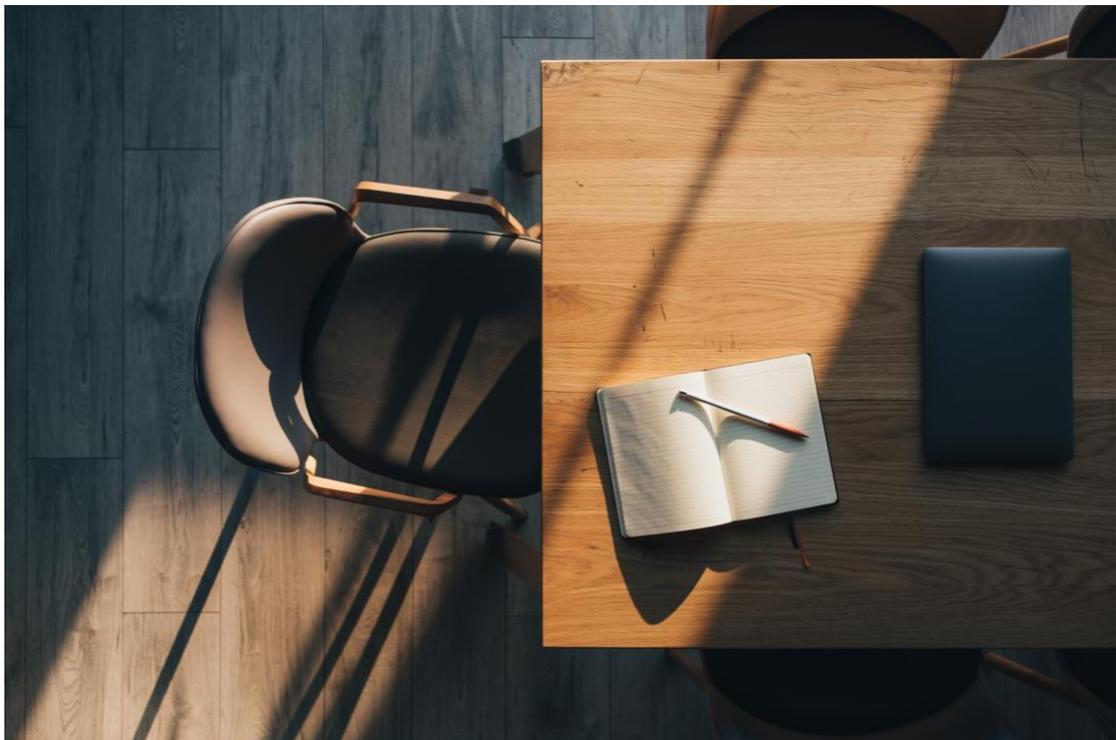


Prologue

By Reinout Schotman

*Part of the Strategic Growth in the Mid-Market series by
Outdoor Connect*



Strategy begins with the question that stops the room.

In 2014, the managing director of a private equity firm invited me—then a partner at a small boutique cloud strategy consultancy—to join a meeting with the newly appointed CEO of a German portfolio company, Swyx—a software-based communications provider. I brought along a talented young colleague. The plan was simple: meet the new CEO, hear his strategic vision, and have dinner afterward.

Nothing about that afternoon turned out to be simple.

The CEO arrived late after a three-hour drive from Germany to the Netherlands. He entered the room rushed, opened his laptop, and began presenting a strategy built on three pillars: **hardware**, **software**, and **innovation**. The vocabulary was familiar, but the narrative wandered. The pillars did not connect. Direction was absent. What was framed as strategy was, in truth, a list of activities without a spine.

Then came the moment that changed everything.

My junior colleague—young, bright, and German, from a culture deeply attuned to hierarchy and seniority—looked up and asked the CEO a question that was both honest and devastatingly revealing:

“If the shareholders gave you €10 million to invest, how would you allocate it across your three pillars?”

Silence. A long, heavy silence.

It was a moment of truth — the kind every leader faces at some point and remembers for the rest of their life, when reality asserts itself unfiltered and unavoidable.

He froze. Newly promoted from a sales leadership role into the CEO position, he carried a role larger than his preparation — and the weight of the question hit him with full force. Not because he lacked intelligence or commitment, but because the question exposed something deeper: the absence of strategic clarity, the weight of responsibility without the guidance of direction. In that moment, it became clear that Swyx’s challenge was not technology, not market position, not competition—it was coherence.

That meeting became a turning point. Within weeks, I left the boutique consultancy and joined Swyx and its shareholders directly as head of strategy. Over the next four years, we tripled revenues, tripled the team, lifted profitability, invested heavily in R&D, forged a previously unthinkable strategic partnership with Deutsche Telekom, and ultimately sold the company to Waterland, a respected private equity firm.

But what stayed with me most was not the growth. It was the burden carried by the CEO.

Along the way, I developed a deep appreciation for the immense strain mid-market leaders endure. Every hour of every day, year after year. As the company grew, so did the stakes—and so did his solitude. There were no corporate buffers, no institutional mass, no strategic shock absorbers. Only the relentless weight of decisions that could not be undone—while navigating the expectations of shareholders and a non-executive board, each with their own timelines, pressures, and definitions of ‘good leadership.’

That is when I began to recognise a pattern I have since seen across the entire mid-market: **structured enough to carry full responsibility, yet lacking the protection of scale; attacked from below by speed, and from above by size; expected to deliver clarity in environments that offer none.**

This book exists because of that pattern. Because clarity is rare. Because direction is fragile. Because leaders cannot escape irreversibility—they can only learn to navigate it.

Throughout my work with Swyx—and with every mid-market company since—I learned that strategy in this segment is not an academic exercise. It is a survival discipline. The difference between momentum and drift, between renewal and erosion, between leadership and exhaustion. Advantage emerges not from speed, but from the thoughtful sequencing of choices.

It takes a particular kind of leader to hold that line. To create clarity where there is noise, direction where there is fragmentation, and confidence where there is only risk. Leaders who stand between the future they must choose and the people who must live in it.

This book is written for them.

About Outdoor Connect

Outdoor Connect is an independent strategy advisory platform focused on board-level value creation for mid-sized, growth-driven companies (€50–€1B). We bring direct senior engagement—without the traditional consulting pyramid—to help founders, CEOs and boards set direction, make sharper capital allocation choices, and embed an execution rhythm. Core areas include growth strategy in technology and the energy transition, strategic repositioning in fragmented markets, and board-level sparring on value creation and M&A preparation.

Outdoorconnect.nl

© Outdoor Connect 2025. All rights reserved. 11/25