

How to get an edge on the market before your product is even built

tl;dr: Work with design partners—aka a small, deliberately selected cohort of target customers who help shape the product from the very beginning, in exchange for early access and discounted pricing.

#1 - Start before you have a product.

Design partners aren't for testing a finished MVP—they're for shaping what gets built in the first place.

#2 - Cold outreach leads to a signal on willingness-to-pay; it's not a last resort.

Tapping your network for early customers feels efficient, but it produces a biased signal. A stranger who says yes, with no social obligation, tells you something your friends can't.

#3 - Enthusiasm is noisy. Conversion is clarity.

Founders mistake positive feedback for validation. The only thing that matters is whether someone will pay. Structure your program with a hard deadline and a binary ask: go paid or don't. It drives traction and PMF evidence.

#4 - Design partners reveal your real ICP.

You go in with a hypothesis about who your customer is. Design partners pressure-test it. Let the partnerships correct your assumptions before you build a GTM motion around the wrong buyer.

#5 - Pricing is a product decision.

Pricing models are determined from design partners, not through internal modeling. Pricing should reflect how your ICP actually buys, not what looks clean on a spreadsheet.

#6 - A design partner program needs structure and stakes.

Design partners are proto-customers, and the relationship should be formalized accordingly. Biweekly meetings, defined feedback loops, a discount in exchange for structured participation, and a hard conversion deadline.

#7 - Your partners become your first sales assets.

Every partner who converts becomes a reference customer, a case study, and a proof point for the next enterprise deal. The design partner program is the beginning of the sales motion, not separate from it.

#8 - Renewals are the real proof of concept.

First sales tell you people were willing to bet on your promise. Renewals tell you you delivered. Net dollar retention traces directly back to building the right product for the right people from day one. Design partners don't just help you launch; they set the conditions for retention.