



CAREER RESEARCH

Moving on up.

The Product Marketing Career Ladder

...and why it's not so much a ladder as a web. Mapped from 862 real product marketing career histories and 151 live job postings across the US, UK and Europe.

If you're starting out in your marketing career, and you're dreaming of becoming a product marketer, you may well have sketched out a career path. Start here, become this, become that, and boom — in 12 years you're VP of Product Marketing at a New York Series A startup well on their way to Series B.

Hold your horses.

The career ladder is not so well defined, and as befits a role that borrows from so many different disciplines, it is of an entirely different shape. And while there are clear career moves within the careers that we've studied, the way you get there — and the way you get to the top — is less obvious.

This report looks at the profiles of several hundred product marketers, from associate to manager to senior to VP and beyond — and looks at how each one got there. We've mapped the routes, we've studied the job descriptions and we've mapped the expectations, the timelines... but let's start with a stat.

“65% of VPs got there by joining a new company — not by being promoted internally.”

Ready? Let's go.

ACT 1

Getting in isn't what you think

The single biggest feeder into the Product Marketing role is the generalist marketer. Those with the title of marketing manager, marketing executive, digital marketer, marketing associate — they are the biggest providers of Product Marketers that we have found in the dataset.

31%

came from generalist marketing roles

11%

came from sales

10%

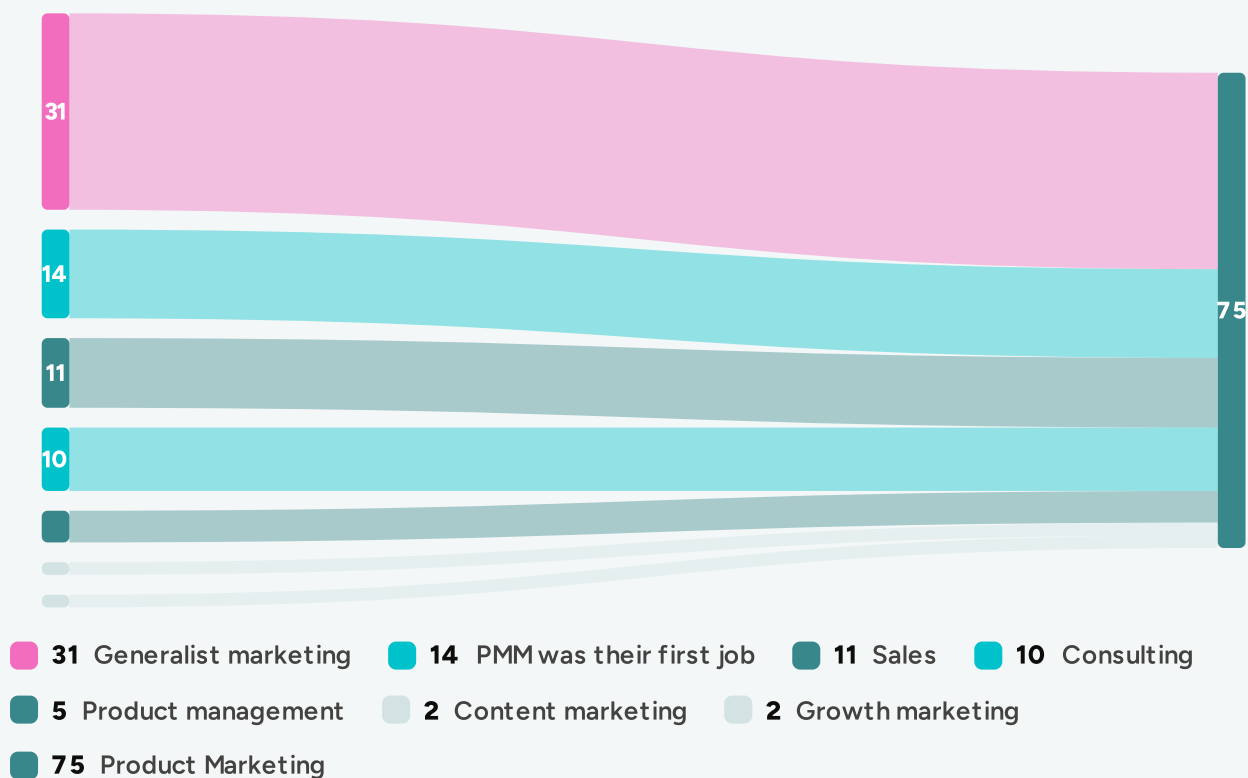
came from consulting

We expected more from content marketing and growth marketing (2% each), and more from product itself (just 5%).

Where product marketers come from

Last identifiable role before reaching product marketing, as a share of the dataset

LAST ROLE



Figures are % of the dataset with an identifiable last role; the remainder came from smaller, one-off backgrounds.

Just 14% of people started out in product marketing roles (associate, junior PMM, product marketing executive in the UK). In the US, they were mostly campus hires.

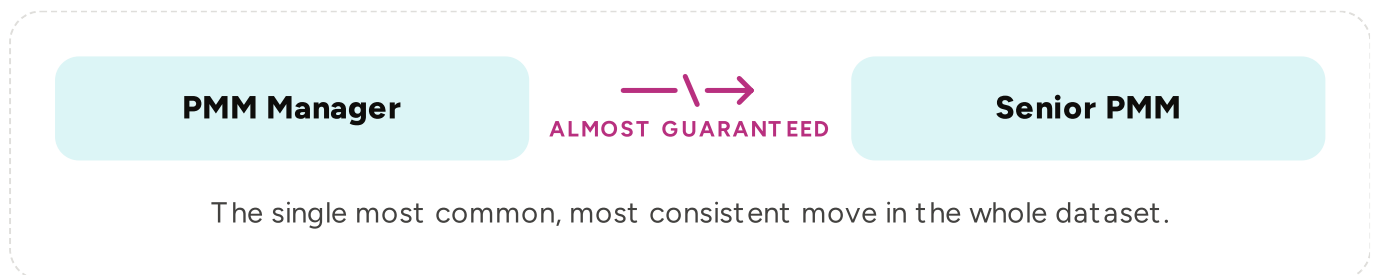
So if you're looking to get into product marketing — you are not restricted. You can come from almost any marketing discipline, from generalist to content, and even from outside of marketing — from sales and consulting.

“It's not where you came from, it's what you learned along the way.”

ACT 2

PMM to Senior PMM — the one rung on the ladder most take

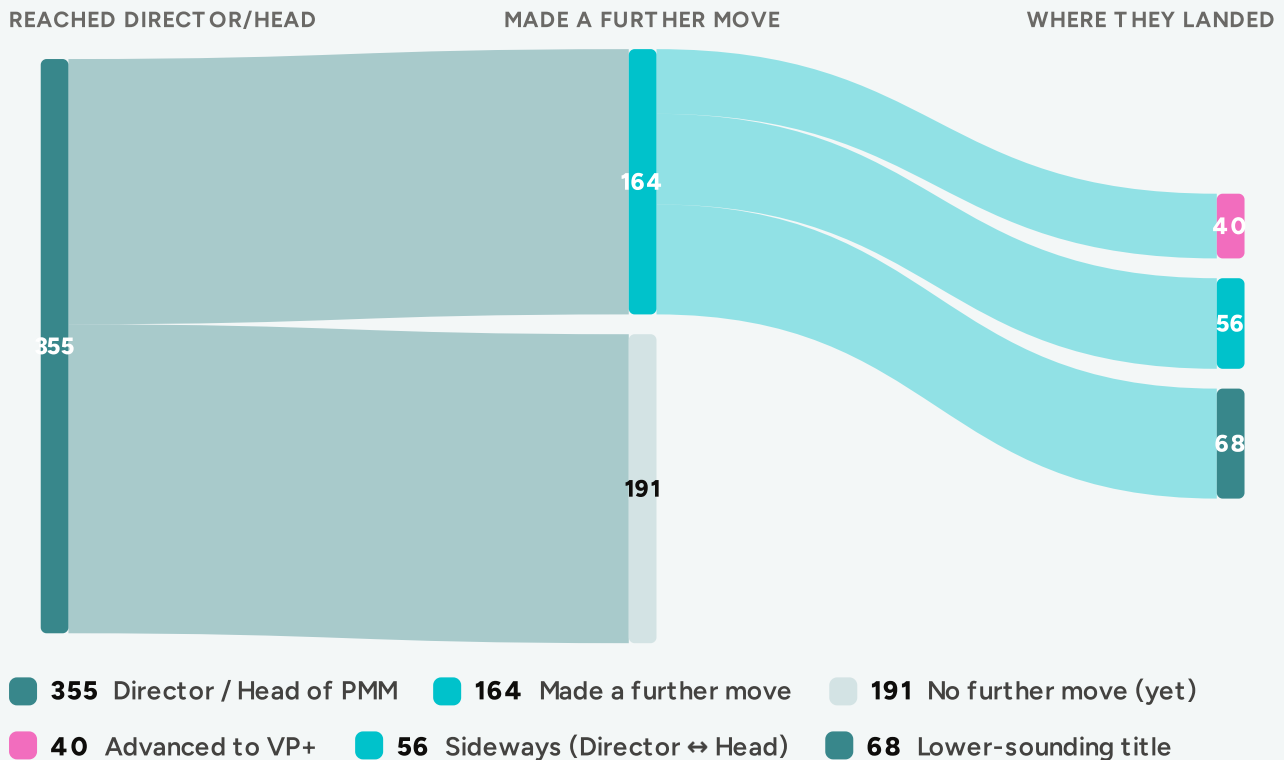
Once someone has made it to PMM, there's one move in the data that is unambiguous, common and consistent.



Above that, the "ladder" stops behaving like an actual ladder. We see function titles almost interchangeable between Head of and PMM Director with people moving between these titles constantly in both directions. Indeed, of the 355 profiles in the dataset who made it to Director or Head of level at some point, only 164 of them went on to make a further move. 40 moved to VP, 56 went sideways, and 68 went to a lower sounding title (!)

What happens after Director / Head of Product Marketing

Of the 355 people who reached Director/Head level, what happened next



40 advanced to VP+, 56 moved sideways between Director and Head, 68 moved to a lower-sounding title.

So, once you're a product marketing manager, you can almost bank on becoming a Senior PMM. After that, it's anyone's game, and much of it depends on the size of the organisation and the scope of the role into which you're moving.

ACT 3

The VP role is a hire — not a promotion

The higher you go in the ladder/web, the less likely you are to be promoted into it by the people who already knew you. This is especially true in the US, to a lesser degree in the UK, and almost not at all in Europe.

So two out of three VPs in this dataset got their jobs by leaving.

65%

of VPs got there by joining a new company — not by being promoted internally.

65% New company

35% Promoted internally

Compare that to 49% of senior PMMs being promoted to Head or Director, and 64% going from associate or junior to Manager, and you start to see the true pattern — the higher up you are, the more you have to move to get your promotion.

The higher the title, the more likely it's a new employer

Share of each career move that happened at a NEW company (the rest were promoted internally)

Associate/Junior → Manager

36%

Manager → Senior PMM

56%

Senior PMM → Head/Director

51%

Head/Director → VP

65%

Source: Example Recruitment research

ACT 4

What the market is buying

While we've had plenty of discussions with hiring managers about tools (attribution, accountability, AI vibe coding, etc.) — product marketing is a skills and personality hire, as opposed to a tools hire.

In 79% of the job postings we studied, we found the words "Positioning & Messaging", and "GTM Strategy" can be found in 72%.

Skills & competencies named in 151 live job postings

Positioning & messaging

79%

GTM strategy

72%

Product launches

54%

Content creation

42%

Cross-functional collaboration

36%

Competitive intelligence

35%

Sales enablement

33%

Data / analytics

33%

Source: Example Recruitment research

We found almost zero evidence of tools or certifications across the entire dataset. Indeed, while we discuss tools at meetings with hiring managers, it's of relatively little importance other than when hiring managers try to nail down how candidates are using AI (workflows, market research, etc.).

Competitive intelligence is most prominent for senior roles — it roughly doubles between IC and Head-of titles, while content creation is asked for more at Manager/Senior level than at Director/VP. Obviously. But it's a contrast worth painting.

When we look more into the language used in the job descriptions, we find a number of stock phrases — and the top one? "Wear many hats."

How job postings describe the role

Wear many hats

22%

Fast-paced / high-growth

16%

Complex / technical product

15%

Comfortable with ambiguity

11%

Source: Example Recruitment research

We found job descriptions asking PMMs to "wear many hats" in 22% of postings, while another 16% flagged a fast-paced / high-growth environment. 15% stated a complex or technical product, specifically requiring a translator-type archetype while 11% state that the PMM should be comfortable with ambiguity.

ACT 5

The time it takes

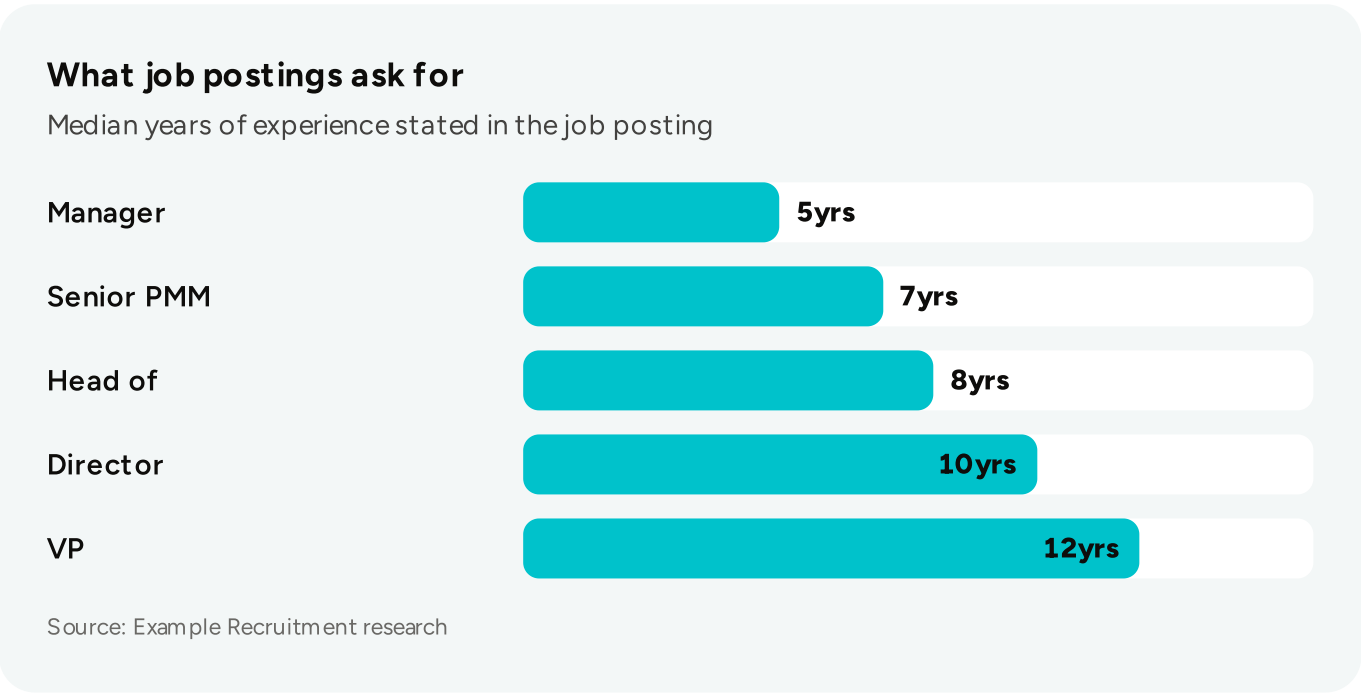
Product Marketing careers tend to come in shorter hops than most. The median tenure per level sits at around 1.2 to 1.6 years across the ladder — this is not a role where people settle into a title for three or four years before their next move. If you've been a PMM for 2 years, your time has come.

What's more, job postings tend to ask for more experience than people typically have when they reach that level. JDs ask for:

- 5 years at manager
- 7 at senior PMM
- 8 at Head of
- 10 at Director
- 12 at VP

But in reality — people reach those titles in far less time:

- 4.1 years for manager
- 6.7 years for senior
- 8.8 years for Head of
- 8.0 years for Director
- 8.5 years for VP



What people actually have when they get there

Median years of career experience when reaching the title

Manager

4.1yrs

Senior

6.7yrs

Head of

8.8yrs

Director

8yrs

VP

8.5yrs

Source: Example Recruitment research

Why does the gap exist? Progression simply outpaces expectations. Companies are chronically over-specifying, before realising that a slightly less experienced hire is more than capable of doing the job they've described.

TL;DR

What should you do to progress as a PMM?

A few concrete takeaways for you TL;DR readers...

1

Don't wait around once you've reached Senior PMM. This is perhaps your cue to start building your CV and making your move 2 years later. The odds on you getting promoted internally reduce significantly at this point. If that next rung on the ladder is not visible, the market data says you'll find it elsewhere.

2

Tools and certifications aren't stated, but don't ignore them, especially AI. Membership of the Product Marketing Alliance would be wise, to show you're serious. Tools that help you show attribution, adoption — they're all useful but perhaps less well known, and could be the hidden edge.

3

Beyond Senior PMM, take each role on its merits, not its title. That's how other PMMs work — you can take a step backwards for a bigger scope, and often, the title is just how things are framed internally.

4

Don't be put off by a JD that asks for more experience than you have. Often, you're on the cusp and you're actually in the goldilocks zone.

5

Broad, generalist marketers have the best chance of becoming PMMs because they've been broad, generalist marketers. They've worn all the hats, bought the t-shirts, ground out the metaphors. The discipline is varied and human, and the future of the product marketing industry lies in this area.

In short...

If you want to get into product marketing, think broad and generalist first — and learn the human skills that will benefit you in the long term. Sharp copywriting, good networking, strategic thinking, analytical reasoning. And that doesn't limit you to a start in marketing itself — sales and product teams can equally provide the skills required to step into product marketing and develop a career.

Once there, the bridge from PMM to Senior PMM is the one that almost everyone takes, but after that — well it's anyone's game as we've said. You can move up, move down, move sideways, move around — the clue is not so much in the title but in the challenge the new organisation gives you. And it's more often than not a new organisation, as opposed to an internal hire.



Example Recruitment — marketing-led headhunters for SaaS and FinTech startups and scaleups in New York and London.

Read the live report and get in touch at theexample.co/reports/moving-on-up-product-marketing-career-ladder