



Don't build the paywall *first*.

You don't need Stripe. You need one person who will pay. Here's how to find that out before you write a line of code.

START HERE

Step one

Ask properly

The Mom Test

Your friends and family love that you're building something. That's exactly why their feedback is worthless – they answer the question they think you want answered. Ask about what they already did, not what they might do.

~~"Would you use this?"~~

→ "What did you do last time?"

~~"Do you like the idea?"~~

→ "Walk me through yesterday."

~~"Would you pay \$9 a month?"~~

→ "What are you paying for now?"

The past, not the future

Specifics, not opinions

Talk less

Step two

Find the money

Competitors are proof

"Someone already built this" is good news. It means people pay for it. An empty market usually isn't an opportunity – it's a market that doesn't exist. Go and find where money is already moving.

People paying for a worse version

One-star reviews listing what's missing

A spreadsheet someone keeps by hand

Step three

Get a signal

Before you build it

Find the cheapest thing that produces a real yes. A page with one button. A presale. Doing the whole job by hand for five people. A yes that costs them something – money, time, a slot on their calendar – counts. A thumbs-up does not.

Presell it

Waitlist with a deadline

Do it manually first

THEN BUILD

RULE OF
THUMB

Nobody has to pay you yet. But somebody has to want it enough to tell you what they're *already doing about it*.

Step one, properly: *the Mom Test*.

Three rules. They're all about removing the ways a person can be kind to you instead of useful to you.

Talk about their life, not your idea	The moment they know what you're hoping to hear, the data is gone. You can run a whole good conversation without mentioning what you're building.
Ask about the past, not the future	People are terrible at predicting their own behaviour and excellent at reporting what they did last Tuesday. Anchor every question to something that already happened.
Talk less, listen more	If you're talking, you're pitching. Ask, then leave the silence alone until they fill it.

Three things that sound like data and aren't

Compliments	"That's a great idea", "I love this." Warm, worthless. Write them down in a separate column and never count them.
Fluff	Anything with <i>would</i> , <i>could</i> , <i>might</i> , or <i>usually</i> in it. Hypothetical futures and generic habits. Push back to a specific: "when did that last happen?"
Ideas	They start designing features for you. Flattering, and a trap. Dig for the problem underneath the feature instead of writing the feature down.

Ask for a commitment, not a compliment

End every conversation by asking for something that costs them. If they say no, you learned more in that second than in the previous half hour.

Time	A follow-up call with a deadline. Half an hour to walk you through their actual workflow.
Reputation	An intro to their boss, their team, or two people with the same problem. People don't spend reputation on things they think are silly.
Money	A deposit, a presale, a letter of intent, a paid pilot. The strongest signal, and the only one that is hard to be polite with.

The one you'll be tempted to skip

"Who else should I talk to?" at the end of every conversation. If the answer is a real name, you found a real problem. If it's "hmm, I'm not sure", that's your answer about the problem too.

Cheap tests, *ranked*.

Start at the top. Only go down the list when the step above comes back yes. Each one costs more and tells you more.

Conversations	Free, a day. Tells you whether the problem is real and what people already do about it. Not whether they'll pay.
A landing page	An afternoon. Tells you whether the pitch makes sense to a stranger. Signups are weak – the traffic source decides what the number means.
Concierge	A week. Do the entire job by hand for five people. Tells you the real workflow, the real cost, and whether the result is worth anything.
Presale or deposit	A week. The first signal that survives contact with a wallet. Ten strangers paying beats a thousand signups.
Paid pilot	A month. A customer paying for a rough version and using it. Close to the real thing – and if it fails here, it was going to fail later and louder.

Four ways people fool themselves

The friend discount	Your first ten customers are people who like you. That's a favour, not a market. The test is whether a stranger with no relationship to you pays.
Vanity numbers	Signups, likes, followers, waitlist size. Free actions measure interest in the <i>idea</i> , which is not the thing you're selling.
Surveys	A survey asks people to predict themselves, at scale, with no follow-up question. It launders fluff into a spreadsheet and makes it look like evidence.
Building for yourself	Fine as a starting point, dangerous as a finish. You are one user with unusual tolerance for your own product's rough edges.

When to stop

You've had twenty real conversations, nobody has tried to solve this themselves, and nobody will give you time, an intro, or money. That's not failure – that's the months you just saved. Change the problem, keep the audience.

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ON

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