a field activation burden that no small team can meet, depletion data that looks flat or declining, and an investor story that is difficult to sustain. What 25 highly active lighthouse accounts creates: strong velocity data, a clear proof-of-concept story, a distributor relationship that is based on performance rather than goodwill, and a replicable model for expansion.

The sequencing discipline is straightforward. You do not expand to a new market until you have demonstrable, repeatable velocity in your existing markets. Not because expansion is wrong, but because expansion without proof is how brands end up with distribution in six states and no traction in any of them.

Bartender Advocacy as a Commercial Asset

In the on-premise channel, the bartender is the single most leveraged commercial asset an emerging brand can develop. A bartender who knows your product, believes in it, and recommends it actively is worth more than any marketing spend targeting the same consumer.

Building bartender advocacy is not a branding exercise. It is a field execution discipline. It requires repeat visits. It requires product education that is specific, concise, and useful at the bar. It requires treating the bartender as a commercial partner, not an audience for a brand presentation. And it requires consistency — the same face, showing up regularly, building a relationship over time.

THE DIAGNOSTIC

- Who is physically representing the brand in market every week?
- How often are your top 25 accounts being touched — and by whom?
- Is there documented accountability for field execution: visit logs, call notes, follow-through?
- Are your field activities connected to measurable outcomes, or is it unstructured market presence?
- Can you name the bartenders in your five best accounts who actively recommend the product?

SECTION FIVE

Founder Misalignments

Where Emerging Brands Spend Money vs. Where It Moves Cases

The resource allocation decisions made in the first two or three years of an emerging brand's commercial life tend to follow a recognizable pattern. Heavy investment in brand identity, PR, digital presence, event activations, and trade shows. Thin investment in field execution, account follow-through, and distributor relationship management. This is not a coincidence. Brand building feels strategic. Field work feels tactical. And in an environment where investor narrative matters, strategic decisions are easier to defend.

The problem is that brand building and commercial execution are not interchangeable. A national trade press placement generates awareness in an audience that may never encounter the product. A well-activated account with a trained bartender generates reorders every 30 days for the next three years.

“Trade shows, PR placements, and cocktail competitions are brand activities. Reorders are commercial activities. Most emerging brands invest heavily in the former and wonder why the latter isn't happening.”

The PR and Influencer Illusion

Public relations generates coverage. Coverage generates awareness. Awareness does not generate demand. These are related but distinct commercial outcomes, and the gap between them is where most emerging brand marketing budgets disappear.

A spirits brand covered in a major outlet, featured in a cocktail competition, or promoted by a lifestyle influencer with significant following will typically see a brief, measurable spike in interest and possibly in direct-to-consumer or e-commerce activity. What it will rarely see is a sustained increase in on-premise or retail velocity in the markets where the brand actually needs to prove traction.

The influencer obsession is a specific variant of this problem. Influencer partnerships are most effective for brands with broad retail distribution and strong consumer recall. For an emerging brand in early distribution with limited market density, an influencer post reaches an audience that cannot find the product, which means the conversion opportunity is theoretical rather than real.

Trade Show Addiction

Trade shows are useful for exactly two things: building industry relationships and competitive intelligence. They are not effective for driving commercial velocity. They are, however, expensive, time-consuming, and psychologically rewarding in ways that make them easy to rationalize.

The math is straightforward. Three days at a major trade show, including booth fees, travel, samples, and staff time, often runs \$20,000 to \$40,000 for a small brand. That same investment, directed at a focused field activation program in a target market, would buy approximately 80 to 160 days of field execution. One of those investments builds awareness. The other builds accounts.

Premature Geographic Expansion

The geographic expansion decision is where misalignment becomes most costly. Founders — under pressure from investors to show market coverage, or excited by distributor interest in a new state — frequently expand before they have established repeatable velocity in existing markets. The result is thin distribution in many places and strong distribution nowhere.

The practical damage is significant. Field activation resources get spread across markets, reducing effectiveness everywhere. Distributor relationships in new markets start without the proof-of-concept story that makes them productive. And the management bandwidth required to run even low-activity distribution in multiple states often exceeds what a small commercial team can sustain.

WHAT FOUNDERS MISS

Depth before breadth is not a conservative strategy. It is the fastest path to the metrics — velocity, reorder rates, account density — that justify expansion in the first place. Expanding without those metrics does not create them. It dilutes the chance of ever achieving them.

The Difference Between Awareness and Demand

Awareness is knowing a brand exists. Demand is choosing to buy it, repeatedly, even when alternatives are available. Most emerging brand spending tilts heavily toward generating the former. Most commercial outcomes depend entirely on building the latter.

Demand is built through consistent, repeated consumer experience with the product. It is built through bartender recommendation, menu placement, and word of mouth between operators. It is built through retail staff education and product placement strategy. None of these things are primarily driven by PR, social media, or event appearances. They are driven by operational execution at the account level, market by market, week by week.

The brands that confuse awareness for demand tend to make the same set of downstream mistakes: they expand too early because awareness in a new market feels like commercial readiness, they underinvest in the account-level activation that converts awareness into purchase, and they are consistently surprised when distribution agreements in new markets don't generate the velocity they expected.

THE DIAGNOSTIC

- Are you spending more on awareness than on account conversion and field activation?
- Can you clearly explain why your best accounts reorder: staff advocacy, consumer pull, menu placement?
- Are you expanding markets before proving repeatable velocity in existing ones?
- Are you measuring account productivity — depletions per door — or just total account count?
- What is your trade show and PR budget as a percentage of your total field activation budget?

SECTION SIX

How Emerging Brands Quietly Die

The end of most emerging beverage alcohol brands is not dramatic. There is no press release. No public announcement. The brand simply becomes less visible, then inactive, then gone. The pattern is consistent enough to be predictable — which means it is also preventable.

It typically starts with a promising first year. Distribution secured. Placements made. Initial depletions driven by inventory load and founder energy. Investor update looks strong. The brand feels like it has momentum.

Then month ten or eleven arrives. The initial inventory loads have cleared. Reorders are inconsistent. The distributor rep has shifted attention to a newer brand or a stronger performer. Field activation has gotten more expensive and harder to justify as the founder's time is pulled in multiple directions. The brand is still in the market, but it is no longer being sold. It is just being distributed.

By month 18, the signals are clear to everyone except, often, the founder. Depletion trends are flat or declining. The distributor is starting to have the portfolio review conversation. Investor runway is compressing. The brand is in 300 accounts but generating the velocity of a brand in 40. The commercial infrastructure that should have been built in months one through six was never built. There is nothing to fall back on.

“The brands that fail don’t usually run out of distribution. They run out of execution. The distribution stays. The demand never arrives.”

The autopsy almost always reveals the same findings: underinvestment in field execution, overinvestment in brand awareness, premature geographic expansion, no reorder tracking system, and a distributor relationship that was treated as a sales solution rather than a logistics partnership.

The founders who get through it are the ones who caught these patterns early, made the uncomfortable decisions — pulling back distribution to concentrate resources, replacing brand spending with field execution investment, building the commercial infrastructure before it was needed — and stayed operationally focused even when it was harder to do so than to chase the next big distributor relationship.

SECTION SEVEN

What Investors Should Actually Measure

The Metrics That Predict Commercial Survival

The standard set of metrics presented in emerging beverage alcohol fundraising rounds — door counts, state counts, total authorizations, year-one depletion volume — are poor predictors of whether a brand has genuine commercial traction. They measure distribution activity. They do not measure demand.

The metrics that actually predict commercial survival are operational and account-level. They are harder to present in a pitch deck. They are also far more honest about what is actually happening in market.

Reorder Rate

What percentage of accounts that placed an initial order reordered within 45 days? A healthy brand in early distribution should be seeing reorder rates of 50% to 70% or better in its core markets. Rates below 30% indicate either a demand problem, an execution problem, or both. This single metric tells an investor more about the brand's commercial reality than total door count by itself.

Active Buying Account Rate

Active buying accounts are accounts that have purchased within the last 60 days. The ratio of active buying accounts to total authorized accounts is one of the most honest measures of distribution quality. A brand with 300 authorizations and 90 active buyers has a 30% active rate. A brand with 120 authorizations and 100 active buyers has an 83% active rate. The second brand has a real business. The first brand has a distribution list.

Velocity Per Active Account

Cases or units moved per active account per month. This metric measures the depth of demand in the accounts that are actually buying. Low velocity across a large account base suggests the product is present but not prioritized. High velocity in a concentrated account base suggests genuine consumer demand and strong account-level execution. Investors should ask for this number by channel — on-premise velocity is different from off-premise velocity, and blending them obscures the story.

Account Retention Rate

What percentage of accounts that were active in a given quarter are still active three months later? Retention is the clearest signal of whether demand is real and repeatable or driven by one-time activation energy. A brand with a 90%+ quarterly account retention rate has something working. A brand with a 50% retention rate is losing half its active accounts every quarter, which means the new account pipeline has to run twice as fast just to stay flat.

INVESTOR TAKE

Doors and states are distribution metrics, not demand metrics. Before writing a check, ask for: reorder rate, active account rate, velocity per active account, account retention rate, and depletion concentration by market. If a brand can't produce these numbers, that is the data.

Depletion Concentration

Are depletions distributed across the account base or concentrated in a small number of accounts? Concentration is not inherently bad — it often reflects the lighthouse model working correctly. But when 80% of depletions come from 10% of accounts, an investor needs to understand whether those accounts are stable and growing, or whether they represent fragile relationships that a competitor or a menu change could disrupt.

Market Density vs. Geographic Sprawl

A brand present in 12 states with minimal density in any of them is a different risk profile than a brand with strong density in two markets and a clear expansion model. Market density — measured as active accounts per geography relative to total potential accounts — is a leading indicator of whether the brand is building real commercial infrastructure or just covering ground.

INVESTOR DILIGENCE CHECKLIST

- Reorder rate within 45 days of initial placement (target: 50%+)
- Active buying account rate as % of total authorizations (target: 60%+)
- Velocity per active account by channel (ask for trend, not just current snapshot)
- Quarterly account retention rate (target: 80%+)
- Depletion concentration: top 10 accounts as % of total volume
- Market density in primary markets vs. geographic spread
- Supplier-funded execution budget as % of total sales and marketing spend

SECTION EIGHT

The Future of Emerging Brand Execution

What the Next Phase of Wholesale Rationalization Means

The structural pressures reshaping the three-tier system are not temporary. Distributor consolidation is continuing. Supplier rosters at major houses are growing faster than rep headcount. The cost of capital for emerging brands has increased. And the consumer environment — while still favorable for craft and premium products — is more competitive than at any point in the last decade.

In this environment, the historical model for emerging brand launch — get distribution, generate press, let the distributor build velocity — is operationally obsolete. The wholesaler system was never designed to build demand for unknown brands. It was designed to fulfill demand that already exists. The brands that understand this distinction are the ones building commercial infrastructure ahead of distribution, rather than after.

Supplier-Funded Execution Is No Longer Optional

The concept of supplier-funded execution — brands investing directly in field activation, staff education, and account-level programming rather than expecting distributor labor to carry it — is no longer a competitive advantage for emerging brands. It is a baseline requirement.

The distributors who are actively growing emerging brands are doing so in partnerships where the supplier is doing significant demand creation work: staffing market managers, funding on-premise programming, running account education events, and generating pull-through before they ask the rep to prioritize the brand. The relationship is collaborative rather than transactional. And the GP math works for the distributor because the supplier is subsidizing a portion of the activation cost.

Data Accountability Is Increasing

The availability of real-time depletion data through distributor reporting systems, VIP, and third-party analytics platforms has raised the operational floor for emerging brands. Founders who are not actively tracking depletion data by account, by market, and by channel are flying blind in an environment where their distributor partners have that data in real time.

The brands that use data operationally — to identify which accounts need a visit, which markets are underperforming relative to potential, which account types are generating the highest velocity — are the ones that are making better decisions faster. The ones that wait for quarterly sales updates are consistently behind.

The Account Density Imperative

The next generation of successful emerging brands will be built on account density rather than geographic coverage. This is a strategic choice that requires saying no to distribution opportunities that are not supported by the operational infrastructure to activate them. It requires founders who are willing to be smaller in more markets in order to be stronger in fewer ones.

The brands that have survived the last ten years of wholesale rationalization — and the ones that are positioned to grow through the next phase — are not the ones with the most states or the most

accounts. They are the ones that built real, repeatable commercial operations in a defined geography and then used those operations as a template for expansion. That model is not new. But the discipline required to execute it, in an environment that constantly rewards the appearance of scale over the substance of it, remains rare.

OPERATOR TAKE

The brands that survive the next phase of wholesale rationalization will not be the ones with the best stories. They will be the ones that built the commercial infrastructure to create real, repeatable demand — account by account, market by market, month by month.

CONCLUSION

Execution Is the Strategy

The U.S. wholesale environment will continue consolidating. Distributor books will continue growing. Sales reps will manage more SKUs per route. Retail and on-premise buyers will continue rationalizing their sets. The idea that an emerging brand can succeed by out-narrating larger, better-capitalized competitors is a story that the market no longer supports.

What the market supports is execution. Systematic, accountable, account-level commercial execution that builds real consumer demand before asking the distribution system to sustain it. The brands that understand this are the ones quietly doing the work — tracking reorders, building lighthouse accounts, measuring velocity per door, keeping distributor relationships grounded in performance data rather than optimism.

The founders and commercial leaders who figure this out early will build brands that distributors want to grow with, that accounts want to carry, and that consumers seek out by name. They will have the commercial infrastructure to support expansion when the time is right, and the velocity data to justify it when they ask investors to fund it.

The brands that don't figure this out will generate noise for 18 months, run out of runway, and spend considerable energy explaining why the market didn't respond to a product that was genuinely good.

The market doesn't care if the product is good. It cares if the product is there, accessible, recommended, and consistently available in accounts where the right consumer can find it. That is a field execution problem. It has always been a field execution problem. And it will remain a field execution problem regardless of how the distribution landscape changes.

“Execution is the strategy. Everything else is a story.”

About Crafted Advisors

Crafted Advisors is a route-to-market and commercial advisory practice for emerging beverage alcohol brands operating in the U.S. three-tier system. We work with founders, commercial leaders, wholesalers, and investors on the operational and strategic challenges of building real commercial traction in a complex and consolidating market.

Our work is built on the conviction that execution is the strategy — that the commercial fundamentals of account activation, depletion tracking, distributor relationship management, and field execution are not secondary to brand strategy. They are brand strategy.

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