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## STAGES OF FORMING AND IMPLEMENTING A GROWTH HACKING DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY IN STARTUPS

**Abstract.** *This article provides a theoretical synthesis of approaches to forming and implementing a growth hacking digital marketing strategy in startups within the context of the digital transformation of the economy. It is shown that growth hacking represents a contemporary growth management concept that combines digital marketing tools, data analytics, and an experimental approach to management decision-making. The conceptual specificity of this approach lies in its orientation toward rapid testing of management decisions and scaling of effective practices based on the data obtained. It is determined that the application of this strategy enables fast and scalable startup growth under conditions of limited resources through the optimization of acquisition channels, increased user engagement, and effective product monetization. A structural model for implementing the growth hacking strategy is substantiated, encompassing the following interrelated stages: goal setting, team formation, process organization, and the use of tooling. The characteristics of applying the AARRR funnel as the foundational tool for managing user interactions are examined, enabling the systematization of acquisition, activation, retention, referral, and revenue processes. Particular attention is given to the interrelationships between the elements of this model, which ensures the coherence of management decisions in the process of achieving growth. It is established that the effectiveness of strategy implementation depends significantly on the integration of analytical, technological, and behavioral components into a unified management system. The role of the growth hacking team is analyzed – specifically the functions of the growth master – as well as the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in ensuring the effectiveness of marketing decisions. It is found that the iterative nature of processes and the use of a data-driven approach create the prerequisites for continuous product improvement and strategy adaptation to changes in the market environment. The results obtained allow for the substantiation of the conceptual foundations of growth hacking strategy formation as a tool for ensuring the competitiveness and sustainable development of startups in the digital economy.*

**Keywords:** growth hacking, digital marketing, startups, AARRR, growth strategy, digitalization, data-driven approach.

**JEL Classification:** M30; O30

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## ЕТАПИ ФОРМУВАННЯ ТА ВПРОВАДЖЕННЯ СТРАТЕГІЇ ЦИФРОВОГО МАРКЕТИНГУ GROWTH HACKING У СТАРТАПАХ

**Анотація.** *У статті здійснено теоретичне узагальнення підходів до формування та впровадження стратегії цифрового маркетингу growth hacking у стартапах в умовах цифрової трансформації економіки. Показано, що growth hacking виступає сучасною концепцією управ-*



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ління зростанням, яка поєднує інструменти цифрового маркетингу, аналітику даних та експериментальний підхід до прийняття управлінських рішень. Концептуальна специфіка даного підходу полягає у його орієнтації на швидке тестування управлінських рішень і масштабування ефективних практик на основі отриманих даних. Визначено, що застосування даної стратегії дозволяє забезпечити швидке та масштабоване зростання стартапів за умов обмежених ресурсів шляхом оптимізації каналів залучення, підвищення рівня залученості користувачів та ефективної монетизації продукту. Обґрунтовано структурну модель впровадження стратегії *growth hacking*, яка включає такі взаємопов'язані етапи, як визначення цілей, формування команди, організація процесів та використання інструментального забезпечення. Розкрито особливості застосування воронки AARRR як базового інструменту управління взаємодією з користувачами, що дозволяє систематизувати процеси залучення, активації, утримання, рекомендації та монетизації. Особливу увагу приділено взаємозв'язку між елементами зазначеної моделі, що забезпечує узгодженість управлінських рішень у процесі досягнення зростання. Визначено, що ефективність реалізації стратегії значною мірою залежить від інтеграції аналітичних, технологічних і поведінкових компонентів у єдину систему управління. Проаналізовано роль команди *growth hacking*, зокрема функції *growth master*, а також значення міждисциплінарної взаємодії для забезпечення ефективності маркетингових рішень. Встановлено, що ітераційний характер процесів та використання *data-driven* підходу створюють передумови для безперервного вдосконалення продукту та адаптації стратегії до змін ринкового середовища. Отримані результати дозволили обґрунтувати концептуальні засади формування стратегії *growth hacking* як інструменту забезпечення конкурентоспроможності та стійкого розвитку стартапів у цифровій економіці.

**Ключові слова:** *growth hacking*, цифровий маркетинг, стартапи, AARRR, стратегія зростання, цифровізація, *data-driven* підхід.

**Formulation of the problem.** In the current context of the digital transformation of the economy, startups operate in an environment of high uncertainty, limited resources, and intense competition, which necessitates the search for effective approaches to ensuring their rapid growth. Traditional marketing strategies often prove insufficiently flexible and effective for the dynamic business models of startups, which underscores the need to adopt innovative approaches – in particular, *growth hacking*. At the same time, the absence of a systematic substantiation of the stages of forming and implementing such a strategy, combined with the inadequate integration of instrumental, process-based, and organizational components into a unified growth management model, complicates its practical application in startup activities.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The conceptualization of digital marketing strategy formation for startups in the contemporary environment is associated with research into *growth hacking* processes, the digital transformation of business models, and the development of innovative entrepreneurship. The works of L. Verbivska and O. Burynska [1] emphasize the importance of digital technologies in entrepreneurial activity as a key factor in improving business process

efficiency. F. Scheuenstuhl, P.M. Bican, and A. Brem [2] explore the possibilities of applying the lean startup approach to enhance innovation processes, providing a methodological foundation for implementing flexible development strategies. V. Tomakh et al. [3; 4] analyze the digital transformation of enterprise management, highlighting the role of innovative solutions in shaping contemporary business models.

L. Romanenko and Zh. Semchuk [5] identify the characteristics, tools, and development trends of digital marketing, while I. Smuk [6] examines *growth hacking* as a driver of innovative startup development at the intersection of marketing and product. L. Verbivska [7] investigates the enhancement of enterprise competitiveness in the context of digitalization, which reinforces the significance of digital tools in marketing activities.

S. Koberniuk, O. Nahorna, and I. Khmarska [8] analyze the use of digital tools in enterprise marketing strategies and their impact on performance. M. Cristofaro, P.L. Giardino, and L. Barboni [9] substantiate a scientific, data-driven decision-making approach within *growth hacking*, while T. Havrylenko and D. Bieleienko [10] systematize contemporary digital marketing tools. A. Rezazadeh et al. [11] examine the role of generative artificial intelligence in shaping growth

hacking strategies, highlighting its significance for the automation of marketing processes.

O. Vytvytska, S. Suvorova, and A. Koriuhin [12] analyze the impact of digital marketing on entrepreneurship development, particularly under conditions of crisis-driven transformation, while T. Bilousko [13] investigates the processes of digitalization of enterprise marketing activities. Despite the substantial body of scholarly work, the question of systematically substantiating the stages of forming and implementing a growth hacking digital marketing strategy in startups requires further investigation – particularly with regard to integrating instrumental, process-based, and organizational components into a unified growth management model.

**Setting the task.** The aim of this study is to substantiate the stages of forming and implementing a growth hacking digital marketing strategy in startups.

**Summary of the main research material.** In the current context of the digital transformation of enterprise marketing activities, approaches to ensuring growth are being reconceptualized, giving rise to new conceptual models for promoting innovative products. One such model is growth hacking, interpreted as an integrated digital marketing strategy oriented toward achieving rapid and scalable company development – primarily for startups – through the application of unconventional solutions, innovative tools, and flexible management approaches [6, p. 11]. Unlike traditional marketing strategies, this approach is grounded in a synthesis of creativity, data analytics, and experimental hypothesis testing, enabling the prompt adjustment of management decisions in line with market dynamics and consumer behavior [9].

Growth hacking should be considered not merely as a set of marketing tools, but as a comprehensive growth management methodology that combines digital marketing methods, behavioral analytics, and technological solutions. A defining feature of this approach is its orientation toward rapidly achieving measurable results under conditions of limited resources – which is critically important for startups in their early stages of development [8, p. 94].

Under the resource constraints typical of most startups, the growth hacking strategy takes on particular significance, as it enables maximum impact at minimum cost through the active use of digital tools, innovative communication channels, and flexible marketing solutions [10, p. 81]. The application of this approach requires a high level

of adaptability, creativity, and speed of decision-making, forming a new paradigm for organizing marketing activities in the digital economy. At the same time, the effective implementation of a growth hacking strategy requires the formation of an appropriate organizational model in which the competencies of marketers, analysts, and technical specialists are combined – ensuring a comprehensive approach to growth management and enabling the achievement of synergies between marketing and technological solutions [11].

From a structural perspective, the process of implementing a growth hacking strategy should be viewed as a stage-by-stage system comprising four interrelated stages (Fig. 1), each of which performs a distinct functional role in achieving the strategic digital marketing objectives of the startup.

Taking this into account, the following core elements are identified:

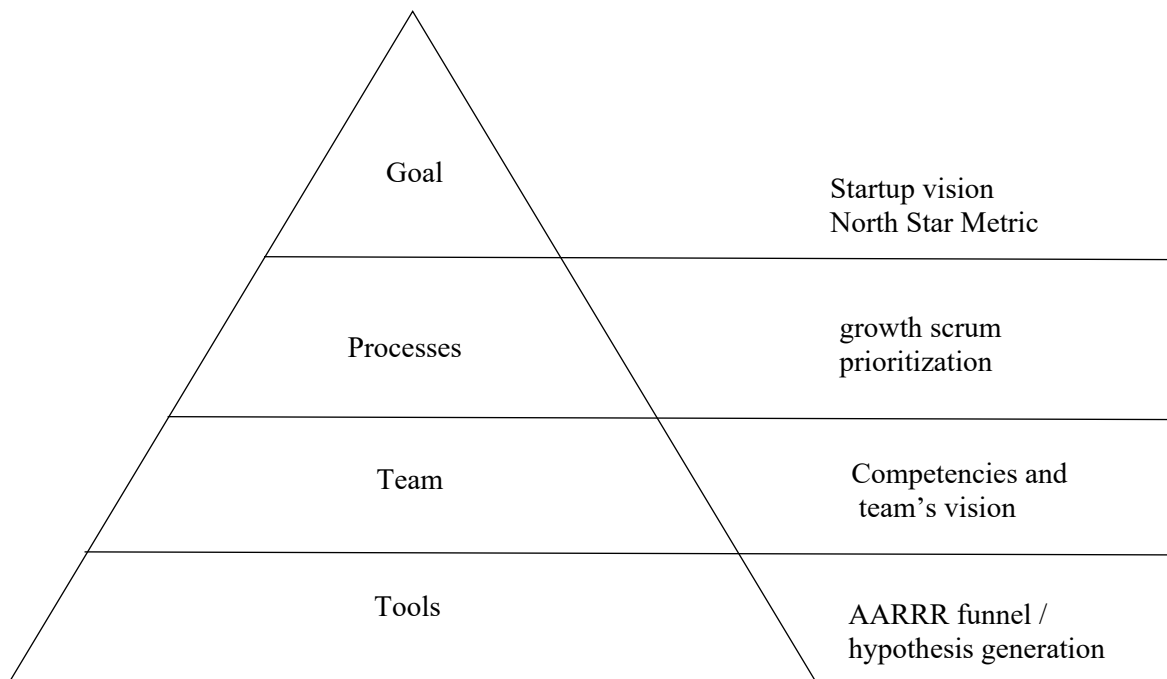
1. **Tools.** The foundational tool of the growth hacking strategy is the AARRR funnel, which is oriented toward optimizing the key stages of user interaction. Additional tools are aimed at improving the efficiency of each funnel stage and providing analytical support for marketing decisions.

2. **Team.** Within the implementation of the growth hacking strategy, the team plays a central role and must ensure a systemic approach to managing growth processes. Of particular importance is the development of the necessary competencies and a unified strategic vision, which determines the coherence of actions and the orientation toward achieving defined objectives.

3. **Processes.** The effective implementation of the strategy requires clear structuring of processes. At the strategic level, they define the logic of activity organization, performance evaluation parameters, and the sequence of marketing initiatives within the growth hacking framework.

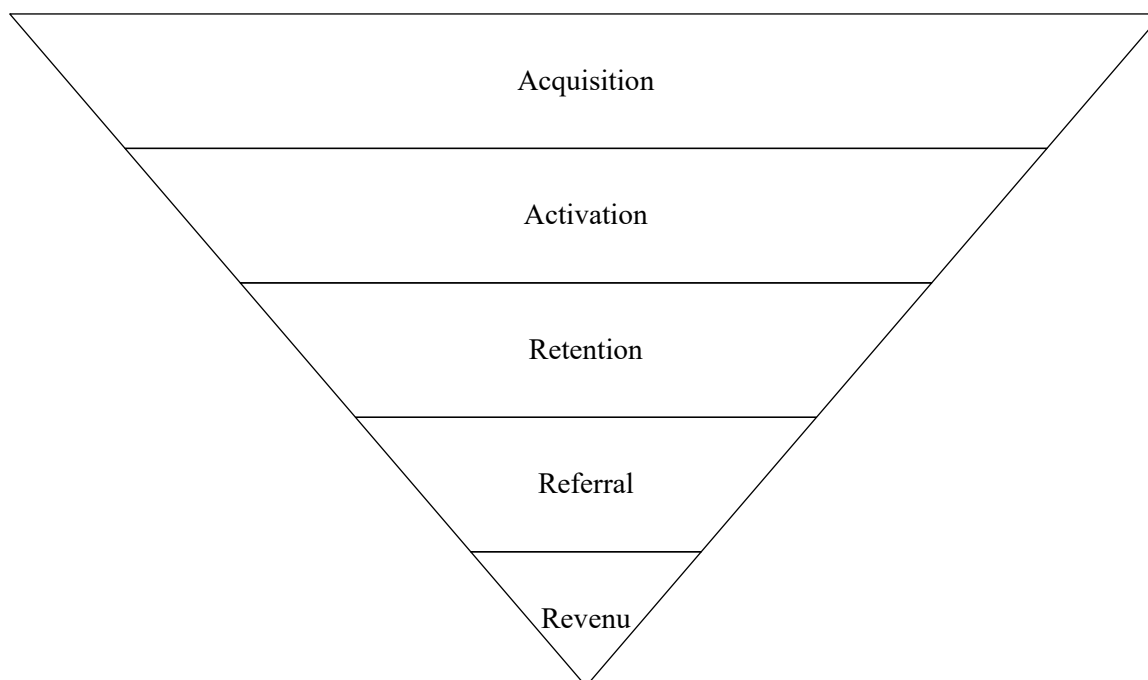
4. **Goal.** Short iterative cycles can lead to fragmentation of management decisions; therefore, it is important to define overarching performance indicators that reflect strategic development objectives. Such indicators must align with the overall vision for startup development and ensure the coherence of all elements of the strategy.

One of the key stages in implementing a growth hacking strategy is the “Tools” stage. For successful strategy execution, it is necessary to research and select the appropriate tools. The AARRR funnel is generally considered the foundational tool within growth hacking. Fig. 2 provides a schematic representation of the AARRR funnel with each of its stages indicated.



**Figure 1. Stages of Implementing a Growth Hacking Strategy**

Source: [1; 12]



**Figure 2. AARRR Funnel**

Source: [12; 13]

At the Acquisition level, hypothesis testing is carried out aimed at attracting users to the product. One of the key objectives of this stage is to increase acquisition conversion rates and the effectiveness of traffic channels. At the Activation level, experiments are conducted focused on improving the user experience of interacting with the product. To optimize this stage, it is important

to identify the moment at which the user perceives the product's value – that is, to ensure that the user recognizes the product's usefulness and develops a positive first experience.

The Retention level involves testing hypotheses aimed at retaining users and increasing their engagement. The primary focus is on identifying the causes of churn and improving the product

in line with user expectations. Analysis of user behavior enables the identification of product weaknesses and informs the directions for its further development.

At the Referral level, hypotheses are tested regarding the stimulation of users to recommend the product to other potential consumers. Central to this stage are viral distribution mechanisms that enable audience expansion without a significant increase in marketing costs. The Revenue level is the final stage of the funnel and reflects the product monetization process, where hypotheses related to improving profitability and business model efficiency are tested.

To improve performance at each stage of the funnel, hypotheses are regularly tested and adjusted based on the results obtained. A key condition is the sequential optimization of each level, since deficiencies at earlier stages complicate the achievement of effectiveness at subsequent ones. The growth hacking process involves a gradual transition between stages – beginning with Acquisition—provided that satisfactory performance indicators have been achieved, which ensures the systematic and manageable growth of the startup [12]. Other widely used tools for implementing a growth hacking strategy are presented in Table 1.

For implementing the growth hacking digital marketing strategy, forming an effective team capable of ensuring the continuity and effectiveness of growth processes is essential. Within the structure of such a team, the growth master plays a leading role, being responsible for coordinating activities, setting priorities, and organizing hypothesis testing processes. As a rule, the growth master is a specialist with interdisciplinary competencies in marketing and software development, which enables the effective integration of analytical and creative approaches within the strategy implementation [6].

Other team members are selected with a view to ensuring a comprehensive approach to managing growth processes. They must possess knowledge

in related fields, including business analytics, programming, digital marketing, user experience design, and data processing. At the same time, startups often exhibit a universalization of functions, whereby a single specialist combines several roles – a consequence of limited resources and the need for rapid decision-making. This approach promotes the generation of ideas at the intersection of different competencies and increases the team's adaptability to changes in the external environment [11].

The “Processes” stage is central to the implementation of the growth hacking strategy, as it is within this stage that activities aimed at achieving rapid growth are organized and carried out. The structuring of processes within this approach depends significantly on the specifics of the product, the strategic objectives set, and the current stage of startup development. At the same time, the primary goal is to build a flexible system capable of ensuring the continuity and speed of data-driven decision-making [9].

Unlike traditional marketing models, processes in growth hacking are iterative in nature and are based on the continuous cyclical repetition of activities associated with data collection and analysis, hypothesis generation, their prioritization, and subsequent testing. This organization of activities enables the systematic and manageable conduct of growth processes, as well as a prompt response to changes in the market environment and user behavior (Fig. 3).

The described process involves continuous movement between stages, where the results of testing serve as the basis for further analysis and the formation of new hypotheses, ensuring the dynamic development of the product and the improvement of marketing decision effectiveness.

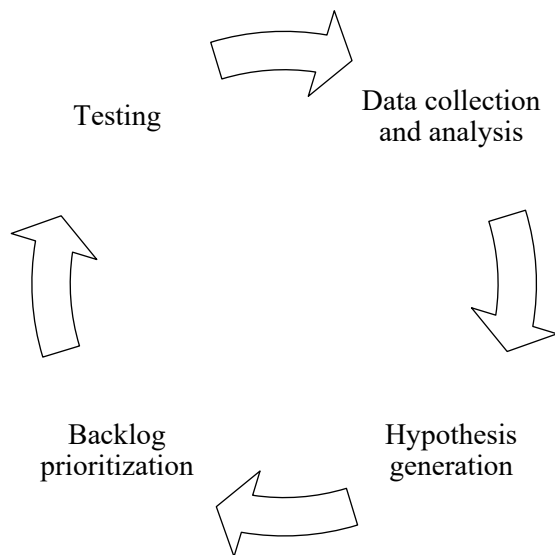
Thus, the implementation of the growth hacking strategy in startup activities takes shape as a dynamic growth management system in which instrumental solutions, organizational mechanisms, and iterative

Table 1

**Tools for implementing a growth hacking strategy**

| Tool Name                                  | Description  |
|--|--|
| Lean canvas (lean business model template) | A tool that helps analyze the product from a strategic perspective. The team uses it to identify growth points and product development opportunities.                                  |
| Customer journey map (client path map)     | Building a customer journey map enables the identification of product bottlenecks and defines directions for improving the user experience.  |
| JTBD – Job To Be Done                      | A tool oriented toward a deep understanding of user needs; it enables the formation of a value proposition that takes into account the context of product use and the tasks it solves. |

Source: [3; 5]



**Figure 3. The Process of Rapid and Continuous Growth Hypothesis Testing**

Source: [4; 7]

decision-making processes are combined. The alignment of the AARRR funnel logic, the cyclical nature of processes, and the interdisciplinary collaboration of the team creates a unified environment oriented toward achieving measurable results. This implementation logic enables not only the prompt adaptation of marketing actions to changes in the digital environment, but also the systematic transformation of user behavioral patterns – improving the effectiveness of audience acquisition, retention, and monetization through continuous analytical support and an experimental approach.

**Conclusions and prospects for further research in this area.** The conducted study allowed for the substantiation of the essence of the growth hacking strategy as a contemporary digital marketing model oriented toward achieving rapid and scalable startup growth under conditions of limited resources. It was established that the effectiveness of implementing this strategy is determined by the combination of instrumental support (in particular the AARRR funnel), the organizational capacity of the team, and the iterative nature of processes grounded in continuous hypothesis testing and data-driven decision-making. It was demonstrated that the application of growth hacking approaches enhances the adaptability of marketing activities, optimizes user acquisition channels, and improves audience retention and monetization metrics.

At the same time, it was determined that the effectiveness of the strategy depends significantly on the level of the startup's digital maturity, the quality of its analytical infrastructure, and the team's

capacity for interdisciplinary collaboration. An important factor is also the integration of innovative technologies – in particular, automation tools and generative artificial intelligence – which expands the possibilities for personalizing marketing communications and improves decision-making effectiveness.

Prospects for further research are associated with the deepening of methodological approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of growth hacking in startups, the development of models for integrating generative artificial intelligence into the processes of testing and optimizing marketing strategies, and the study of the influence of user behavioral factors on the growth dynamics of digital products. Separate scholarly interest is warranted by the study of industry-specific characteristics of growth hacking application and the formation of adaptive strategies across different sectors of the digital economy.

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