

PROOF OF CONCEPT AND MARKET-DEMAND TEST

Find out before you go all in.

A practical cheat sheet for testing an idea with real people, reading the evidence honestly and choosing your next move.

INSIDE

- 02 Why test first
- 03 The method and a 14-day plan
- 04 Define the riskiest assumption
- 05 Not all signals are equal
- 06 Choose the right test
- 07 Three tests that worked
- 08 Interviews that tell the truth
- 09 The landing-page test
- 10 Read the results
- 11 Build it, refine it or drop it

HOW TO USE IT

Read pages 02 to 05 once. Then work through 06 to 11 with your own idea beside you. Every chart has a source or is labelled as an illustration.

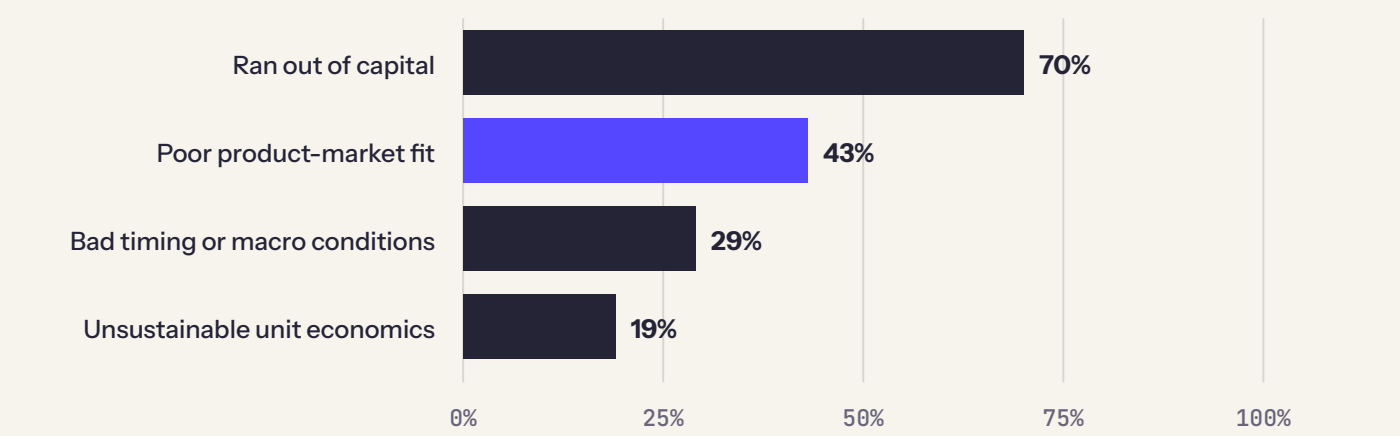
Popcornerz / Clarity for your next move.

01 / WHY TEST FIRST

Running out of money ends companies. Missing demand often starts it.

In CB Insights' 2026 review of 431 venture-backed companies that shut down since 2023, poor product-market fit appeared in 43% of cases. Running out of capital appeared in 70%, but the report calls it almost always the final cause, not the root problem.

Reasons cited in post-mortems, share of 431 shutdowns ^[1]



Companies often cite several reasons, so bars add up to more than 100%. The sample is venture-backed companies, so treat it as a direction rather than a rate for every business.

What a market-demand test does

It puts a clear version of your idea in front of the people you hope to serve and records what they do. The result is evidence that you can use, whether it points forward, sideways or to a stop.

The rule for this cheat sheet

Test the assumption that would hurt most if wrong, using the cheapest method that still produces behaviour. Opinions are a start. Actions with a cost are better.

Proof of concept or market-demand test?

	PROOF OF CONCEPT	MARKET-DEMAND TEST
Question	Can this work?	Will relevant people act on it?
Evidence	A prototype, a technical spike, a working demo	Sign-ups, bookings, deposits, pre-orders, replies
Risk it removes	Feasibility and delivery	Desirability, willingness to pay, reach
Start here when	The open question is whether it can be built	The open question is whether anyone wants it

Many ideas need both. Do first whichever unknown is riskier and cheaper to resolve. For most early ideas that is demand.

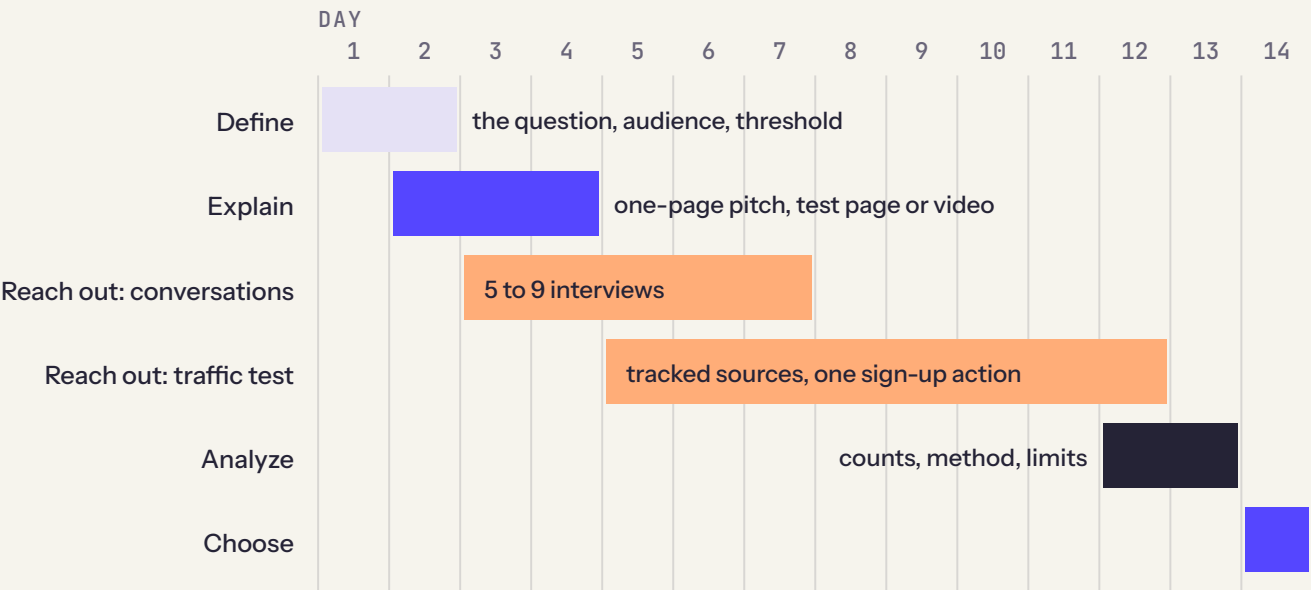
02 / THE METHOD

Explain. Reach out. Analyze. Choose.

Four moves turn an early idea into a decision. Each one has a single output, so you always know what to produce next.

01 Explain Make the idea understandable in one page or 60 seconds. OUTPUT: one-sentence proposition, a test page or short video	02 Reach out Put it in front of relevant people, in conversations and through tracked traffic. OUTPUT: 5 to 9 interviews and one sign-up test	03 Analyze Separate what happened from what it means. Show counts, method and limits. OUTPUT: a one-page results note	04 Choose Build it, refine it or drop it, using the threshold you set before testing. OUTPUT: one decision and the next test
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A 14-day starting plan



Recommended starting plan. Shorten or stretch it to match how fast you can reach relevant people.

DECIDE BEFORE DAY 1

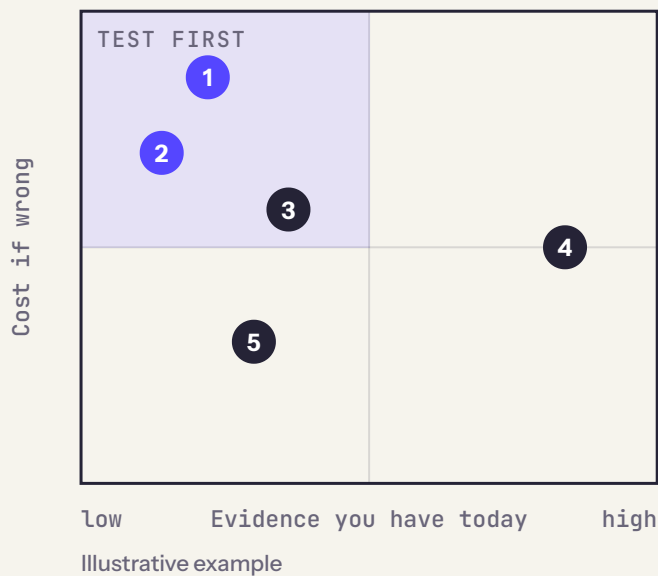
- **The question** you are testing, in one sentence
- **The audience** you will count, described by who they are
- **The action** that counts as a signal, and what it costs the person
- **The threshold** that would change your decision (page 04 shows how)
- **The stop date**, so the test ends even if the numbers are unclear

03 / DEFINE

Start with the assumption that would hurt most if wrong.

Every idea rests on a stack of guesses. List them, place them on the map and test the top-left ones first: the guesses you know least about and can least afford to get wrong.

Assumption map



- 1 People have this problem
- 2 They would pay to fix it
- 3 We can reach them cheaply
- 4 We can build it
- 5 The price level works

Write the hypothesis as a number

At least **X%** of **Y** will **Z**

X is the share you need. Y is a specific group you can reach. Z is an action that costs them something, such as an email, a booking or a deposit. Format from Alberto Savoia's XYZ hypothesis ^[4].

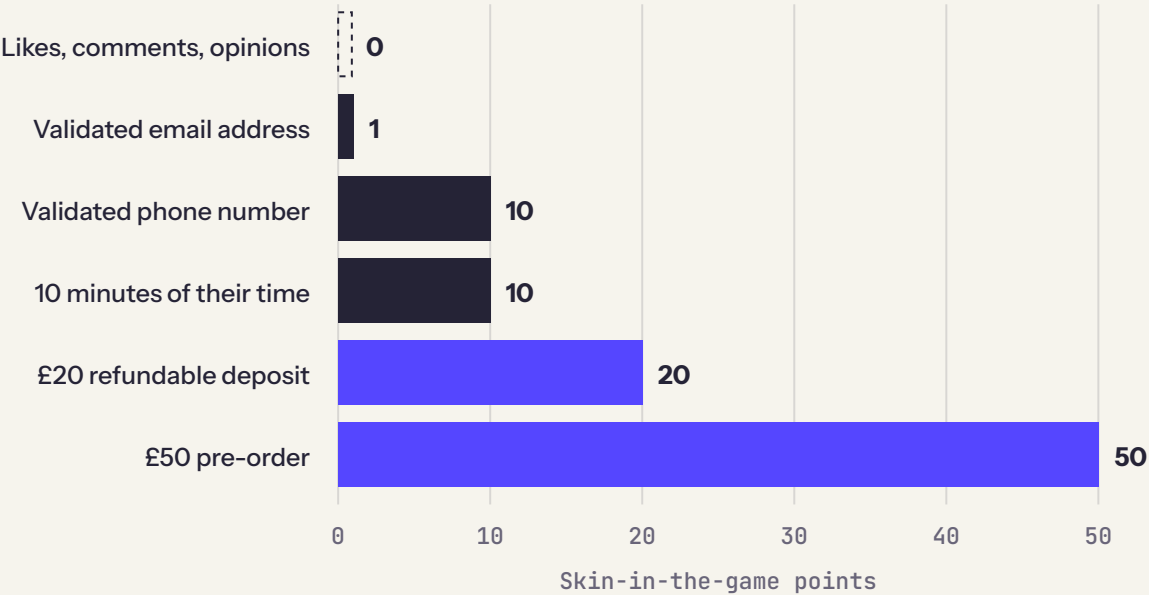
HOW TO SET X WITHOUT GUESSING (FICTIONAL NUMBERS)	
1	Paying customers that make the next step worthwhile 30
2	Assume this share of sign-ups would pay (an assumption to test later) 30%
3	Sign-ups needed: 30 ÷ 30% 100
4	Visitors you can realistically reach in the test 1,000
X Threshold: 100 ÷ 1,000 10%	
Hypothesis: at least 10% of freelance designers who see the page will leave an email. Write it down before any data arrives.	

04 / SIGNALS

A comment is not a sign-up. A sign-up is not a purchase.

Evidence comes in different strengths. Strategyzer's testing library ranks behaviour above stated intent, and stated intent above opinion [3]. The more a signal costs the person, the more it tells you.

Commitment ladder: points for each signal, using Savoia's scoring [4]



Savoia scores one point per validated email, 10 per validated phone number, one per minute of time and one per pound of deposit or order. The time and money amounts shown here are examples to show the scale.

People do about half of what they intend



Illustration of "about half"

Sheeran and Webb's review of the intention-behaviour gap concludes that intentions turn into action about half the time [7]. A friendly "I would buy that" is a forecast, not a purchase.

Read each signal for what it is

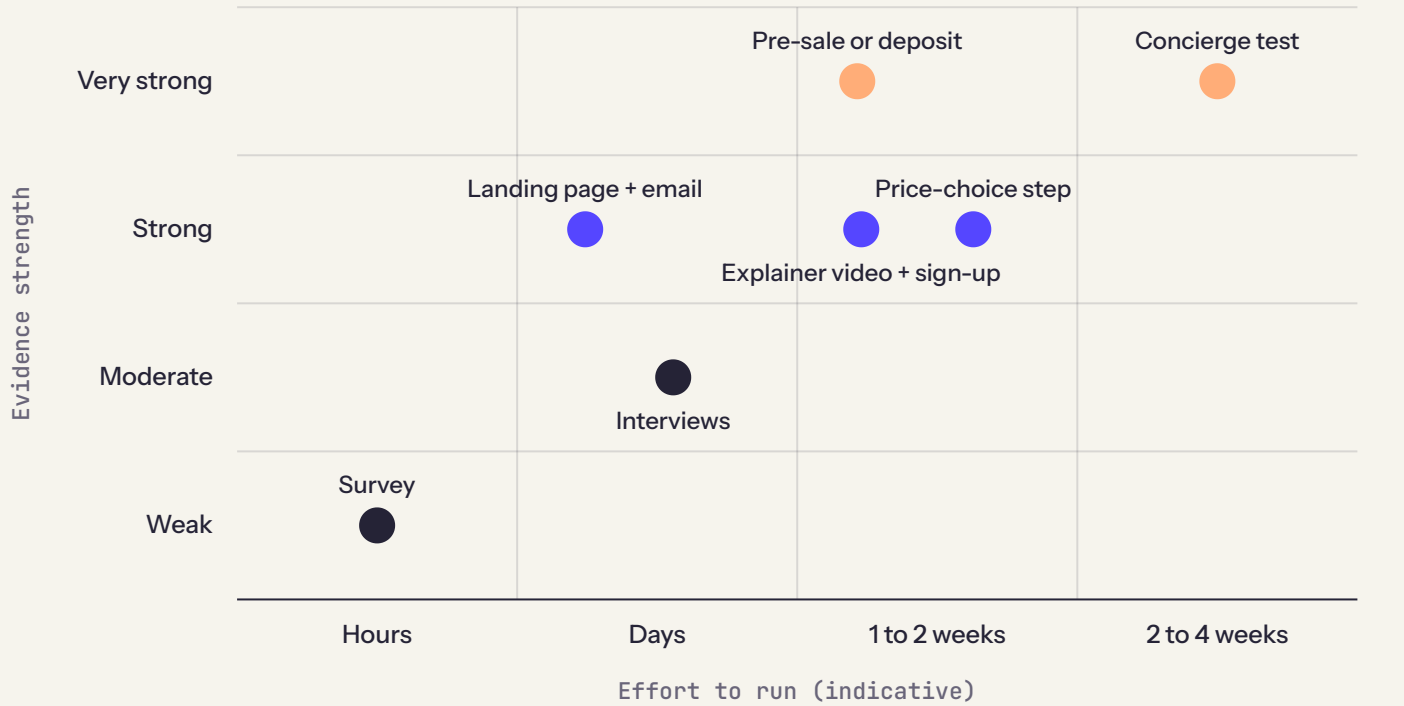
SIGNAL	IT SHOWS	IT DOES NOT SHOW
Like or comment	Politeness, interest	Any action
Email address	Mild interest, reachable	Willingness to pay
Email plus price tier	Interest at a price	That they will pay
Booked call	Real pain, real time	A purchase
Deposit or pre-order	Willingness to pay now	Long-term use

05 / CHOOSE A TEST

Pick the cheapest test that produces behaviour.

Start low and move up only when the signal survives. A strong signal from an expensive test is great. A strong signal from a cheap test is better value.

Seven tests by effort and evidence strength



Popcornerz assessment. Evidence tiers follow Strategyzer's ranking of behaviour above intent above opinion [3]. Effort is an indicative range for a first-time team.

TEST	HOW IT WORKS	BEST FOR	TIME
Interviews	5 to 9 conversations about what people do today	Is the problem real?	3 to 5 days
Landing page	One promise, one sign-up, tracked traffic	Interest from a defined group	1 to 2 weeks
Explainer video	A short video, then the sign-up	Ideas that are hard to explain	1 to 2 weeks
Price-choice step	Pick a plan before leaving an email	Willingness to pay	+ hours
Concierge	Deliver by hand behind a simple front	Is the outcome valued?	2 to 4 weeks
Pre-sale or deposit	Ask for money before it exists	The strongest demand proof	1 to 3 weeks

Times are Popcornerz estimates for a small team and vary with how quickly you can reach the right people.

06 / PROOF STORIES

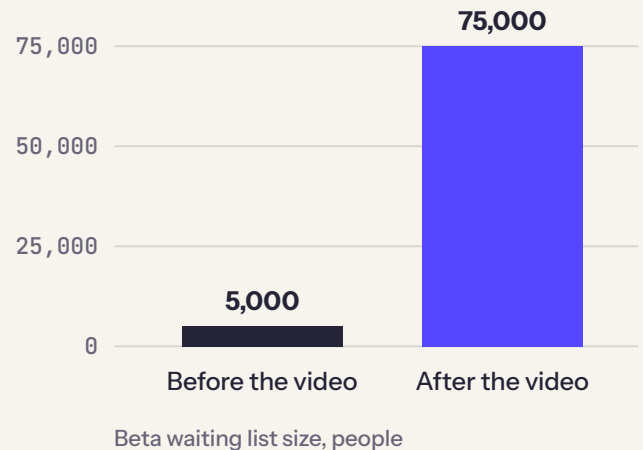
Three tests that answered one question each.

None of these teams started by building the full product. Each ran a small test aimed at the single risk that mattered most.

DROPBOX / RISK: WILL PEOPLE UNDERSTAND AND WANT IT?

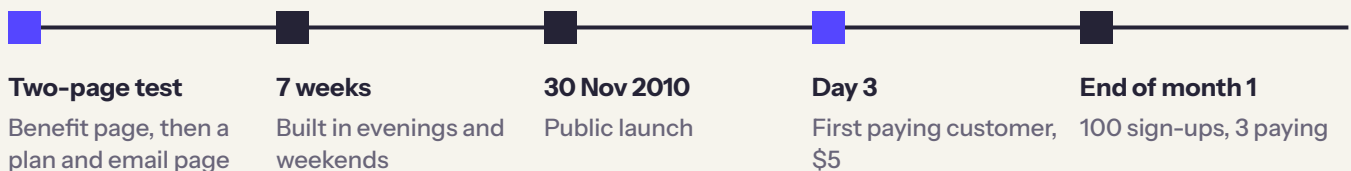
Drew Houston recorded a three-minute screen demo narrated by himself, with in-jokes aimed at the Digg audience, and posted it. He said the beta waiting list went from 5,000 people to 75,000 "literally overnight" ^[2].

What it proved: a concept that was hard to explain became clear in minutes, and a relevant audience asked for it.



BUFFER / RISK: WILL PEOPLE PAY?

Joel Gascoigne built two pages. The first explained the benefit. The second, after a plan choice of \$0, \$5 or \$20, collected an email. He built the product only after the test showed interest ^[5].



ZAPPOS / RISK: WILL PEOPLE BUY SHOES ONLINE?

In 1999 Nick Swinmurn photographed shoes in local stores and posted them online, buying a pair only after an order came in. The story is told in Tony Hsieh's book *Delivering Happiness* and summarised by Learning Loop ^[6]. It is a concierge test: a manual process behind a simple front.

WHAT THEY HAVE IN COMMON

- One risk per test, named in advance
- A clear explanation of the idea before asking for action
- A relevant audience, not a broad one
- An action that cost something: an email, a plan choice or a manual order

These tests show early demand. None of them proves long-term retention.

Ask about the past, not about your idea.

People are kind about ideas and accurate about their own behaviour. Rob Fitzpatrick's *The Mom Test* builds interviews around that fact [8].

Three rules

- 1. **Talk about their life**, not your idea.
- 2. **Ask for specifics in the past**, not opinions about the future.
- 3. **Listen more than you talk**, and take notes on what they did.

Swap these questions

AVOID	ASK INSTEAD
Would you use this?	When did you last run into this?
Is this a good idea?	What did you do about it?
Would you pay for it?	What have you paid or tried so far?
How much would you pay?	What does the problem cost you now?

A seven-question script

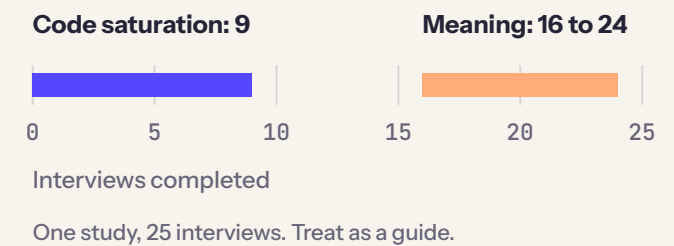
- 1. Tell me about the last time you dealt with [problem].
- 2. What did you do about it?
- 3. What was the hardest part?
- 4. What have you tried or paid for to fix it?
- 5. What did it cost you in time or money?
- 6. Who else is involved in deciding?
- 7. Who else should I talk to?

END WITH A SMALL COMMITMENT

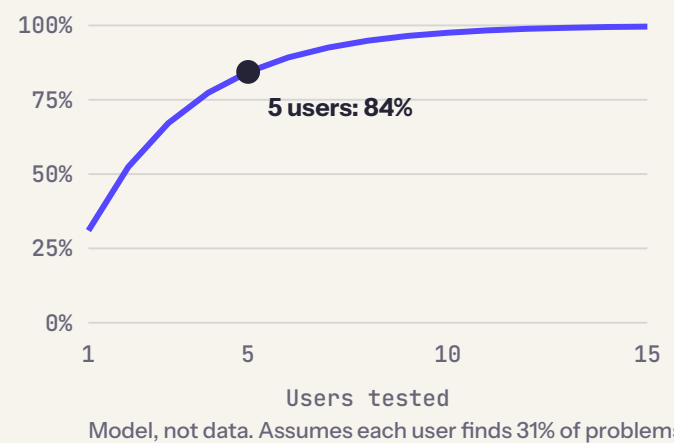
Ask for a follow-up call, an introduction or a spot on the early list. A yes costs them something.

How many interviews?

Interviews until themes stop repeating [9]



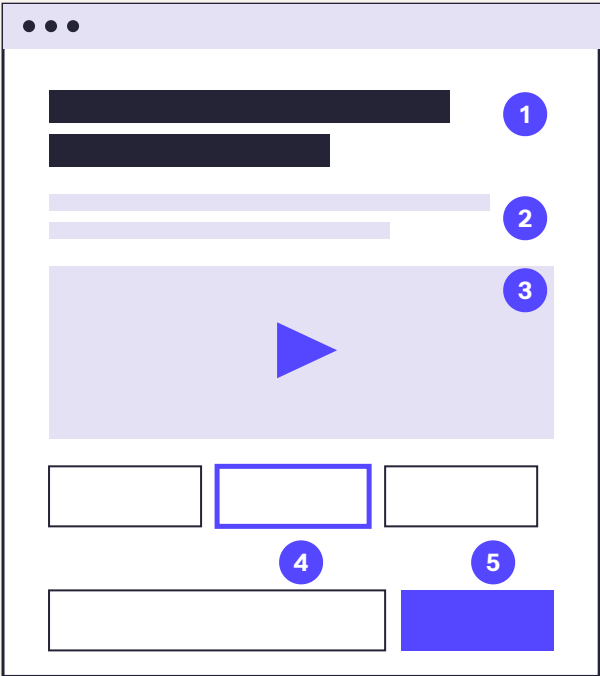
The five-user rule is for usability tests [10]



Start with 5 to 9 conversations in one narrow group, then keep going until new interviews stop adding new themes. In one study code saturation came at 9 interviews and meaning saturation took 16 to 24 [9]. The "5 users find about 85%" figure applies to usability problems that affect at least 31% of users [10], so use it as a floor, not a target.

One promise. One action. Tracked traffic.

A landing page tests whether a defined audience will act once the idea is clear. Keep it to one promise and one action, then count who arrives from where.



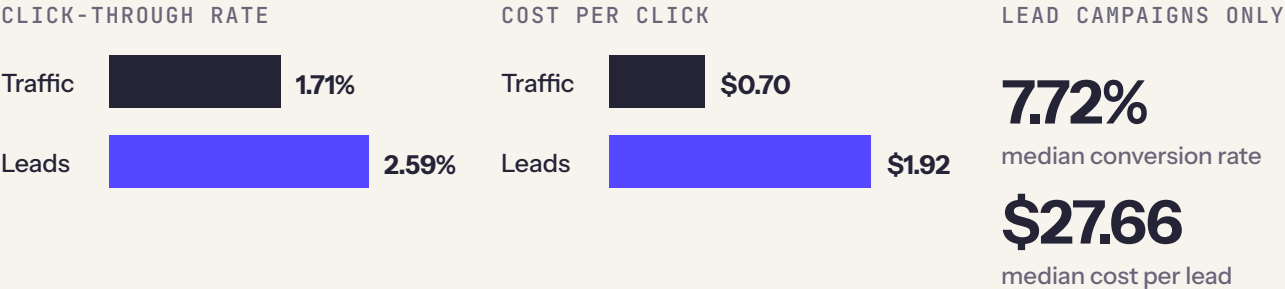
- 1 **Promise.** The outcome for the visitor, in plain words.
- 2 **Explanation.** One or two lines on how it works.
- 3 **Visual or short video.** Shows the idea in under a minute.
- 4 **Price step (optional).** A plan choice before the email shows willingness to pay.
- 5 **One action.** Email or booking. No second button.

TRACK THESE FOUR NUMBERS

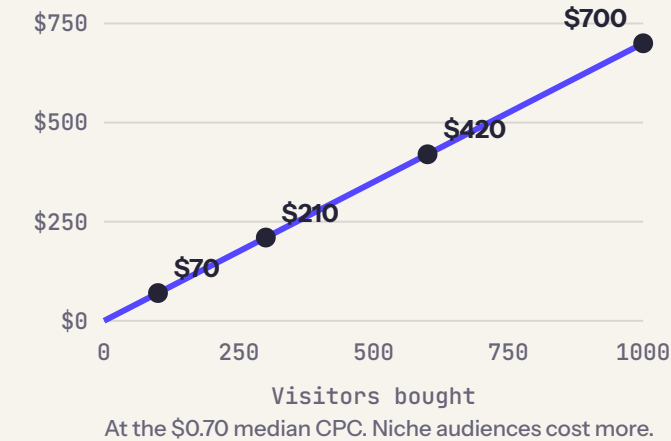
Unique visitors, clicks on the action, completed sign-ups and the source of each visit (tag every link). Record who you targeted and when.

What it costs to buy visitors

Median Meta ads results, US campaigns, April 2024 to June 2025 ^[11]



Cost of buying visitors at \$0.70 per click



Plan your traffic

At the 2025 median traffic cost of \$0.70 per click, 300 visitors cost about \$210 and 1,000 visitors about \$700. Niche business audiences usually cost more, so test your own cost with a small spend first.

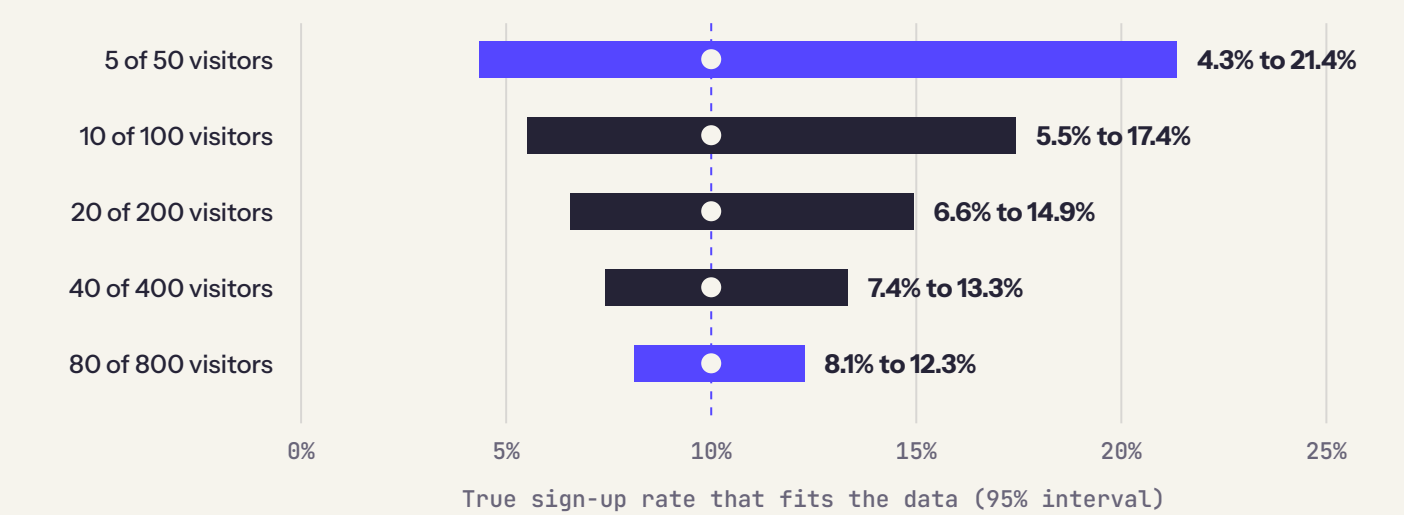
Free routes work too: communities where your audience already gathers, direct messages and introductions from interviewees. Tag each route so you can compare them.

Do not mix audiences. Report each source on its own before you add them up.

Small numbers sound sure. They are not.

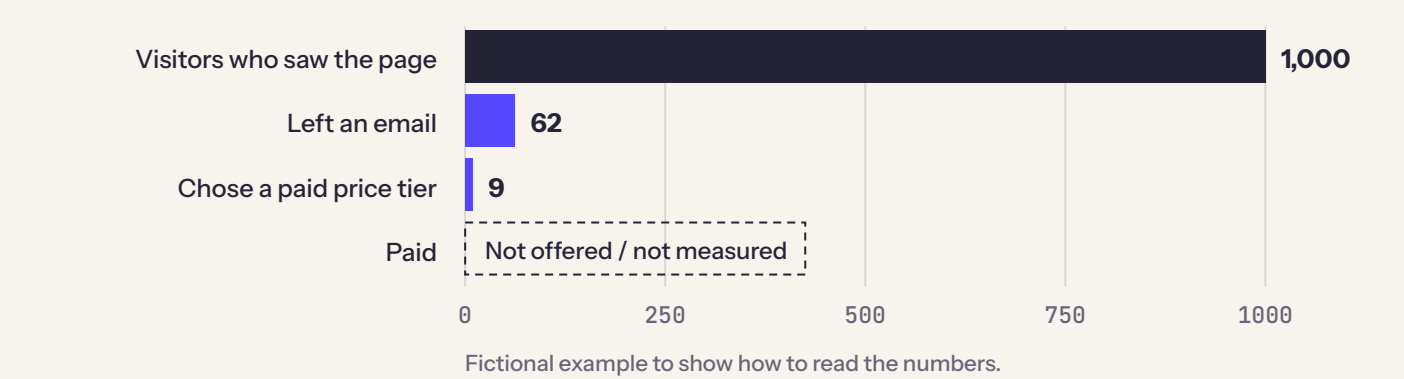
The same 10% sign-up rate means very different things at 50 visitors and at 800. Show the count, the denominator and the range your data can support.

An observed 10% sign-up rate, with a 95% interval, at five sample sizes



Wilson score intervals, calculated for this sheet. With 5 sign-ups out of 50 visitors the true rate could sit anywhere from 4.3% to 21.4%. With 80 out of 800 it narrows to 8.1% to 12.3%. Intervals assume a random sample, which a self-selected test only approximates.

Reading a result: a fictional test of a planning tool for freelance designers



What this result supports

62 of 1,000 visitors (6.2%, interval 4.9% to 7.9%) left an email, below the 10% threshold. 9 chose a paid tier. Payment was never offered, so it is **not measured**, which is different from zero.

What it does not support

It does not show that designers will not pay, or that the idea has failed. It shows interest below the target in this group, with this message.

THE ONE-PAGE RESULTS NOTE	
Measure	The action, its count and the denominator. Keep intent, sign-ups and purchases separate.
Method	Audience criteria, channel, timing, what people saw, exclusions, duplicates removed.
Limit	What was not measured, and who was not reached.
Meaning	What happened, and what it does and does not support.
Next step	The follow-up that resolves a real unknown. No arbitrary pass mark.

10 / CHOOSE

Build it, refine it or drop it.

All three outcomes are useful. Each one helps you make a more informed commitment. Decide with the threshold you wrote before the test, not the one that feels right after.

 Build it Behaviour met or beat the threshold, in the audience you meant to reach, at the highest commitment you tested. NEXT: build the next test	 Refine it Some interest, but below the threshold, with a weak commitment or a mixed audience. Change the audience, message, offer or price. NEXT: change one thing, retest	 Drop it Behaviour stayed well below the threshold across more than one audience or message, or the economics cannot work. NEXT: save the commitment
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The three outcomes carry equal weight on purpose. A stop that saves months of work is a good result.

Seven traps to avoid

Friendly feedback	Family and friends are polite. Count strangers who fit your audience.
Counting likes	Likes cost nothing. Count actions that cost time or money.
No threshold	Without a number set first, any result can look like a win.
Leading questions	"Would you use this?" invites a polite yes.
Tiny samples	Read small counts as a range, not a point.
One channel	A single source can reflect that source, not the market.
Confusing the tests	A working prototype does not show demand.

BEFORE YOU LAUNCH, CHECK

- One question and one audience
- The XYZ hypothesis, written down
- An action that costs something
- Every link tagged by source
- A stop date

SOURCES

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