The 30% Solution

How to find the customers who are already in your world, and win them before your competitors know they exist.

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The examples in this book are composites drawn from real businesses. The names are invented and the arithmetic is illustrative, not a forecast. Your results will vary.

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Foreword

Where is your next customer coming from?

If that is not a question you have asked yourself, perhaps late on a sleepless night, this book may not be for you. For most business owners, it sits at the front and center of a great many of our thoughts and our activities. And the answer varies across every business.

This book is dedicated to those business owners who have struggled with that question. My goal is to help you answer it without resorting to desperation. In fact, I think you will find the ideas and concepts here are not only understandable, but also uplifting. I encourage you to consider the advice we offer and to implement the ideas that can help your business.

And let us know your thoughts and your results. This, like everything we do, is a work in progress.

Dave Anderson, Leadstra

Contents

PART ONE

The Insight

Every market splits three ways, and it runs in a loop. Almost every business fights over one small piece of it.

CHAPTER 1

How Hard Are You Working to Find One Good Customer?

Somewhere in the back of your head, you probably already know the number.

Last year, how many people did you have to talk to before you landed one client you'd actually want to work with again? Not someone who just paid the invoice. Someone who pays fairly, treats your team well, and gets the kind of result you'd be proud to put their name to.

For most of the small business owners we know, that number lands somewhere between fifty and a hundred conversations. Sometimes more than that.

It's a lot of work for one good fit.

And it isn't because you're bad at sales. It's because of how the math of buying works.

The needle in the haystack

In any market, about ten percent of prospects are in some kind of buying conversation at any given time. Three percent are ready to buy this quarter. Another seven percent are open to the idea but in no hurry. The rest of the market has its head down doing something else, running the business, putting out a fire, focused on a problem that has nothing to do with what you sell.

The ten percent already in a buying conversation are like needles in a haystack. The remaining market, the other ninety percent, is the haystack. The needles are real. Finding them is a useful skill, it is a lot of work, and most sales training is built around it.

But the best salespeople know something sales training rarely teaches. The real secret to a steady pipeline has almost nothing to do with the pitch. The great ones aren't simply better at presenting or closing. They have quietly built a system that keeps them in front of the right people until the timing is right. It isn't a script or a clever close. It's a way of working, and the same system that makes a salesperson great can transform the sales operation of almost any small business. We'll get to how it works. For now, just know it's there.

What sales training doesn't talk about is what it costs to spend your career inside the haystack. Calendar time, sure. But also effort, reputation, margin, and the kind of business person you start to turn into while you're doing it.

We've watched enough of this play out to know how it usually goes. When the whole pipeline depends on finding the next ready-to-buy stranger, the pressure pushes owners toward four familiar traps. Not every owner falls into all of them, and rarely in the same order. But if you've run a business this way, you'll recognize at least one.

The 4 Villains in the Haystack

The longer you spend chasing strangers through the haystack, the more you start to look like one of four characters. None of them is who you were when you started the business. Most of the owners we know have seen at least two of them in the mirror. A few have seen all four.

Villain 1: The Pushy Salesperson. The Pushy Salesperson didn't start out pushy. They used to open conversations with a question. Then every conversation needed to be converted, and the questions turned into a premature pitch. The network notices. Past clients start to hesitate before sending a referral their way, because they don't want to put their friend on the receiving end of someone hunting for the next deal. Slowly, the person they used to be, the one people enjoyed hearing from, gets buried under a version of themselves that can only hear "yes" and pushes more and more when yes doesn't come. If you've ever launched into a pitch on a call where you only meant to say hello, you've met the Pushy Salesperson in the mirror.

Villain 2: The Burned Out Business Owner. The Burned Out Business Owner used to love the work. Now the work gets done on weekends, because the weekdays are full of prospecting. Looking for fifty needles a year is heavy lifting, and there's only so much room in a calendar. Most owners squeeze the search in wherever it fits, around the delivery work, around family, around sleep. And it doesn't get easier as the business grows. It gets harder. The more clients you serve, the less time you have to go find more. If you've ever caught yourself answering one last email at eleven on a Tuesday night with the laptop open in bed, the Burned Out Business Owner is the person you're becoming.

Villain 3: The "I'll Work With Anyone" Closer. This one sneaks up after a stretch of slow months. The next almost-good-enough prospect starts to look less like a warning and more like a rescue. So when any opportunity walks in, you say yes. Maybe it's a deal that will empty your cash reserves to complete; or perhaps a chronic complainer who has been fired by your competition. Six months in, you are stuck with a client who pays sixty days late, scope-creeps every project, and chews up half of the time your team should have been spending on better-fit work. For a small business, the wrong client can derail your team's focus and leave nothing for you to showcase to others when complete. But, you needed the work, so the voice that used to say no out loud gets quieter and quieter. If you've ever sat across from a prospect knowing in your gut they were going to be trouble and took the deal anyway, you are the "I'll Work With Anyone" Closer.

Villain 4: The Desperate Discounter. When the pipeline thins, price is the easiest lever in the room to pull on. The Desperate Discounter pulls it. It works in the short term, the way most things that hurt later do. Then the discount quietly spreads. Existing clients renew at the new number, not the old one. Margins compress. You stop being able to pay yourself or your team the way you meant to. You stop being able to reinvest in the parts of the business you most want to grow. Worse yet, you stop attracting the clients who would pay fairly for good service. If you've ever quoted a number lower than what the work is worth because you needed the deal to land, that's the Desperate Discounter writing the proposal.

If you've been running a business for more than a few years, most likely one or more of these characters have been a part of your story. For a lot of the owners we work with, all four villains have shown up at one time or another.

A different place to look

There's something we wish someone had told us when we were starting out.

In that same market where ten percent are in a buying conversation today, there's another thirty percent doing something a lot quieter. They are doing their job, silently struggling with a problem you can solve. It hasn't risen to the point where they need to find a fix, but like a rock in your shoe, it is there. And it is annoying.

They aren't shopping today. But when their moment comes, they have two choices: stop what they are doing and look for someone to diagnose their problem, help them evaluate the cost to fix it, and then consider which vendor offers the best solution for their needs; or rely on a trusted connection. One that isn't pushy but leads with relevant information about their situation. One who comes highly referred. One who understands what will motivate them to buy and talks about it with transparency and honesty. One who shows solid proof that they are up to the challenge.

These aren't needles in the haystack. Most of them have bumped into you in the past. Perhaps at a trade show. Maybe through a Google search. Or they might have seen your ad and downloaded more information. If you check your CRM, their email address is probably in there. If not, it should be.

For this 30%, the conversations are warmer. They take less effort. Because they know you and have seen signs that you understand them, they are less likely to talk to your competitor. Better yet, when the time is right, these prospects close at much higher rates. Here is the challenge: these people are yours to lose.

We call the system for finding and staying close to them The 30% Solution. It's what this book is about.

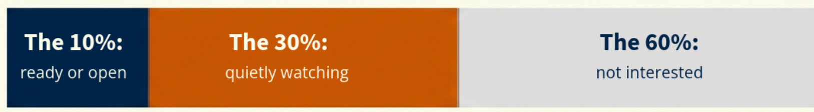
In the chapters that follow, we walk through the six patterns we see most often in small businesses who focus only on finding the 10% ready to buy today. We put numbers on the gap. We hand you the method, in build order, and we hold nothing back.

And if you want to know which of the six patterns has hold of your business before you read another page, we built a free Marketing Scorecard for exactly that. Ten questions, about ten minutes, and it names the one to fix first. It lives at leadstra.com, and you never have to speak to us to use it.

You don't have to keep digging through that haystack to grow your business. The rest of this book is about a different kind of work, and a warmer place to look.

CHAPTER 2

Every Market Splits Three Ways



Every market splits three ways. The 30% is where the growth is.

There's a picture of the market that, once you see it clearly, makes the math of buying make sense.

It comes from a sales trainer named Chet Holmes, who drew the first version of it twenty years ago and called it the Buyer's Pyramid. He'd been studying how prospects actually behave when they're sitting in the room with you, and he kept coming back to the same pattern.

It looks like this.

The 10%: Ready or open

Three out of every hundred prospects in your market are actively buying right now. Not thinking about it. Buying. They have a budget, a decision-maker, and a timeline. The proposals are out. The decision happens this quarter.

Another seven out of a hundred are open to the idea. Not actively shopping, but not closed either. If the right conversation showed up tomorrow, they'd take the meeting. Maybe even take the proposal.

That's the 10%. They are the hand-raisers. The ones every business is fighting over right now. Most marketing, most sales, most prospecting, all of it is built around finding these prospects and converting them.

Later research has put that figure somewhere between three and twelve percent, and where you land depends almost entirely on how long your customers go between purchases. Sell something people replace once a decade and you are closer to three. Sell an annual renewal and you are closer to twelve. Ten is a fair working number for most service businesses, and honestly, the exact figure is not the point. The point is that the group everyone is fighting over is small, and it is the only group most businesses ever talk to.

Don't get us wrong, pursuing the 10% is important work. It's just hard work and requires skill and persistence. The 10% is who the prospectors on your sales team should focus on. They are the hunters for your business. You should know your 10% well, know their triggers, and work tirelessly in pursuit of their business.

But you should not forget the 30%. They are the hidden gold.

The 30%: Quietly watching

Remember the best salespeople from the last chapter, the ones whose real edge had nothing to do with the pitch? This is the group they had quietly figured out. They don't win by chasing the 10% harder than everyone else. They win by staying in front of the people who aren't ready yet, so that when the moment finally comes, they are already the obvious call.

I learned this the long way around, before I had a name for it.

Early in my career I worked in the audiovisual business. I was the account manager for an AV support firm that provided in-house technology support for a large pharmaceutical client. Our team provided the equipment and the people that made their presentations, recordings, and meetings run. We also installed the systems in the rooms we supported. Over time I became the person everyone called, not just the people using the rooms, but the facilities staff who maintained them. The facilities staff were the same people who handled new construction, and because I was always around and happy to help, I started getting invited into their planning meetings. Eventually I was invited to sit in on design conversations for the new presentation facilities. My job shifted from account management to sales. Before long, I was one of the top producers on our sales team, while still serving as the account manager for the client.

Here is what surprised me. I never made a cold call. I never wanted to. What I did was stay in touch. I visited my clients regularly. I sent along things I thought they'd find interesting. I set up demonstrations of new technology, not to close a sale, but just to keep them aware of what was possible. And when a new project finally got funded, who do you think got the first call?

I wasn't smart enough at the time to realize I had stumbled into the 30% Solution. Looking back, my quiet attention to those dormant prospects matched, and often beat, the most aggressive hunters in our business. And on the rare occasion we lost a job to a competitor, guess who was standing there to upgrade it once the competition packed up and left? That was me, too.

There is a much bigger group sitting just behind the 10%.

Roughly thirty out of a hundred prospects in your market are simply not thinking about you right now.

That is Holmes' own phrasing, and the distinction is worth pausing on. They are not opposed to you. They have not looked at you and passed. Their attention is somewhere else: the business is running, the team is busy, last quarter's project hasn't shaken out, the budget is committed to something more urgent than the thing you sell.

But they can be moved. That was Holmes' entire point, and it is the foundation of everything he taught. Educate this group, be useful to them over time, and a meaningful share of them will need what you sell eventually. When that day comes, they will already know your name.

These are the people who'd buy from you when the time is right, *if you happen to be around when that moment arises.*

That is the 30%: the quietly-watching middle, and the unworked half of your real opportunity. They are the reason you have heard that a sale takes seven touches. There is no research behind that number, and that is exactly the point. Nobody knows the number. Which is why you build a rhythm instead of counting touches. But who has time for seven touches anyway? Especially aimed at a prospect who is busy and doesn't want to be bothered?

Most owners don't have a system to effectively separate the 30% from everyone else they meet. They have a system to pitch to the 10%: sales calls, proposals, follow-up, close. But they have no solid plan to educate and nurture the 30% in a way that leads to measurable results. So when a 30% prospect shifts from quietly watching to actively shopping, instead of being in a prime position to assist without competition, you are forced to compete on a tougher battlefield, as a stranger.

The 60%: Not your audience

The remaining sixty out of a hundred fall into two groups, and Holmes drew them as equal halves. Thirty out of a hundred *think* they're not interested. The other thirty *know* they're not interested, and they will tell you so inside the first fifteen seconds of any conversation.

Marketing tactics that try to convert this group are the most expensive marketing you can buy. For small businesses with limited resources, the wise move is to stop spending energy on the 60% that don't see your value. They aren't your audience. That's not a failure, it's a feature of every market. Know they're there but focusing your effort on the 30% Solution is the path to a healthy business. If they shift, the same tools that connected you with the 30% will work to engage them.

Why the picture matters

Here's the part most owners haven't internalized yet.

Most dollars you've spent on marketing have been pointed at the 10%, or some effort to shotgun the remaining 90%. That makes intuitive sense. The 10% is the group that actually buys, and it is easy to convince yourself that "everyone" needs what you offer. But the 10% is the smallest, most competitive group to reach. It's the group with the shortest memory, and if you miss them in the moment, they are gone. And the 60% is the least interested and most expensive to connect with. Just not worth your efforts.

The 30% is different. It is a much larger group, often less expensive to reach, and because of your efforts they will be slower to forget you. But you'll have to wait for the right moment. You can't be too pushy. You must understand their buying signals and be ready to act on them. Some will become active in three months. Some in six. Some longer. The math doesn't care how long they wait to act. It cares that they're moving toward a buying conversation. The business that has been steadily reaching out, sharing case studies, and offering useful insights will be the one they call first. You've heard the term pipeline. This is your most fertile pipeline.

Keep your marketing focused on the 30%. This is your garden. You must cultivate them because they are tomorrow's victory. This book is about building the systems that engage, nurture, and harvest the 30%. It's about earning back the time and effort lost chasing “everyone” and “anyone.” It’s about becoming the “go to” resource for your best clients. It’s about growing your business the right way.

CHAPTER 3

What The 30% Solution Actually Is

The 30% Solution is a system, not a tactic, not a campaign, not a quarter-by-quarter scramble. It's a way of showing up regularly enough to be remembered and lightly enough to be welcome, until your prospect's moment arrives.

That sentence is easy to write. Building the system is harder. But the hard part isn't the technology, it's knowing what *not* to do. Most of the owners we work with have already tried two versions of marketing-the-30%, and neither one is actually it.

Let's name them.

Two ways small business owners typically get it wrong

Mistake 1: Ignoring it and pointing all sales energy at the 10%.

Jenna had a consulting business. She spent most of her time preparing her presentations and creating thought leadership around her business. The process of finding opportunities to present to businesses was so time-consuming and draining she decided to hire a salesperson to book 2 to 3 presentations each month.

Her first hire was successful, and Jerry booked meetings by making cold calls. He pitched Jenna as an expert and was very effective at booking lunch-and-learn presentations. The challenge was that, for Jerry, the conversation was a yes or no proposition. Are you interested in having Jenna present to your team? If yes, great, let's compare calendars. If no, thanks, and on to the next.

Eventually two things happened. Jerry got tired of chasing the same small group of ready-to-buy prospects. He also hated that all his competitors were calling on the same businesses. Those were the 10%. Over time, the opportunities narrowed and the chance to charge a reasonable speaking fee diminished. Between the competition and the familiarity with the product, finding new opportunities became a burden.

Jerry was a hard worker and enjoyed the challenge, until he didn't and decided to move on. This left Jenna with a meager pipeline and no fallback options. Her business took a big step backwards and caused her to rethink her entire process for developing her clientele.

By not building a system to nurture those ‘no’s’ that really meant ‘not today’, Jenna inadvertently helped burn out a good employee and put her business in jeopardy.

Mistake 2: Treating everyone like a sales target.

Michael owned a small accounting firm. His specialty was the ability to understand small business and offer advice beyond the spreadsheet. He loved to dive into his client’s business and help them find ways of managing their money more effectively.

Michael’s clients appreciated his passion and expertise. Unfortunately, when it came to selling, Michael’s passion convinced him that any and every small business needed his services. How could they not?

His marketing was informative, but not specific. His sales efforts tried to convince every business he approached that his expertise was a ‘game-changer’. As a result, his pitch landed flat on those who did not know him. In some cases he alienated prospects by sounding like a ‘know-it-all’. And the harder he pushed, the more doors seemed to close.

Every once in a while he would find a prospect. These were businesses without a lot of administrative staff who found Michael’s expertise valuable and were looking for that kind of help. Michael, unknowingly, found his 10%.

Unfortunately, his efforts were much less effective on the remaining 90%.

For the 60% that weren’t interested, his approach and messaging were viewed as spammy. This reinforced their hard ‘no’, and they certainly didn’t make any referrals for fear he’d treat their colleague as they’d been treated.

And the 30%? The group that really could have made a difference? They quietly unsubscribed. Michael lost them. Not because they weren’t a fit, but because he treated them like a sales target rather than a unique prospect who needed to be nurtured.

Both mistakes are exhausting and can lead to disaster. Unfortunately, both are also common. Perhaps you see yourself in one or both of these examples. Don’t worry, there is a solution. You just need to look at the 30% differently.

What The 30% Solution actually is

The 30% Solution is a deliberate, low-pressure, optimistic, and educational system for staying close to the right prospects so that when their moment comes, they think of you first.

Notice the words.

Deliberate. Not accidental, not “we’ll do it when we have time.” Built into the rhythm of how the business runs.

Low-pressure. Because the 30% isn’t shopping yet. Pressure today isn’t a deal closer, it’s how you get disqualified. They remember being pushed, and they remember not liking it.

Optimistic. Because so many sales systems start with and focus on pain. Yes, pain is a motivator, but showing proof of success and offering valuable insights are also powerful motivators for those who have yet to decide they want to move forward towards a solution. Too much pain becomes insufferable.

Educational. The 30% doesn’t want a pitch. They want to understand. Teach them what actually separates a good decision from a bad one in your category, the buying attributes that matter when they finally choose, not your features and benefits. When you help a prospect learn what to look for, they get smarter, and they start measuring every option against the standard you just set. That is how a casual prospect quietly becomes an ideal, well-informed client, often before the buying conversation has even started.

Staying close. The work isn’t selling. The work is being present, useful, recognizable, on a rhythm the prospect can absorb without effort. They should hear from you regularly enough to remember you, and lightly enough that they never wonder why.

The right prospects. Not everyone. The 30% is a specific slice of the market. They are the people who’d buy from you when their moment arrives. But they must know and remember you. They must be a special part of your community. A system for engaging the 30% isn’t built for everyone. It’s built for the people most likely to become tomorrow’s customers.

Mechanically, the system has four moving parts. We’ll walk through each one in detail later. For now, you should know they exist:

1. A useful first touch: something the prospect can actually use, even if they never buy.

2. A predictable rhythm: effective contact that arrives as easy-to-digest information or education, not marketing or sales content.
3. A trigger moment: a piece of content, an event, or a change in their world that flips them from passively-watching to actively-shopping. This trigger might move them to a different conversation or schedule them for a talk with you directly.
4. A short path to a conversation: when they're ready, talking to you is one click away.

That's it. Four pieces. Built into an intelligent, automated system. Running without the founder having to chase and elevate interested prospects the minute they are ready.

Where your 30% lives

A practical note before we move on. You don't have to go looking for the 30% in the open market. They've already touched your business, most of them more than once. You just haven't been listening for them.

Look in five places:

1. Your existing clients. They've worked with you. They know what you do. Some of them have another problem, another team, or a friend in a similar situation.
2. Your network. Past clients, prospects who didn't close, people who replied to a LinkedIn post once, the chamber breakfast list, the person who sat next to you at a conference two years ago.
3. Your website and social visitors. People who read a blog post, watched a video, or hung around long enough that you should know they were there.
4. Your responders to advertising. Anyone who downloaded a guide, attended a webinar, or clicked through and then didn't book a call.
5. Your discarded leads. The ones your sales team marked "not now" or "not a fit" or just stopped responding to.

These five groups are already inside your world. Most owners we work with have ten times as many of these prospects as they realize. They just haven't built the system to find, capture, and stay close to them.

Why this works, and why many marketing tactics don’t

It works because it respects the journey to a solution.

The 10% are actively buying. They are searching for a partner who meets their needs and can deliver. They need a sales conversation now. These are the prospects the sales team should handle every day. The 30% isn’t moving today. Pushing them harder won’t change that. They value education that helps them determine and quantify the need before they consider the solution. They must be met on their own terms. Your sales quotas mean nothing to them. They don’t want a discount. The two most important factors to engage the 30% are being relevant and being available when their moment comes.

The 30% Solution makes you that trusted advisor. Quietly, and in a way that can be measured. You create this without manufactured urgency that causes them to repel and without the over-pursuit that makes them dread your emails.

And while the process may seem longer, it’s also cheaper, more durable, and creates a flywheel: Yesterday’s 30% becomes today’s 10%, and the 30% behind them is already watching you. Your prospecting efforts become more stable and measurable as you learn what your key clients really need and respond to. Referrals become natural because your relationship is based on more than the lowest cost or product availability.

That’s the work. Here’s the outcome:

Regular. Reliable. Revenue.

The next chapters show you the patterns we keep seeing in small businesses whose 30% has gone quiet, and what to do about each one.

CHAPTER 4

The Whole Journey

Every customer you have ever met traveled the same road to reach you, whether they knew it or not. Marketers have mapped that road for years, and they call it the buyer's journey. It is worth understanding in detail, because the 30% is not scattered randomly across your market. They are in a specific stage of the journey, and once you can see which, everything about how you reach them gets simpler.

The journey has five stages. The first three happen before anyone buys anything. The last two happen after.

Awareness. The prospect realizes something is wrong. A cost is creeping up, a process keeps breaking, a goal keeps slipping. They do not yet know what the fix is, or if a fix even exists. They only know they have a problem.

Consideration. The problem has grown real enough that they start looking for a solution. They read, they ask around, they begin to form an opinion about what a good answer would look like.

Decision. They choose. They have a short list, and they pick the one they trust most to deliver.

Those three are the pre-sale journey, and they are where this chapter spends most of its time, because they are where your marketing either works or does not.

Then come the two stages almost every business forgets.

Experience. They become a customer and they live with the choice. You deliver, or you do not. This is where loyalty is made, long after the marketing is over.

Promotion. If the experience was good, they say so. They refer a friend. They agree to a case study. They leave the review, give the testimonial, mention your name at the exact moment someone else describes the problem you solve.

Those last two stages matter more than most businesses realize, and they are worthy of your attention and consideration. A good experience is what earns you the case study, the review, and the testimonial. And those are not just trophies for your website. They are the very things that make the next stranger aware of you and the work you do.

That is the part a funnel picture misses. A funnel has a beginning and an end. Prospects go in the top and a few fall out the bottom as customers. That is where the process stops. But the story does not stop. A client you serve well today becomes the reason someone new calls you next year. Address the back half of the journey, the experience and the good word that follows it, and your own customers slowly become your best source of new ones. Ignore it, and you are left refilling the top by yourself, month after month, paying for every new name.

We will come back to Experience and Promotion, and to managing them effectively, later in the book. For now, walk with me through the three pre-sale stages, because each one runs on a different engine.

What moves a prospect at each stage

This next idea is the one that unlocks the rest of the book, so it is worth slowing down for.

A prospect is not motivated by the same thing at every stage of the journey. What they care about changes as they move, and if you do not change with them, you lose them.

Each of the three pre-sale stages runs on its own driver. The drivers for the Awareness and Consideration stages are well established in marketing, and I am simply passing them along. The driver for the Decision stage is a theory I have developed over years of watching deals close or fall apart, and the research on how people actually make decisions backs it up.

At Awareness, the driver is pain.

A person in the Awareness stage is not shopping. They are hurting. They know something is costing them, but they have not committed to fixing it and they may not believe a fix exists. What moves them here is naming the pain better than they can name it themselves. When you describe their problem more clearly than they could, they tend to conclude, without you saying a word about yourself, that you must understand the solution. This is where you earn the right to keep talking.

At Consideration, the driver shifts to buying attributes.

Once a prospect accepts that they will solve the problem, their attention moves to the attributes that matter most to them in a provider. Is it price? Lead time? Depth of expertise? A local presence? Someone who answers the phone when things go wrong? These are the buying attributes, and they are exactly the ones you will uncover in Chapter 12, when you sit down and interview your best clients. A prospect in Consideration is building a scorecard in their head, and the businesses that make the short list are the ones whose message speaks to the attributes that prospect has decided to weigh.

At Decision, the driver becomes your brand promise.

By the time a prospect reaches Decision, the pain is old news and the criteria are mostly set. They are down to a short list of providers who all, more or less, clear the bar. Now they are looking for one thing: a reason to be confident they are making the right choice. That reason is your brand promise, the specific, provable thing you stand for above your competition. The research on how buyers actually decide bears this out. At the decision stage, what tips the choice is trust and differentiation backed by proof, and a real brand promise is precisely that. It is the one clear thing that makes the safe choice obvious.

Pain, then attributes, then promise. Read down that list and you can feel the prospect changing as they move along the road.

A word about referrals

This is also why a referral is so valuable, and it is worth understanding exactly why.

A referral does not skip the journey. Your new prospect still has to move through Awareness, Consideration, and Decision like anyone else. What a referral does is hand off a great deal of trust at the start. Usually a referral begins with someone who is good at hearing a friend describe their pain, and who says, at just the right moment, "you should call the people I used." That introduction arrives pre-loaded with the trust it normally takes months to build, which is why a referred prospect moves through the journey so much faster and so much more smoothly.

But faster is not the same as skipped. Your job with a referral is not to assume they are ready to buy. It is to quickly find out where on the road they actually are, and to make sure your first message meets them there. A referral who is still in Awareness needs you to speak to the pain, even with all that borrowed trust. A referral who is already at Decision needs proof your company will meet their needs and expectations. Waste the trust a referral hands you by pitching a person who is not ready, and you can undo in one message what your referral partner spent real credibility to give you.

How to tell which stage someone is in

If the right message depends on where a prospect is on the journey, how are you supposed to know where they are?

It starts before any software, with knowing your ideal client cold. You should understand your ideal client so well that you know how they experience each stage of the journey, what the pain sounds like in their words, what attributes they weigh, what promise would finally make them confident. That takes a sharply defined ideal client, not one so broad or so vague that you cannot picture a real person. If your definition of a good client is “anyone with a budget,” you have nothing specific enough to speak to.

You also have to know their pain points and their common buying attributes, because those decide your fit as a vendor as much as anything. If you are never going to be the low-price option, you are better off disqualifying the people shopping on price than spending months courting them, only to watch them vanish the moment a cheaper quote appears. The flip side is the good news: your real attributes act like a magnet for the right prospect. Make sure they come through clearly, and the people who value what you actually offer will feel it.

Once you know your client that well, you can read which stage they are in from two simple things: what they raise their hand for, and what they click.

Start with a lead magnet, something genuinely useful you offer in exchange for a first bit of engagement. Ours is the Marketing Scorecard. A prospect answers ten short questions about their business, and on the other side we can tell which of the six Scenarios is most likely holding their pipeline back. That single step does something powerful. It sorts a nameless contact into a known problem. We now know what they are struggling with, in their own words, before we have ever spoken.

But knowing their problem is not the same as knowing how ready they are to fix it, and that is where the clicks come in.

After the Scorecard, the follow-up is not one generic newsletter. It offers choices. An email might point to two different things: one piece for someone just starting to feel the problem, another for someone actively comparing how to solve it. Which one they click gives you an insight to their perspective that can drive your future engagements. A prospect who keeps reaching for the “is this even worth fixing” content is early, in Awareness, and needs patience and pain-focused material. A prospect who clicks “how to choose a provider” has moved to Consideration, and is ready for attribute-focused content and proof. Nobody announced their stage. They revealed it through their actions. It now becomes your job to realize this and adjust your messaging appropriately.

Do this well and every future message gets more topical, more useful, and more welcome, because it is aimed at the stage the prospect is actually in rather than a generic middle. You are no longer broadcasting. You are responding.

How far you take this, the exact tagging and scoring behind the scenes, can get sophisticated, and that part lives in your system rather than in this book. But the principle is simple and it costs almost nothing to start: give people useful things to raise their hand for, pay attention to what they reach for, and let that guide what you send next.

Why the rest of the book is organized this way

One last thing before we move on, because it will make the next six chapters click into place.

Every one of the six Scenarios in Part Two is a breakdown at a particular stage of this journey. The Quiet Brand is a breakdown at Awareness, too few people ever learn you exist. The Referral Black Hole is a breakdown at Promotion, your happy clients never spread the good word that brings the next one. Stale Lead Flow is a breakdown between Consideration and Decision, people reach the door ready to talk and nobody is there to meet them. You do not need to memorize which is which. Just carry this with you: your 30% is standing back at Awareness and Consideration, waiting for you to speak their language, and the surest way to keep them moving toward you is to say the right thing at the right time, every time.

PART TWO

The Six Scenarios

Six ways the loop breaks. You will recognize two or three of them.

CHAPTER 5

The Referral Black Hole

You can probably tell the story of your last good referral. You remember who sent it, and you remember being a little surprised when it landed. What you can't tell me is when the next one is coming.

That uncertainty is the problem. If a significant amount of your business comes from word-of-mouth, but only when it knocks on your door, you don't have a referral problem. You have a missing system. We call this pattern the Referral Black Hole, and it's usually where a quiet 30% has been hiding the longest.

The signal sounds like this:

> *"Most of our business is word-of-mouth, when it shows up."*

What's really going on

Underneath that sentence, a few things tend to be true. Your clients are happy. They'd send you a name if you asked at the right moment, and some of them already have, in a conversation you never heard about. But three things are usually missing, and any one of them is enough to keep the pipeline quiet.

There's no system to ask for that referral. The moment to bring it up never feels clean, so it gets skipped, and "I should reach out to them" becomes a line on a list you never finish.

There's also no reliable infrastructure to receive a referral. When a referral does come in, whoever happens to see the email first handles it, warmly but ad hoc, and easy to drop on a busy week.

And there's no rhythm to stay close to your past clients. These are the clients who liked your work, but once it was done they went back to their own fires. Ninety days go by, then a hundred and eighty. They haven't forgotten you exactly, but you're no longer the first name in mind when a friend asks them who to call.

Put those together and your most valuable referral pool, the people who already know you and already trust you, is sitting inside your own client list, and you have no way to reach them without being awkward.

What it's costing you

The number is usually bigger than owners expect, because it's revenue that's already adjacent to the business.

Run the rough math on your own figures. Say you've served fifty clients over the last three years. If even 30% of them would refer you if you asked at the right moment, that's fifteen people who could be sending you work. At a conservative one converted referral each per year, times your average deal size, you have the figure. For most of the owners we work with, it lands somewhere between $80,000 and $250,000 a year.

In an owner-led service business, that past-client list is the warmest market you will ever have, and it's the one most owners overlook or don't even consider.

That isn't a "spend more on marketing" number. It's a "system you haven't built yet" number. The relationships are already paid for.

The first move

Resist the urge to reach for a referral incentive or a contest. Those can work in retail. In service and consulting businesses they usually backfire, because they make a trusted recommendation feel transactional and quietly cheapen the thing that produced it.

The move that works is quieter, and it starts by measuring before it asks.

Measure satisfaction first, with a real metric. At the end of a project, or once a quarter for ongoing work, run a quick Net Promoter Score. NPS is a standard business measure, used by everyone from national brands to the firm down the street. You ask one question, *on a scale of zero to ten, how likely are you to recommend us?*, plus a short "why."

The reason NPS remains relevant, even in the face of fair criticism that it is not a reliable growth indicator, is that it does a good job of one narrow thing: it tells you who is willing to offer a referral. That is the only job we are asking it to do here. The nines and tens are your *promoters*, the people most likely to refer. The sevens and eights are *passives*, content but quiet. The zeros through sixes are *detractors*, who won't refer and might say the opposite if asked.

So the score does two jobs. A high one is a green light. A low one is a gift: a problem you can fix before it costs you the client. It also helps you ensure you never ask an unhappy customer to vouch for you. Fix the issue first, then follow up to let them know how their feedback helped. Your next NPS score may get into the green zone.

Got the green lights? It's time to make the ask to the people who just told you they'd say yes. A good ask has four parts:

1. Why it matters. Your best clients tend to come from people like them, and a referral lets you keep doing great work instead of chasing strangers.
2. Who you're looking for. Paint the picture clearly enough that a name comes to mind: the industry, the role, the situation that makes now the right time. Use an example if you have one.
3. A frictionless way to act. If someone does come to mind, have a referral form ready to send them. Don't rely on "let me know if you think of anyone."
4. Something back. Invite them to a short call to trade introductions from each other's LinkedIn networks, where you'll bring names for them too.

That reciprocity is what turns an awkward favor into something they're glad to do.

Then stay close. Most clients won't have a name the day you ask, so build a light rhythm of four to seven touches that keeps you top of mind. Each one is useful on its own: a resource they can use, a result you're proud of, a quick checklist, a seasonal note. The goal isn't to ask seven times. It's to be the name they think of when someone in their world finally says, "do you know anyone who...?"

A simple cadence might look like this:

When	The message
Week 2	Something useful: a resource or insight for their world
Week 4	A short client win, or a result you're proud of
Week 8	A simple checklist or how-to they can use themselves
Week 12	The reciprocal offer: "open to trading a few LinkedIn intros?"
Quarterly after	A brief "here's what we're seeing" note

Every message stands on its own. The only ask is a quiet link in your email signature with your calendar link, a lead magnet, or your phone number.

All of this can run on automation. Just build it so the same client never enters the same sequence twice. Once they've been through it, they belong in your ongoing rhythm, not back at the start of the drip.

None of this is heavy. It's a measure, an ask, and a rhythm, built once. Together they turn word-of-mouth from something that happens to you into something you run.

Your sleeping 30% might be the same people you already worked with last year.

Living It: How Leadstra Is Building Its Own Referral System

We'd be poor advisors if we didn't run this ourselves, so here's what we're building. Every delivered Blueprint or Strategy Scan will be followed with a short satisfaction check. A strong score will trigger a referral request fourteen days later. This is scripted and automatic, so it never depends on someone remembering. The referral request names the kind of client we're looking for and provides a short online form for them to fill out. The next message, coming several days later, offers a working session to swap LinkedIn introductions both ways. Anyone who isn't ready yet drops into a light quarterly "what we're seeing" email newsletter. This is useful on its own and provides a quiet way to hand us an introduction when the time is right. This is the same process we recommend: an easy ask, and the rhythm we just described, pointed at our own clients. (Our internal build sheet tracks what's live, what's still open, and who owns it.)

CHAPTER 6

The Stale Lead Flow

Picture the leads you meant to get back to. The inbound inquiry from two weeks ago. The proposal you sent a month back that went quiet. The referral a client handed you that you still haven't called. You didn't lose them on purpose. They're sitting in your inbox or your marketing system, waiting on a follow-up that keeps sliding to next week.

The signal sounds like this:

> *"I meant to follow up with that lead from two weeks ago. And the proposal from last month. And the referral from the client lunch."*

That's the Stale Lead Flow. Leads arrive, from inbound, from referrals, from first meetings, and then they sit. By the time anyone follows up, the prospect has moved on, gone cold, or hired whoever answered first. The work that earned the lead is still there. The system that was supposed to carry it forward isn't.

In owner-led service businesses doing $500K to $5M, this is the most common pattern we see. It's also the most fixable, because the people are already yours.

What's really going on

Let me tell you about Tom.

Tom owns a commercial painting company. Good crews, work he's proud of, a steady trickle of inbound leads and the occasional referral. On paper he should be booked solid. He isn't, and he can't quite explain why.

Take a Tuesday. A strong lead lands at nine in the morning, a property manager asking about repainting three buildings. Tom sees it, thinks "I'll call right after lunch," and then the day happens. A crew is short-handed across town. A client calls about a color that dried two shades off. A supplier pushes a delivery into next week. By the time Tom looks up it's six o'clock, dinner is waiting, and the property manager has quietly slipped onto tomorrow's list. Tomorrow shows up with its own fires. He finally calls Thursday. She'd already hired the company that picked up Tuesday afternoon.

Tom didn't forget. He never forgets a good lead. He just never got a clean minute, and a good lead doesn't wait for a clean minute.

Then there's the referral. A past client texts him a name: "You should call Nora, she's opening a second location." Tom saves the number. But calling Nora means cold-calling a stranger and basically pitching, and that feels pushy, like showing up hat in hand. So a five-minute call sits on his list for three weeks, getting more awkward by the day, until it feels too late to call at all. A short, friendly note the same afternoon would have been easy. The full sales call never felt easy, so it never happened.

And the proposal. He bid a big repaint last month, felt good walking out, and then heard nothing. He could follow up, but a second "just checking in" feels like begging, so he lets it sit. The job goes to whoever stayed in front of them.

Then there are the leads Tom never even writes down, because they never look like leads. At a chamber breakfast, another contractor mentions his crew is buried and he's turning away interior work. Tom says, "send some my way," means it, jots nothing down, and nothing happens. That same month he introduces two people in his network who clearly needed to know each other. It's a small kindness, the kind he does without thinking, and he never circles back to either of them to ask for an introduction in return. Both were open doors. Tom walked past them, not because he didn't care, but because they never arrived in an inbox with the word "lead" on them.

None of this is Tom being lazy or bad at his job. Tom is excellent at his job. His opportunities slipped away for very human reasons: the pressure of the day beat his good intentions, a cold call felt heavier than a light note would have, following up felt like chasing, and the best openings of all never even looked like leads. Stretch those habits across a year, and Tom is quietly leaving a second truck's worth of revenue parked at the curb.

If you read Tom's week and winced a little, you already know this pattern from the inside. The good news is that every one of these leaks closes the same two ways. First you make the lead visible. Then you put a system behind it. None of it depends on Tom becoming a different person.

What it's costing you

Here's a way to put a real number on it, and I'm going to use your numbers, not mine, because the point only lands when it's your own money.

Every batch of leads you generate contains two kinds of people. Some need help right now, this week. The rest will need you eventually, but not today. That split is the whole book in miniature: the urgent few, and the quietly-watching many.

What almost nobody tells you is that the ratio between those two is not fixed. It swings hard depending on where the lead came from. A dead furnace on a search ad is nearly all urgency. A guide someone downloaded to plan next year's budget is nearly all "not yet." Same business, completely different mix. We will come back to this in Chapter 13, because it is the single most useful thing to understand about your own leads.

For now, one number. Go pull your own history and answer a simple question: of the leads you actually followed up on, what fraction turned into paying work? That is your close rate. Most owner-led firms land somewhere between one in five and one in three.

Now run it. Say your average sale is $5,000, your close rate is one in four, and between the inbound you didn't reach and the proposals that went quiet, four real leads a month slip away before anyone works them.

4 leads a month × 1-in-4 close × $5,000 = $5,000 a month

That's five thousand dollars a month walking out the door, or $60,000 a year, from leads you already paid to generate and simply never worked. Put your own close rate and your own average sale in the line above. Whatever it comes to, it is money you spent to attract and then let evaporate.

And notice this is the conservative version, because it only counts the urgent buyers who were ready now. It assigns zero value to the larger group who were not ready yet, the ones who needed nurturing rather than a fast reply. Those are your 30%, and right now they are worth nothing to you, because nobody is minding them.

This isn't a lead-generation problem. It's a follow-through problem, and follow-through is a system, not a personality trait. The system has two jobs: catch every lead in one place, and tell you the instant an urgent one arrives, so the ready buyer gets a fast answer while the not-yet buyer gets a patient one. Miss either job and you are back to paying for leads you cannot use.

The first move

The fix isn't to try harder or set more reminders. Reminders depend on you, and you're the busiest person in the building. Two things have to happen instead: every lead has to land in one place, and then a system has to carry it forward without you. Built once, it looks like this:

1. One place every lead lands. Create a single point of collection. A lead in your inbox, a text, a sticky note from a phone call, or a comment in a networking conversation is not really a lead until it is captured in one system. Until then it is just one more thing you are trying to remember.
2. A warm-up for new inbound. The moment a lead arrives, they start hearing from you. A real first reply within minutes, then a short useful rhythm, so nobody waits on you to find a free hour.
3. A re-engagement for leads gone quiet. A brief, low-pressure sequence that brings a stalled conversation back with something useful, not a "just checking in."
4. A post-proposal nurture. For the prospect who got the price and went silent, a sequence that stays present and helpful while they decide, so the proposal doesn't die in a quiet inbox.
5. A capture habit for the leads you don't recognize. Some of your best openings never show up as leads. A connection mentions a problem you could solve. You introduce two people and never think to ask for an introduction back. Catch them the same way: jot the signal the moment you hear it, send a light note instead of a sales pitch, and make it a standing rule that every introduction you make is also a reason to ask for one in return.

The trick is that none of it should feel like chasing. Each message earns its place by being useful on its own, the way a light note to Nora would have been easy where a sales call felt heavy. Here's a rough cadence and the kind of message that fits each step:

When	The message
Within minutes	A real reply: "Got your note, here's what happens next."
Day 2	Something useful tied to their question: a guide, an example, a photo of similar work
Day 5	A short proof point: a quick result or story from a job like theirs
Day 12	A light check-in with a fresh angle, not "just following up"
Day 30	A genuinely useful resource, with no ask attached
Monthly after	A brief "here's what we're seeing" note that keeps you top of mind

Keep the voice that of a helpful peer, not a salesperson circling a deal. The lighter the touch, the more welcome it is, and the more likely they answer when their moment finally comes. Build these once, and every future lead lands in a system that follows up whether or not you remember to.

Your 30% may already be in your marketing system, people who just haven't heard from you in months.

Living It: How Leadstra Follows Up on Every Scorecard

Our most important lead source is the Marketing Scorecard, so it's where we're building this first.

Every completed Scorecard will enter a twelve-touch follow-up that runs over about three months. Each touch is useful on its own and tied to the Scenario the result named. No string of "just checking in" emails.

The moment someone replies, clicks to book, or fills out a form, the automation stops. The lead goes to a personal note from Dave instead. No one should get a canned email right after they raised their hand.

The full cadence and the stop-or-redirect logic live in a separate build sheet our team works from in GoHighLevel.

CHAPTER 7

The Quiet Brand

You do excellent work. Your clients are happy, loyal, and quick to say good things about you when someone asks. And yet growth feels harder than it should. Almost no one outside that circle knows you exist.

The signal sounds like this:

> *“Our clients love us. We just need more of them.”*

That’s the Quiet Brand. The work is good. Sometimes it is the best in the market. But the only people who know that are the ones who have already hired you. Outside that list, your name draws a blank. In owner-led service businesses doing $500K to $5M, this is one of the most frustrating patterns we see, because the work itself is not the problem. You are simply invisible to the people who need you most.

What’s really going on

Let me tell you about Rosa.

Rosa runs a custom millwork shop. If you have ever run your hand along a reception desk that felt more like art than furniture, there is a good chance it came from a shop like hers. Her work is beautiful. The architects and contractors who have hired her say so to anyone who asks. The trouble is that almost no one asks.

Rosa’s whole pipeline runs on a handful of people who already know her. A designer she did three projects with sends her the next one. A contractor passes her name along when it comes up. When that works, it works beautifully. Then last spring, two things happened in the same month. Her favorite architect retired. A contractor she had leaned on for years moved out of state. Just like that, a third of her referral network was gone. Rosa had no idea where the next job was coming from.

Here is the part that stung. When she went looking, she found a market full of people who needed exactly what she makes. None of them had ever heard her name. She had no presence anywhere a stranger might look. She had nothing with her name on it that was not a finished piece in someone else’s lobby. The only marketing channel her business ever had was Rosa herself, in a conversation, one person at a time. And Rosa was always in the shop.

It was not a quality problem. Rosa's work could stand next to anyone's. It was partly a visibility problem and partly a positioning one. She had never decided what she wanted to be known for, or who she wanted to be known by. So outside the few people who had seen her work, there was nothing for the market to hold onto. The brand lived only inside the heads of people who had already worked with her.

If a promising prospect has ever told you "I had no idea you existed," right before asking "so what is it you do?", then you know Rosa's situation from the inside.

What it's costing you

The cost of a Quiet Brand is not a single lost sale. It is the cost of living on a roller coaster.

When the only thing feeding your pipeline is referrals you do not control, your year runs in waves. You get a few great months when three projects land at once. Then comes a quiet stretch. The phone goes still, and you start to wonder. This is the feast-and-famine cycle, and it runs this way because you are not cultivating your 30%. You are harvesting the referrals that happen to find you, and nothing else.

That swing is not just stressful. It is expensive, and over time it threatens the very thing that made you good. You cannot hold a skilled team together on an unpredictable pipeline, and the craft that built your reputation lives in that team.

Start with your people. In the famine, you cannot keep everyone busy, and your best people, the ones with options, start taking calls from steadier shops. Replacing a skilled employee is not cheap. Gallup and SHRM both put the cost of replacing an employee somewhere between 50% and 200% of their annual salary, depending on the role, and often higher. That counts recruiting, the months of lost output while a replacement gets up to speed, and the experience that walks out the door. On a $60,000 role, that is $45,000 to $90,000. And it is the kind of person you cannot simply post a job listing and rehire.

Then look at your overhead. Rent, equipment, salaried staff: those bills arrive every month, full size, whether the work does or not. Picture three slow months a year, where revenue covers only part of them. That gap can eat $40,000 or $50,000 in margin you never get back.

And then there is the growth you never feel steady enough to chase. When you cannot predict next quarter, you do not hire ahead. You do not buy the bigger machine. You do not say yes to the larger contract. That is the most expensive cost of all, and the hardest to see, because it never shows up as a line on a statement.

It shows up as a business that stays the same size, year after year, while better-positioned competitors quietly pass you by.

Here is the harder question, the one most owners skip. Is the market quiet because it cannot find you, or because your value is based on your capabilities and not your client's needs? The people who already know your work understand its value, and they hire you easily. Most others can't easily tell what you do, or why it should matter to them. The Quiet Brand is a little of both. The business is often framed in terms that make sense to the founder, which leaves the people who could be your ideal clients unsure of what you do. The fix is as much about getting clear as it is about getting louder.

The first move

The fix is not random social media posting. It is strategic, and it happens in order. First you get clear on what you stand for and who it is for. Then you put that in front of those people where they already are. Then you prove it. It is three moves, built once and then maintained.

1. Get your positioning right. This is two questions at once: who are you best for, and what are you best at? Your ideal client and your real strengths have to meet. Then push past features and benefits to the buying attributes that move that client, and the impact they care about. What changes for them when they hire you? Say that in a way a stranger could repeat and a referral partner could pass along without you in the room. Skip this step, and everything after it just makes you loud about the wrong thing.

2. Show up where your buyers already are. Do not assume the answer is a website. The best place to be found is wherever your ideal clients already look for help, and that is different for every business. For one it is local search. For another it is an industry association, a partner network, or a single platform. Find out by researching where your clients really go, then test small before you spend big. If a website is part of it, know whether your buyers are local or national, because ranking in your town and ranking everywhere are two different games. And decide deliberately whether paid search or ads earn their keep, by running a small, measured test rather than guessing.

3. Make your expertise visible to people who have not hired you. Right now the only proof of how good you are is locked inside finished work that only your clients have seen. Put that expertise where a stranger can find it, in whatever form fits your business. For Rosa, that is a real portfolio and a clear point of view on her craft. For a consultant, it is the articles, talks, frameworks, or case

studies that show how they think. The goal is the same either way: let a good-fit prospect see that you are excellent before they ever reach out.

None of this asks you to become a marketer or to do worse work. It asks you to decide who you are for, and then to let the quality you already deliver be seen by the people who need it.

Your 30% can't activate if they don't know you exist.

Living It: How Leadstra Got Clear, Then Got Louder

We are a marketing firm. Here is the catch: marketing is rarely what a small business owner wants to think about. They want a website. They want social media, or SEO, or one of the hundred tactics the market keeps selling. And we start with strategy, which is not something most owners understand or care much about.

So we changed how we talk about what we do. Instead of leading with our process, we lead with why it matters to the owner. We built the six Scenarios and the four villains as pictures our prospects and clients can see themselves in. That one shift made what we do more relevant, easier to explain, and far more likely to stay top of mind.

Now, everywhere we show up, in social, email, webinars, and videos, the message is built on those pieces. The Scorecard is the easy front door. An owner who is ready can book a meeting on the spot. An owner who is not can take this book and a short email series that helps them understand their Scenario and what to do about it.

Along the way we mix in the human parts, a personal note, a case study, a client's own words, and we keep the invitation to talk as a quiet, standing offer, not a hard sell.

CHAPTER 8

The Heavy Lift Pipeline

You are closing business. On paper, that should feel like winning. Instead, each new sale seems to arrive with a client who takes far more work than you expected, and sometimes more than they are worth.

The signal sounds like this:

> *"I'm closing business, but every sale brings a new challenge."*

That's the Heavy Lift Pipeline. The deals are real and the calendar is full, but the clients you win are heavy. They cost more time, energy, and patience than they return. The effort per client runs so high that a full month can leave you exhausted and no further ahead. In owner-led service businesses doing $500K to $5M, this is the pattern that keeps a busy company from ever becoming a profitable one.

What's really going on

Let me tell you about Dana.

Dana runs a small commercial contracting firm, tenant build-outs and light commercial jobs. The work is strong and the referrals keep coming, so her crews are always booked. She is also always tired, always a little behind, and never quite sure where the money went. Look at who is on her job list, and three faces keep showing up.

The first is the low-baller. They talk to Dana for weeks before they sign, negotiating every line of the bid. Once the work starts, they question every invoice and fight every change order. When it ends, they often pay late or ask the accounting department to itemize each deliverable. And while Dana offered them an incredible deal to gain the business, they end up repaying her by requiring the most hand-holding of anyone she serves.

The second is the scope creeper. They agreed to a clear scope of work, and then the "just one more thing" requests began. One week it is, "while your crew is here, can you swap out those fixtures?" The next it is, "throw in the back-office repaint too, for the long-term value of our relationship." Each ask is small, but when totaled at the end of the month, they represent lost hours that can't serve other clients or have to be compensated with overtime pay. Both eventually bust the budget.

The third is the delinquent payer. They always pay. They just never pay on time. Thirty days becomes sixty. Dana floats their balance while payroll and her supplier bills come due, and she loses hours she does not have chasing money she already earned.

None of these clients are villains. But every one of them is heavy, and Dana keeps signing them, because a full schedule feels safer than an empty one. Her problem is not that she works hard. It is that she is working hard on the wrong animals.

Hunting the wrong animal

There is an old idea in sales, one that was taught to me years ago by a very good trainer, that sorts your prospects the way a hunter sorts game.

Squirrels are everywhere, and they are easy to catch. The trouble is that a squirrel barely feeds you. By the time you have skinned and cleaned it, you have spent more energy than the meal returns. Rabbits are a step up. One will feed you for a day, but it still takes real effort for a small return. Deer are a solid catch. A deer feeds you well, though it takes skill and time to hunt and to process. Moose are the prize. A moose takes about the same skill as a deer to bring down, but it feeds you for a long, long time. And elephants are the giants. One can feed a village, but you may have to rebuild your whole camp, your tools, and your way of working just to handle it.

Dana's schedule is full of squirrels and rabbits. Her low-ballers, her scope creepers, and her slow payers are small, plentiful, and easy to catch. And they are eating her alive, because a squirrel takes nearly as much time to clean as it does to eat, so while it is plentiful, the results do not justify the effort required.

There is a quieter cost buried in all that scrambling. When Dana is always behind, her work rarely gets the room it needs to be great. The extra care, the tight punch list, the finish that turns a good job into one worth talking about all get squeezed out by the rush. So, her clients appreciate her work ethic but rarely see the polished output that makes them excited to refer her. It is not that Dana lacks the talent. Her circumstances just keep it from showing.

Meanwhile the moose, the property managers and repeat commercial clients who would pay well, respect the work, and stay for years, are out in the woods. Dana never has a free afternoon to go hunt them, and rarely gets to produce the standout work that would draw them to her on its own.

What it's costing you

The cost of a Heavy Lift Pipeline is the gap between effort and payoff.

Line a squirrel up next to a moose. A $2,000 job and a $40,000 job both need a bid, a scheduled start, a punch list, and a fair amount of hand-holding. Say the squirrel takes twenty hours and the moose takes sixty. The squirrel pays you $100 an hour. The moose pays you more than $650. To equal one moose, you would need to catch and clean twenty squirrels, and twenty squirrels means twenty negotiations, twenty rounds of scope creep, and twenty invoices to chase.

Now stack the direct costs on top. The low-baller's deep discount comes straight out of your margin. The scope creeper's "small" extras are real hours delivered for free. The slow payer forces you to finance your own business while you wait. Each one is survivable alone. Together, across a full schedule, they are why a busy contractor can work all year and have little to show for it.

And then there is the moose you never caught, because you were too busy dressing squirrels to walk into the woods. That is the most expensive cost of all.

The first move

The fix is not to work harder. It is to hunt a different animal, on purpose, with a system that brings the right one to you.

1. Name your moose. Get specific about your best kind of client. Who pays well, values the work, respects your time, and stays for years? Write it down in plain terms. You cannot screen for a client you have never defined, and you cannot aim at a target you cannot see.
2. Set your positioning and price to draw moose and turn away squirrels. Price so the low-baller self-selects out before the first call. Position around the outcomes a moose cares about, not the cheapest line item. Then qualify on purpose. Ask the questions that surface a haggler, a scope creeper, or a slow payer before you sign them, not after.
3. Keep the herd in sight. Your best future clients are your 30%, right for you but not ready to move today. Build a system that stays in front of them, useful and unhurried, so there is always a moose on the horizon. That is what lets you say no to the next squirrel, because you are no longer taking bad clients out of fear of an empty calendar.

Do this, and the weight lifts. Not because the work gets easier, but because you are finally doing the right work, for the right people, at a price that pays.

Your best clients are already out there in your 30%. Build the system that brings them to you, and you can stop hunting squirrels to survive.

Living It: How Leadstra Learned to Hunt Moose

We learned this one the hard way, by taking on a few too many squirrels of our own.

Early on, we said yes to almost anyone with a budget. Some haggled every invoice. Some kept asking for one more thing. Some paid late. A full calendar felt like success, right up until we did the math on what those clients returned.

So we got specific about our moose. Our best client is an owner-led service business that values a marketing system enough to invest in it and to run it with us. Now the Scorecard and a short fit conversation do the sorting up front. When the animal at the door is a squirrel, we are not afraid to say, "we are probably not the right fit."

And we keep the herd in sight. The right-fit owners who are not ready yet stay in our world through the Scenarios, this book, and a steady, useful rhythm. We never have to take a bad client just to fill the month.

We have taken down a few elephants too, the jobs so big we had to bring on subcontractors to handle them. That worked, right up until it did not. When a sub fell short, the outcome was still ours to answer for. Timelines slipped, quality suffered, and our team had to learn new skills under pressure, skills we did not need and could not reuse. So we changed how we handle elephants. We keep a small bench of subcontractors who know us, train with us, and work with our team regularly. And when a client needs something outside our core, we help them find the *best-fit partner for it, rather than force a quick fix through our own shop.*

CHAPTER 9

The Founder Bottleneck

You may have planned to grow the business. You may not have. Either way, most founder-led companies reach a point where growth is no longer a choice. The math shifts. What carried you last year will not carry you next year, and standing still stops being an option. Growth is not always the dream. Often it is simply survival.

However you arrive there, the same trap waits. As you grow, the work that made you successful, the relationships, the standards, the personal touch that turned clients into fans, tends to get pulled to the edges. There is more of everything now, except time.

The signal sounds like this:

> *"I can't take two weeks off without revenue going to zero."*

That's the Founder Bottleneck. The business is trying to grow past what one person can personally manage, and you are still the one everything runs through. In owner-led service businesses doing $500K to $5M, this is the wall between the company you have and the company you are trying to build. And here is the cruel part. As you grow, it gets harder, not easier, because now you are not only the salesperson. You are also the operations manager, the head of HR, the finance department, and the marketer. Every one of those roles wants the hours you used to spend building relationships.

What's really going on

Let me tell you about Marcus.

Marcus runs a design-build remodeling firm. He grew it from nothing on two things: his standards, and his relationships. Clients trusted him because he treated their home like his own, and he stayed close to every one of them. That was the whole company for years, and it worked.

Now the company is bigger. There are crews, a project manager, a bookkeeper, and a small office. Marcus is busier than he has ever been, but not with the things that built the place. On Monday it is a payroll problem. Tuesday, a key employee gives notice, and he is suddenly running a hiring search. Wednesday brings a cash-flow crunch and a call with the bank. Thursday, a marketing decision lands that he has no time to think through. By Friday, the relationships that grew this company have slid to the bottom of the list again. The past clients, the warm referrals, the prospects who are almost ready all go untouched. Not because Marcus stopped caring, but because there is one of him and a dozen fires.

Something quieter is happening underneath. The thing that made the company special, the way Marcus does the work and treats a client, used to live in Marcus and pass to everyone by watching him. Now there are people on the team who never learned it from him directly. The standard is starting to thin. The company is growing, and in the growing, it is slowly becoming less like itself.

That is the Founder Bottleneck at scale. It is not only that Marcus cannot clone himself for sales. It is that the whole business still leans on him for everything. And the two things that made it great, the relationships and the character that set it apart, are exactly what gets squeezed out.

What it's costing you

The cost of a Founder Bottleneck shows up in three ways, and each one is more serious than the last.

The first is that your systems were built for the business you have, not the one you are becoming. Every owner has systems. The real question is whether they grow with you. Say you run your day out of your email inbox. A promising contact writes to you in a busy week. Does that person make it into a CRM, or stay buried in a thread you meant to get back to? Does the opportunity move forward on a schedule, or does it wait on you remembering? At your size today, running on your inbox and your memory works. Add more leads, more staff, and more volume, and the seams start to show. This is not fragility. It is being right-sized for a smaller company than the one you are trying to build, and the systems that got you here were never designed to get you there.

The second is you. Scaling a business on willpower alone is how good owners burn out. You can carry every role for a while on sheer effort, but not forever. The founders who try tend to hit a wall, and when they do, the business hits it with them.

The third cost is less tangible. It sneaks up on many business owners as they try to grow. It has to do with the growing identity of the business: the company's DNA.

Every company has a core identity that defines it. Much like human DNA defines your essence, your company's DNA defines its place in the market. It is a lot of things at once: the problems you solve, the knowledge you share, the buying attributes you demonstrate, the brand promise you offer, and the experience you create. In the beginning, you, the founder, are the source of all of it. As the company scales, that identity has to be named and engrained into every part of the business. If not, the business becomes something different, something that may not be as successful.

Here is why that matters at the worst moment. The day you step back from selling, you may find the business can no longer make its own case. Many bought because of you. Most owners define themselves by what they deliver. But the real reason a client chooses you lives deeper, in those buying attributes and that brand promise, and most owners have never put them into words. As an owner, your company DNA and your brand promise show up with you, in person. The moment a system or a new sales person has to represent the company instead of you, the presentation shifts. If it shifts the wrong way, good deals stall or go away.

Growth that loses your DNA is not really growth. It is decline with more overhead. So the goal is not simply to get bigger. It is to get bigger while staying yourself, clear enough on what that self is that a system can carry it for you.

The first move

Scaling requires systems. But the systems have to carry two things at once: the work, and the DNA. Get that right, and you grow without losing what made you. It happens in three moves.

1. Name your DNA, and prove it. Before you can protect what makes you special, you have to know what it is, and most owners do not. You can describe what you deliver. It is far harder to name why a client truly chooses you. So do the work. Inventory your best clients' buying attributes, the reasons that really drive the decision, and turn them into a brand promise you can say out loud. Get clear on what your business is and why it matters, not only to you, but to the customers who choose you and the employees who build it with you. This is not a tagline. It is the core value that has always sat under your success. Write it plainly enough that a new hire can understand it and a client can feel it.
2. Build systems that scale the relationship, not just the task. This is the hard and important part. A marketing system can keep you in front of your whole 30% in your voice and to your standard, month after month, even when you cannot personally touch each one. To deliver your value in your voice, though, you have to know both: the value itself, and the voice that carries it. If you have not defined those recently, that is the work to do before anything else

gets built. The prospect still feels the care that grew your business. You are simply no longer the only one who can deliver it. Done right, the system does not replace the relationship. It carries it to more people than you ever could alone.

3. Free yourself to work on the business, not just in it. Once the systems carry the routine and the reach, your hours return to the work only you can do: the strategic relationships, the standards, the culture, and the closes that need you. That is the founder's real job as a company grows. It is not to do everything, but to protect the DNA and steer.

Do this, and growth stops costing you the company you love. The system carries your reach and your standard, and you carry the vision.

Come back to Marcus. If he builds this, the relationships that grew his firm keep running whether or not he is in the room. The standards that drove him to build the business stay in place and new customers appreciate them as much as the originals did when Marcus was the only ambassador. That is what finally lets him step back. And a business that can run without its founder is the only kind he can ever truly step away from, or one day sell. The same work that harvests his 30% is what turns the company into something that no longer depends on him.

Your 30% needs to be reachable when you're not in the room. Build the system that makes that true.

Living It: How Leadstra Scales Without Losing Its DNA

We had to look hard at our own answer to this.

Our service is marketing strategy and automation. But that is not our DNA. Our core value is an owner-centric mindset. It is not the mindset that says we are the smartest or the coolest people in the room. It is the one that says we have been there, and we will be there with you. For the right client, that resonates in a way that goes far beyond any deliverable.

So as we grow, we are building systems and structures that capture and reinforce that value instead of diluting it. That means a systematized Blueprint and Strategy Scan, free tools *like the Scorecard, and services like LeadstraOS. Most of all, we hold a deliberate focus on real, authentic relationships with our clients and our partners.*

When you work with Leadstra, you work with a team that treats you like more than a client. That is written into our brand guide, and we reinforce it at every level as we grow. The whole point of scaling is to bring what made us who we are to more people, not fewer.

CHAPTER 10

The Marketing Money Pit

At some point, most owners decide to stop doing the marketing themselves.

It is a reasonable decision. You are not a marketer. You have a business to run, and the do-it-yourself approach has carried you about as far as it can. So you go looking for help, and you find someone who sounds like they know exactly what to do. They are confident. They have a deck. They promise to take the whole thing off your plate.

That is usually where the money starts to disappear.

The signal sounds like this:

> *"I've spent real money on marketing. I can't tell you what it bought me."*

That's the Marketing Money Pit. The spend is real. The retainers, the ad budgets, the software, the freelancers. The reports are real too, and they are full of impressions and clicks and reach and rankings. What is missing is the one line that matters: did any of this work create a customer? The math is there, but ads and leads do not automatically equate to profitable revenue. And that is the ultimate metric. Every renewal becomes a guess, and every new budget request feels like throwing good money into a hole you cannot see the bottom of.

What's really going on

Let me tell you about Ray.

Ray runs a managed IT services firm. Twenty-two employees, contracts with small and mid-sized businesses across the region. Ray is a measurer by nature. His whole company runs on numbers. Ticket resolution times, uptime against the service agreement, margin per client. Ask him which of his accounts is profitable and he will tell you to the dollar, from memory.

A year ago, Ray hired an agency. Four thousand dollars a month. Search optimization, some paid ads, a blog, social posts. Every month a report arrives in his inbox. Impressions are up. Clicks are up. Keyword rankings are improving. Engagement is strong. Every month Ray skims it, feels vaguely reassured, and approves the invoice.

Last month his bookkeeper asked him a simple question. What are we getting from the marketing?

Ray opened the folder of reports and could not answer her.

So he did what someone who measures things does. He pulled the twelve clients he had signed in the previous year and traced each one back to where it came from. Four were referrals from existing clients. Three came through a former colleague who now works at a firm that sends him work. Two came from the chamber. Two were existing clients expanding their contracts. One came from a cold call his sales guy made on a Tuesday.

Not one came from the agency. Not one he could name.

He called them. They told him that brand awareness takes time, and they showed him a chart of his search rankings climbing.

Look at that chart for a second, because it is the whole chapter in one picture.

The road from a marketing dollar to a new customer has four steps. A ranking produces traffic. Traffic produces a lead. A lead produces a customer. The agency was reporting on step one, which is three steps away from Ray's money, and everyone in the room had agreed to treat it as if it were the finish line.

And in 2026, even that first step has come loose. Search engines now answer a great many questions right on the results page, so a business can climb to the top of the rankings and receive fewer visitors than it did two years ago. Ray's chart was going up. His traffic was not. Nobody mentioned that, because nobody was measuring it.

This is the shape of the whole problem. The number they showed him was real. It was also, by then, connected to nothing.

Here is the part that matters most, and it is the part almost nobody talks about. Ray did not cancel. He couldn't get himself to walk away. Because what if it was working? What if, in some way he could not see, the work was driving the deals and he killed it? He had no way to be sure, but the reports and the weekly check-ins all showed progress. There had to be some benefit, and he could not risk a drop in business. So he renewed for another six months. The invoices and the work continued.

Now look closely at what the pit actually is, because it is not what most people assume.

It is not an absence of information. Ray had a folder full of information. Reports, dashboards, weekly calls, charts moving in the right direction. What Ray did not have was clarity. He could not draw a straight line from a dollar he spent to a customer he gained, and no amount of activity reporting was ever going to draw it for him.

The pit is not the money. It is the missing line between the money and the revenue.

And underneath that, two things were happening.

The first is that nobody ever built the bridge. Ray's agency reported on what it could see, which was activity. It could not see a closed deal, because closed deals live inside Ray's business, not theirs. Unless somebody deliberately connects the two, the reporting stops at the click and everyone quietly agrees to call that a result. That is not always malice. Most of the time it is just nobody's job.

The second is that Ray bought tactics before anyone made a diagnosis. He never decided who he was trying to reach, or what would actually move them. He bought a bundle of activity and hoped it would add up to a strategy. It never does. Tactics chasing tactics, with no system underneath, is the whole recipe for the pit.

What it's costing you

The cost shows up in three ways, and the third one is the one that should make you put the book down for a second.

The first is the obvious one. Four thousand dollars a month is forty-eight thousand dollars a year. Add the software Ray bought along the way and stopped using, a CRM nobody logs into, an email platform, a scheduler, a social tool, and he is closer to sixty thousand. In a business his size, that is not a line item. That is a hire he did not make.

The second is the trap, and it is crueler than the spend. Ray cannot cancel. Unmeasured spend is stickier than bad spend. Spend you can measure, you can stop. Spend you cannot measure, you keep feeding, because cancelling it feels like a bigger risk than continuing it. So the pit does not get shallower over time. It gets deeper by default, one renewal at a time.

The third is the opportunity cost, and this is the one that stings. While sixty thousand dollars went out the door to strangers who never produced a customer, all but one of the clients Ray actually signed came from someone who already knew him. Referrals. A former colleague. The chamber. His own past clients. In other words, his 30%. The one exception, a single cold call, cost him nothing but a Tuesday afternoon.

That group produced eleven of his twelve new clients with no budget, no system, and nobody minding them. They did it by accident.

Sit with that. The part of his market that got zero dollars and zero attention outperformed the part that got sixty thousand dollars.

Now imagine what that group would produce if somebody actually worked it.

The first move

You cannot manage what you cannot see. So the first move is not to cut. It is to build the line nobody has built for you, the one that runs from a dollar spent to a customer gained. Three steps, in order.

1. Instrument the spend. Connect every dollar to a source, and every source to closed revenue. Not impressions. Not clicks. Closed revenue. Every lead that enters your business gets tagged with where it came from, and that tag follows the person all the way through to the signed contract. Pay attention to the handoff, because that is where most measurement quietly dies. When a lead lands in a salesperson's inbox, does it stop being anybody's number? Unacceptable. This is not complicated technology and it is not expensive. It is a discipline. Inside ninety days you will be able to say, with a straight face, which sources produce customers and which sources produce reports.
2. Build a dashboard you can read in five minutes. One page. Leads by source. Cost per lead. Cost per closed customer. Revenue by source. That is the whole thing. If it takes longer than five minutes to understand, or if it needs somebody to walk you through it, then it is not a dashboard. It is a report designed to be admired. You should be able to open it with your coffee in the morning and know exactly where your money is working and where it is not.
3. Audit every retainer, line by line. For each vendor and each tool, answer three questions. What did we pay? What did they deliver? What customer can we trace back to them? Anything that cannot answer the third question goes on a clock, with a number attached and a date. Not cancelled in anger. Named, measured, and given a deadline. You will be surprised how quickly a vendor finds the ability to report on revenue once you make it the only thing you will pay for.

And now the caveat, because you deserve reality rather than a rosy pitch.

Some marketing genuinely takes time. Search optimization takes three to six months before you see meaningful movement, six to twelve on competitive terms, and longer still if your website is new. Brand building is slower than all of it. The point of instrumentation is not that every dollar has to pay for itself inside thirty days. Anyone who promises you that is selling something dangerous.

The point is that you have to be able to see it, and your vendors should be able to reasonably explain it to you. Anyone unwilling to connect their work to your revenue is telling you something.

One more warning before you start cutting. When a source shows no revenue, find out whether the channel failed or the follow-up failed. A referral arrives warm and half sold. A lead from paid search arrives curious. They are different people at different moments, and a team that works them the same way will get the same disappointing number from both. A lead nobody worked is not a lead that failed. Fix the follow-up before you kill the source.

There is nothing wrong with patient money. There is everything wrong with unmeasured money.

Your 30% is somewhere inside the spend you cannot account for. Instrumentation tells you which dollar found them.

Living It: The Day a Client Did the Math in Front of Me

I have been on the other side of this conversation. Everything in this chapter, I learned by getting it wrong first.

Years ago I worked in the agency world. We worked hard, and the work was good. Then one day a client said something to me that I have never forgotten.

“We’ve spent thirty thousand dollars with you in the last six months. By my records, we’ve generated twenty-nine thousand in revenue.”

He was not angry. He had simply done the math, and the math was awful.

So we dug in, and what we found was worse than a bad campaign. Our team had generated leads. Plenty of them. What nobody could tell me was whether they were the right leads, because the moment a lead landed in a salesperson's inbox, the measurement stopped. We could count everything we delivered. We could not see a single thing that happened to it afterward.

Then we found the second problem, and it was the deeper one. Our sales team was working a paid lead exactly like a referral, and it was not landing. When one of those leads did not close quickly, nobody followed up, and nobody measured whether the person was still paying attention. They went cold, and no one noticed.

The investment was real. The return technically existed. It came nowhere close to justifying the effort.

Here is what fixed it. We measured every lead end to end, from the first touch to the invoice. We trained the sales team to work a paid lead differently than a referral, because they are different people at different moments. And for everyone who was interested but not ready to buy yet, we built a way to stay in front of them until they were.

That last piece did not have a name at the time. It does now. It is The 30% Solution, and I learned it standing in a pit I had helped dig.

PART THREE

The System

The method, in build order. Nothing here is held back.

CHAPTER 11

The Actionable Network

There is a fair objection buried in everything you have read so far, and it is time to say it out loud.

The 30% Solution assumes you have a 30%.

Every scenario in this book activates a group of people who already know you. Past clients. Warm leads. Contacts who have crossed your path. The whole engine runs on a pool of relationships that already exists. So if that pool is small, and for a lot of owners it is, the honest reaction to “go work your 30%” is “what 30%? I barely have a list.”

If that is you, read this chapter first. The fix is not to spend more on ads or to start cold-calling strangers. The fix is to build the asset the rest of the book depends on. We call it your Actionable Network, and most owners have more of it than they think, and less of it than they need.

What an Actionable Network actually is

Your Actionable Network is not your follower count, your email list, or the stack of business cards in a drawer. It is the specific set of people who pass three tests at once.

They are reachable. You could call or message them today and they would know your name and answer.

They are relevant. They, or the people they know, could actually buy from you or refer someone who will.

They are reciprocating. There is enough goodwill between you that they would want to help, and you would want to help them back.

Reachable, relevant, reciprocating. A contact who fails any one of those is something else. A stranger who downloaded a guide is not yet in your Actionable Network. A beloved cousin who sells nothing near your world is a lovely relationship and not a node in this network. The Actionable Network is the overlap: the people who would pick up when you call and could actually move your business if they did.

Hold onto that phrase, people who pick up when you call. It is the whole definition, and it draws a hard line you must not cross. These are named human beings, not entries in a database. Which means the relationship-building in this chapter is done by hand. You do not automate the relationship. You do not outsource it. The moment you try, you are back to building a nameless list, and a nameless list is not an Actionable Network no matter how long it grows.

Before you touch a single contact

Two things come first, and skipping them is why most "I'm going to network more" resolutions die by February.

Treat it like real business development. Growing and working an Actionable Network is a business development strategy, no different from running ads or building a sales team. If you pay for ads, you set a budget and measure the impact against the business it brings back. If you have salespeople, you measure them by the contracts they land. Give this the same seriousness, and set it up the same way, before you send a single message. Four things make it real.

1. Set a goal you can measure. Decide up front what success looks like in tangible terms: sales conversations started, deals closed, introductions made. You are about to pour real time into this, and without a number you cannot tell whether it is working, or when your messaging and tactics need to change.
2. Define your target tightly enough to disqualify. Get so specific about who you are after that you, and everyone helping you, can rule someone out. That is the only way to teach other people to refer you well. A network that sends you the wrong leads costs you time you will struggle to get back, so the sharper your target, the better the referrals.
3. Decide how a lead becomes a tracked prospect. Work out the path a referred person travels before they reach you. A simple online lead magnet does this well. Instead of qualifying every referral by hand, you have your partners point people to it, and you capture and track them from there. One caution: a prospect who is ready to buy, or carrying an urgent question, can be put off if no human connects quickly. Decide in advance how you will catch the hot ones fast, so the funnel never costs you the eager buyer.
4. Commit, or leave it off the list. This is the one that matters most. Building an Actionable Network takes real, recurring hours, so decide honestly what you are willing to give up to make room. A network strategy you will not fund with your time is like an advertising campaign you launch and never pay for.

> Nothing happens, and you walk away deciding the strategy does not work when the truth is you never ran it. If you can commit, run it like any other sales or marketing effort: track your time and your costs, keep what works, change what does not, and keep sharpening your words for both the referral partner and the prospect they send you. If you cannot commit, leave it off your list until you can.

Build something worth pointing to. The key to any referral is relevance. The trouble is that what you do feels perfectly relevant to you, and that clarity falls off a cliff the moment someone else tries to explain it. If your own contacts cannot describe what you do in a way that lands, they cannot refer you. So do not describe what you do. Describe how it helps the person on the other end.

Here is what I mean. “Leadstra provides marketing strategy and automation to small B2B businesses.” That is accurate, and it is what we do. But read it again as if you had to repeat it to a friend. Does it tell you who to send us, or what to say? Not really.

Now try this. “Leadstra helps small business owners find the hidden prospects sitting in their own contact list and turn them into their next best customer.” Same company, but now you can picture the person it is for, and you have words you could actually pass along. On top of that, our Six Scenarios and Four Villains give a referral partner something concrete to recognize, so they know first what to listen for, and second what to say to make the connection.

You need your own version of that. It can be a one-page sheet that lays out who you help and how, a talk you give, or a short video you have made. The format does not matter. What matters is that it hands the people in your network two things: what to listen for, and how to describe you to a friend. Get that right, and they can refer you without ever needing you in the room.

Step one: find where your network lives

Your network is almost never in one place. It is scattered across your email, your phone, LinkedIn, an old CRM, your networking group’s roster sheet, QuickBooks, a notebook, the group text from that conference. The first job is simple and slightly tedious. Pull it all into one list.

Export what you can. Most CRMs, and even LinkedIn, will hand you a CSV of your contacts. Comb your inbox for the last six months and pull the people you have actually corresponded with. A good AI assistant can help you surface personal connections and past clients from your sent mail if you ask it the right way. Add the ones that live only in your head. The goal is one list, in one place, with every name you can find.

Do not filter yet. Right now you are only counting. Most owners are surprised here. The list is often two or three times longer than the network most owners carry in their memory. That gap is the first piece of good news.

Step two: the filter that changes everything

Now you sort, and you sort on two questions at once.

The first is warmth. If you reached out to this person to ask a personal favor, not to help them with a project, would they take your call? The answer is yes, maybe, or no.

The second is relevance. Do they, or the people they know, connect to the kind of client you are after? High, or low.

Put those two together and you get four groups.

	High relevance	Low relevance
Warm (would take your call)	Gold. Start here. Their world touches your buyers and they would take your call.	Friends. Keep them close. They matter to your life, but they are not the engine for this.
Cool (maybe or no)	Worth an invitation. They can reach your buyers even if you are not close yet, and the right ask can warm the relationship.	Not for now. Move on without guilt.

Warmth tells you how to approach someone. Relevance tells you whether to bother. Most networking advice measures only the first, and wastes enormous energy on warm people who cannot actually help. The second axis is what makes this strategic instead of merely social.

Step three: activate, one conversation at a time

Now you reach out, and the whole point of every message is the same. To end in a conversation. Not a sale. A conversation.

For your warm and relevant group, keep it simple and human. Ask to meet, by video or in person depending on where they are. If a week goes by with no answer, pick up the phone. This group already likes you, so you are not selling, you are reconnecting with a purpose.

For your cool but relevant group, say plainly why you are reaching out and how they fit. Something like: “I am putting together a small group of people I know who serve [your ICP], so we can advocate for one another and grow our businesses on purpose. I thought of you. Would you be open to hearing more?” If you hear nothing in a week, follow up once. A week after that, one last note: “I won’t keep knocking, but I would genuinely like you in this group if the timing is right.” Then stop. That is the same invitation you make out loud to the warm group, only in writing.

For the rare cool contact you still want, be honest about the reach: “This isn’t the usual note from me, but I am starting something and wanted to gauge your interest.” Then make the ask cleanly. Some will surprise you. A structured, mutual opportunity can re-open a door that a personal favor never could.

Notice what none of these is. None of them is an automated sequence that runs whether you show up or not. You are drafting real messages to real people and following each one to a live conversation. The drafting can be assisted. The relationship cannot be delegated.

The Circle: turning contacts into a network that works for you

The people who say yes become something more useful than a longer contact list. They become a small, reciprocal circle that advocates for each other. You run it with two light meetings. Keep them regular enough to stay real, monthly or quarterly, and never so heavy that people dread them.

The first meeting is by video, and its job is to align. You open by reintroducing the idea: a group of people who serve a shared kind of client, helping each other grow. Then everyone introduces themselves, what they do, how they connect to the shared ICP, and what their current ask is. Once everyone has spoken, you teach for a few minutes. Here is how what I do actually works, and here is the easiest way to refer me, whether that is handing someone a book, sending them a quiz, or making a simple introduction. Then you ask for their help improving it. You know your offer. They know what it is like to try to explain someone else’s offer to a friend. Between you, you can make referring each other easy. Record it with an AI notetaker, with everyone’s agreement, and send the notes the next day with each person’s ask highlighted and an encouragement to connect one to one. Set the next meeting before you close.

The second meeting is voluntary, and it earns its value with a little homework. To attend, each person shares their LinkedIn profile and agrees to come prepared.

Beforehand, everyone gets the roster and does three things. First, connect with every other member, sending and accepting requests. Second, look through each other's connections and note three to five people from each member they would love an introduction to. Third, write those introductions for them. Draft three versions the other person can simply forward: a cold one, for someone they do not really know; a warm one, for someone they know well and can vouch for as a fellow professional; and a warm recommendation, for the rare case where they know you would solve a specific problem that person has. That third kind is uncommon, and worth ten of the others.

Do the math on what just happened. Every member walks in with a list of people they want to meet and the exact words to make each introduction effortless for the person making it. You have turned a room of goodwill into a working referral engine, and nobody had to make a cold approach to do it.

Stay in your pond

One warning belongs in every meeting. A network compounds fastest when it is concentrated. If your circle is a random assortment of nice people in unrelated fields, the introductions scatter and nothing builds. If it clusters around one kind of client, one industry, one community, then each new relationship touches the last, referrals overlap, and density rises. Pick your pond and go deep. It is better to be the known name in one small world than a stranger in ten.

Then follow up, and teach them to do it too

Three habits keep this alive.

Follow up with everyone, and systematize it so it never depends on your memory. Thank people for connections. Thank them for showing up. Ask, sincerely, how you can help them grow. The circle runs on reciprocity, and reciprocity runs on follow-through.

Keep looking for new people to bring in. A network is never finished. Stay on the lookout for good additions, and hold every one of them to the same filter, warm enough to answer and relevant enough to help. A circle that stops growing slowly goes stale as members move on, retire, or drift. One that keeps adding good referral partners gets more valuable for everyone in it, because every strong new member widens the reach of the whole group, not just yours.

And give the whole idea away. Teach your members to build a circle of their own. It sounds like you would be creating competition for attention, but the opposite is true. The larger and more active each person's network becomes, the more valuable their introductions are to you. You want the people in your corner to have deep, active networks, so help them build theirs.

How you know it is working

Because this is a strategy, you measure it. Track the size of your Actionable Network, the warm-and-relevant count, and watch it grow. Count the conversations you actually have, not the emails you send. Count the introductions made and received. Over a few quarters, those numbers tell you plainly whether the engine is turning. And every new warm, relevant relationship is fresh fuel for the 30% system in the rest of this book. In the language of the journey, you are widening the very top, giving more of the right people a way to enter your world in the first place.

An Actionable Network is not a list you buy or a number you inflate. It is a small, tended, human thing you build by hand, one real conversation at a time. Build it, and the 30% stops being a nice idea for other people's businesses and becomes the description of yours.

Living It: How Leadstra Is Building Its Own Actionable Network

We are not writing this from the far side of the problem. Leadstra sits squarely in it. Our own Actionable Network is smaller than our ambition, so we are running this exact process on ourselves. We are pulling every contact we have into one place, sorting them on the same warm-by-relevant grid, and activating the gold quadrant with real, personal outreach that ends in a conversation. Our Partner Program is the vehicle for the Circle, a reciprocal group of advisors who serve the same owners we do, built to advocate for one another. The discipline we hold ourselves to is the one we ask of you: no automation stands in for the relationship, and every sequence ends with a human conversation. Our internal build sheet tracks who is in which quadrant, what has been sent, and what is still open.

Before you turn the page

1. Before anything else, do the cost math. What is your current cost to acquire one client through your coldest, most expensive channel? Write it down. That number is your permission to give this the time it needs.
2. Pull your network into one list, from every place it hides. Do not filter. Just count. Notice how much bigger it is than you thought.
3. Sort the list on the two questions: would they take your call, and do they touch your ICP. Find your warm-and-relevant gold.
4. Name the one clear thing you will point people to. If you do not have it yet, that is your first build, and it can be a single clear page.
5. Reach out to five people from your gold quadrant this week. Not to sell. To start a conversation.

CHAPTER 12

Strategy First

You have now seen six ways a pipeline breaks. If you saw yourself in one of them, and most owners see themselves in two or three, the natural next question is a practical one. What do I build?

That question has a real answer, and the rest of this book is that answer. But we are going to start somewhere you probably do not want to start.

This is the chapter you will want to skip.

I know that because almost everybody does. When an owner finally decides to fix their marketing, the impulse is to reach for something you can see. A new website. A newsletter. A cool AI tool with a dashboard. A lead generation offer that seems too good to be true. Something that feels like motion, because motion feels like progress and you have been stuck for a while.

But every one of those things is an answer to a question you have yet to figure out. Skip this chapter and you risk building a beautiful system that talks to the wrong people about the wrong thing on a schedule they never asked for. I have watched it happen. I have done it myself.

Strategy is the decision that comes before the tactic. There are four of them, and until they are settled, everything downstream is a guess.

Let me tell you about Elena

Elena runs a commercial landscaping company. Fourteen crews, mostly office parks and apartment complexes across two counties. She built the business on craft. She knows plants. She can look at a property and tell you what will thrive in that soil and what will be dead by August. Her designs win awards.

Every piece of marketing she had ever produced sold that craft. Beautiful photographs. Before-and-after galleries. A whole page about her horticultural training.

None of it worked the way she thought it should.

So before she spent another dollar, she did something uncomfortable. She called her ten best clients, the ones who were profitable and pleasant and had stayed for years, and she asked them why they had chosen her.

Not one of them mentioned the plants.

Not one. Ten conversations, and the word “design” never came up. What they said instead, in ten slightly different ways, was this: your crews show up on the same day every week, and I never have to call you.

Elena sold landscaping. Her clients were buying one less thing to worry about.

Think about who her clients actually were. Property managers. People running twelve buildings with a phone that never stops. To them, the landscaping was not an aesthetic project. It was a line item that had, historically, generated phone calls. Complaints from tenants. Crews that skipped a week. Invoices that did not match the contract. Elena’s real product was the absence of all that, and she did not even realize it. No one had ever said it out loud, not once, anywhere.

She had been marketing her craft to people who were buying her reliability.

That is what a missing strategy actually looks like. Not a bad website. A perfectly good website, aimed at the wrong thing.

The four decisions

Strategy is not a document. It is four decisions, and you can make all four in about three weeks if you are willing to be honest.

1. Who is your ideal client, stated specifically enough to disqualify someone.

Most owners, asked to describe their ideal client, produce something like “small to mid-sized businesses that value quality.” That is not an ideal client. That is a description of everyone with a checkbook, and it will not help you make a single decision.

Here is the test. If your definition does not exclude anybody, it is not a definition. It is a wish.

Do this instead. Pull your last twenty clients. Put them in a spreadsheet and score each one on two things: how profitable they were, and how much you enjoyed the work. Not how big. Profitable and pleasant. Now look at the top five and find what they have in common. Industry, size, structure, the role of the person who hired you, what was happening in their business when they called. The pattern is almost always there, and often it is not the one you would have guessed.

Elena’s ideal client was not “commercial properties.” It was a property manager responsible for more than five buildings who had been burned by an unreliable vendor in the last two years. That is specific enough to walk away from work, which is exactly the point.

2. What are the buying attributes, in your clients' words and not yours?

A buying attribute is what the client actually valued when they chose you. It is almost never the thing you think you sell, because you are looking at your business from the inside, where the craft lives, and they are looking at it from the outside, where the problem lives.

You cannot reason your way to this. You have to ask.

Call ten of your best clients. Not a survey. A phone call, or coffee. Ask three questions.

- Before you chose us, what motivated you as you considered vendors to provide the service we offer?
- Of the others you considered, what made each one worthy of your consideration?
- What were the top three things that made you choose us?

Then stop talking and write down the words they use. Not the gist. The words. Because those words are your copy, and they will be better than anything you or your agency would have written, for the simple reason that they are true and they came from a buyer.

If you are comfortable with the technology, record the conversations and let AI do the sorting for you. Ask permission first, always. Tell them you are recording it so you do not miss anything, and that you will be running it through a tool to pull out the themes. Few have ever said no to this request, and it is a courtesy your client is owed.

Then feed the recordings to your AI platform of choice and have it pull out the buying attributes each client named, ranked by how often they came up across all ten. Look at the top eight or ten. Those are the buying attributes of your best clients, in their language, in priority order. The top three are the ones that will drive your promise. The rest of the list has a second job, and you will use it in the next decision.

Elena walked out of those ten calls with a phrase she had never once used in her own marketing: *I never have to call you.*

3. What has your competition already claimed?

This is where most competitive analysis goes wrong. Owners build a feature grid, compare themselves column by column, and conclude that they are better. Fine. Nobody cares. Every business believes it is better, and the buyer has no way to check.

You are not looking for what your competitors *do*. You are looking for what they have already *claimed*, because a claim that has been taken is expensive to take back, and a claim that nobody has made is sitting there for free.

Pull up your top five competitors' websites, with your ranked attribute list beside you. For each competitor, mark which of your attributes they promote and how much weight they give it. Then write down the promise each one leads with.

What Elena found was that all five said versions of the same three things: quality, attention to detail, and family owned since some year in the 1980s. Every single one.

Nobody claimed reliability. Nobody said a word about the phone calls. The most valuable lane in her market was completely empty, and it was empty because everyone in the industry was in love with the same thing she had been in love with, which was the work itself.

That is the opportunity you are hunting. Not a better version of the thing everyone says. The true thing nobody has bothered to say.

4. What is your brand promise, and can you prove it?

Now put it into one sentence. One. It has to be specific, it has to matter to the client you named in decision one, and it has to be provable.

That last word is doing the heavy lifting.

Here is the test I use, and it is unforgiving. If a competitor could put your promise on their website tomorrow morning without changing one thing about how they run their business, it is not a promise. It is a platitude. "Quality work, on time, every time" passes nobody's test. Anyone can type it. Nobody can check it.

Elena's promise: *Same crew, same day, every week. You will never have to call us.*

She can prove it. She publishes her on-time percentage. She names the crew lead assigned to each property. And it is genuinely uncomfortable for a competitor to copy, because to say it out loud they would have to actually do it, and most of them cannot, which is precisely why the lane was empty.

A real promise has a cost. If yours is free to make, it is worth what you paid.

What this changes

Notice what Elena now has that she did not have three weeks earlier.

She knows exactly who her best client is, specifically enough to walk away from the rest. She knows what they are actually buying, in their own words. She knows what has already been claimed and what has not. And she has one sentence that is true, that matters, and that her competitors cannot comfortably steal.

Notice what these four decisions really are. They are the three drivers from Chapter 4, made concrete. Her ideal client and the pain that client feels is what she will speak to at the Awareness stage. Her buying attributes are what she will speak to at Consideration. Her brand promise is what she will speak to at Decision. Settle these four and you have something true to say at every stage of the journey, which is the entire reason the rest of the system works.

She has not bought a tool. She has not written a single email. She has not spent a dollar on advertising.

But as she starts to make the tactical decisions, every one of them is now easy. A week ago she was convinced her flowers had made the sale. Today she knows better. She knows her target is the property manager. What does the first touch say? It talks about the phone calls they are tired of making. What is the content about? Vendor reliability, not plant selection. What does the nurture sequence carry, month after month? Case studies in consistency. Crew highlights. Client testimonials that use the word “reliable.” Proof, delivered patiently, to the 30% who are not ready to fire their current vendor today but will be the next time somebody skips a week.

The same thing. Always the same thing. *You will never have to call us.*

That is what strategy buys you. Not a plan. Coherence. Every dollar and every message pulling in one direction, which is the only way small budgets ever beat big ones.

Your 30% is not ignoring you because your marketing is bad. They are ignoring you because nothing you have said yet sounded like it was about them. Strategy is what makes the message unmistakably theirs.

Before you turn the page

1. Score your last twenty clients on profit and enjoyment. Look at the top five. Write down what they have in common.
2. Call ten of your best clients. Ask them the three questions: what motivated you when you were considering vendors, what made the others worth considering, and what were the top three things that made you choose us. Write down their words, not your summary of their words.
3. Open your five closest competitors' websites. Mark which of your attributes each one promotes, and write down the promise each one leads with. Find the empty lane.
4. Write one sentence. Test it: could a competitor copy it tomorrow without changing anything about their business? If yes, write another one.

Do not build anything until you have done these four. Everything in the next four chapters assumes you have.

CHAPTER 13

Not All Leads Are Created Equal

Here is a sentence I hear constantly, and it is almost always wrong.

“We tried that channel. It didn’t work.”

Sometimes that is true. Some channels genuinely do not produce for some businesses, and part of running a company is finding that out and moving on. But most of the time, when an owner tells me a channel failed, the channel did exactly what it was supposed to do. It delivered a human being to the front door.

What failed was what happened next.

Let me tell you about Curtis

Curtis runs a commercial HVAC service company. Rooftop units, chillers, maintenance contracts on office buildings and light industrial. Solid business, good technicians, terrible marketing, and he knew it.

So he did what an owner does when he finally decides to get serious. He turned on three things at once.

He bought Google Ads. He built a referral arrangement with a handful of property managers he already worked with. And he wrote a genuinely useful guide called *How to Budget for Your Rooftop Units Before They Fail*, and put it behind a form on his website.

Then he set up his follow-up. One sequence. Five emails over two weeks, introducing the company, explaining his maintenance plans, and asking for a call. Everybody got the same five emails, because that is what the software made easy, and because a lead is a lead.

Six months later he pulled the numbers.

Google Ads produced 140 leads and 4 jobs. The cost per job was so bad he could barely look at it.

The referral arrangement produced 22 leads and 11 jobs. Half. His best channel by a mile.

The guide produced 310 downloads and exactly 1 job.

Curtis drew the obvious conclusion. Google Ads was a money pit and the guide was a vanity project. He was going to kill both, put everything into referrals, and be done with it.

That would have been a mistake, and it would have been the most reasonable-looking mistake he ever made.

What was actually happening

Curtis did one more thing before he pulled the plug. He called some of the leads that went nowhere.

The Google leads were emergencies. Almost every one of them. A rooftop unit had died, the building was getting hot, and a facilities manager was typing “commercial HVAC repair” into his phone at 6:40 in the morning. That person called three companies. Whoever answered first and could be on the roof that day got the job.

Curtis’s first email went out twenty-four hours after the form was submitted.

By then the unit was fixed. By somebody else.

The channel had delivered a person with the highest possible urgency, ready to spend money that day, and Curtis met them with a two-week educational drip campaign. It was not a bad channel. It was a channel with a shelf life measured in *hours*, and Curtis was responding on a clock measured in *days*.

The guide downloaders were not buyers at all. They were facility managers and building owners planning next year’s capital budget. They were eight to fourteen months from spending anything. That is not a failure. That is the exact person you want, arriving early, raising their hand, and telling you they will need this eventually.

That is the 30%, walking in the door and identifying themselves.

Curtis sent them five emails over two weeks, asked for a call three times, and then, when they did not book one, stopped talking to them forever. Three hundred and ten people who had told him they would need his help someday, and he went silent on all of them ten months before they were going to need it.

And the referrals worked for a reason that had nothing to do with his emails. The property manager did the nurturing for him. When someone you trust says “call Curtis, he is good,” you arrive already believing it. Trust shows up pre-installed. Curtis’s generic five emails did not help those leads. They simply failed to hurt.

So here is the real scoreboard. Curtis did not have one good channel and two bad ones. He had three working channels and one follow-up sequence, which was wrong for two of them and irrelevant to the third.

He was about to cancel the two channels that were actually working, and keep the sequence that was the problem.

Every lead arrives missing something

This is the point of the whole chapter, so I want to be precise about it.

When someone lands in your business, three things are true about them in some combination. They have a certain amount of trust in you. They have a certain amount of urgency about the problem. And they have a certain amount of knowledge, both about the solution and about you.

Almost no one arrives with all three. What makes channels different is not the quality of the people. It is *which* of the three is missing.

And that gives you the only rule you need: the channel tells you what they lack. Your follow-up supplies exactly that, and nothing else.

Walk through it.

A referral arrives with high trust and low knowledge. They believe you are good, because someone they trust said so. What they do not know is how you work, what it costs, or what happens next. What they are missing is a clear path. So the follow-up is short and it removes friction. Make saying yes effortless.

And do not, under any circumstances, run a referral through a twelve-email sequence that explains why your industry matters. You are re-selling something that has already been sold, and worse, you are wasting the credibility that another person spent on your behalf. Nothing squanders a referral faster than treating it like a stranger.

A search lead is a different animal. They arrive with maximum urgency, but little trust if you have not already built it with your brand marketing. They have a problem right now, and while they found you, they also found your top four competitors. What they need is immediate engagement. From there, they will qualify you by how you show up. So the follow-up is proof, delivered fast. Reviews, a real person's name, an actual time you can be there.

And "fast" means what it says. This lead is not one for an email. It is one for an emergency number listed plainly on your website with a real person ready to answer it. Even if that person does not know everything about HVAC, if they can confirm an appointment and get the process moving, that is what the moment requires.

A content download is the one almost everybody gets wrong, and it can be the most valuable one in this book. People who download are looking for knowledge, and in the process, if your content is any good, they gain some trust as well. Their urgency is the unknown. What is knowable is that they are now in your system and available to engage, if you do it the right way. They are researching. They are planning. They are not buying today, and no amount of pressure is going to change that.

What they are missing is time. Not persuasion. Time.

This is your 30%, and they have done you the enormous favor of raising a hand and identifying themselves. The follow-up is patient, useful, and it can be long. Plan an informational cadence that touches them monthly for as long as it takes. The job is not to close them. The job is to give them an easy trigger to reach for on the day they move into buying mode. A free consultation. A short form. A number. And the job is to still be there, still useful, on the day the thing finally breaks.

A networking or event contact has met a human being, so there is some trust, but the urgency can be anything from very hot to nonexistent. What they are missing is a reason to remember you exist. The follow-up is consistent presence, not pursuit.

A cold contact is missing all three. That is not a reason never to do outreach, but it is a reason to be honest about what you are signing up for, which is a long game against long odds.

There is a second lens on all of this, and it is the journey from Chapter 4. What a lead lacks tells you where they are standing on the road. A search lead, all urgency, is deep in Decision, comparing you against the tabs open beside you. A content download, all patience, is back at Awareness or Consideration, still learning. Read a lead both ways at once. Supply what they lack, and speak to the stage they are in, and your follow-up will almost never feel out of step.

Three rules for every nurture

Whatever the channel, a nurture that works does three things.

1. It speaks to them in their own terms, based on how they arrived. A property manager should receive information that relates to the world of a property

manager. A building owner should hear about capital planning and asset life. A general contractor should hear about schedule and coordination. Do not mix them, and do not go generic to cover all three at once. Generic is what people delete.

2. It demonstrates value against their actual needs. Informational guides. Case studies that show your capability without announcing it. Tools and worksheets that make their job easier. If the piece is only useful to someone who is about to buy from you, it is not nurture. It is a pitch wearing a costume.

3. It gives them a way to escalate, without a pitch. Always leave an easy door open. A form, a calendar link, a phone number. But never push it. “If you have a need, feel free to reach out” is the whole ask, and it is enough. They will use it when they are ready, and they will remember that you did not chase them.

Which brings us to the rule underneath all three.

Never try to sell to the 30% until they tell you they are ready. Educate them on the problem. Show them, over time, that you are a reliable solution. And in doing both, show them that they matter to you before they are worth anything to you. That is the entire trade, and it is why it works.

Match the clock

If you take one thing from this chapter, take this.

A lead’s shelf life is set by the channel, not by your software’s default setting.

The search lead is perishable in hours, sometimes minutes. The referral is good for days or a few weeks. The content download is good for a year or more, and it *gets more valuable over time*, right up until the moment it converts, because every month you stay useful is another month of trust compounding.

Now go look at your own follow-up. If everything in your business is on the same three-day, five-email cadence, then you are simultaneously too slow for one group, too pushy for another, and completely absent for the group that was going to be worth the most.

That is not a channel problem. That is one sequence trying to do four jobs.

Before you kill a channel

Chapter 10 said this and it belongs here too, because this is where owners actually make the mistake.

When a channel shows no revenue, do not cancel it. Not yet. First find out whether the channel failed or the follow-up failed. Those two look identical on a spreadsheet, and they call for opposite decisions. Look deeper before you decide, or you risk killing the channel that was going to feed you next year.

A lead nobody worked is not a lead that failed.

Curtis kept Google Ads. He also stopped sending those leads to a nurture sequence, because they do not need one. They need a phone that gets answered, so he set up an instant text message and a live response inside five minutes, and the same channel that produced four jobs in six months produced eleven in the next four.

He kept the guide too. He built a monthly rhythm for the people who downloaded it, useful and unhurried, no asking. It took nine months before the first real conversation came out of it. It has produced maintenance contracts every quarter since.

Same channels. Same budget. Different follow-up.

One honest note about measurement

Chapter 10 told you to measure closed revenue and not clicks, and I meant it. But a 30% nurture is a long game, and closed revenue is a lagging indicator. On a twelve-month cycle it will tell you nothing at all for most of a year, and if that is the only number you watch, you will lose your nerve and shut the thing down at month six.

So watch the leading indicators too. Measure their progress in clicks, in people coming back to read something a second time, in replies, and in appointments booked over time.

A word of caution on open rates, because most software still puts them front and center. Since 2021, Apple and other mail providers have been pre-loading the images in an email before a person ever looks at it, which registers as an “open” that nobody performed. Roughly half of all reported opens are now machines. An open tells you almost nothing.

A click is different. A click is a decision. Somebody read a subject line, chose the thing they cared about, and reached for it. Build your reporting on the actions a human has to take on purpose, and ignore the ones a server can fake.

These are not the scoreboard. Closed revenue is still the scoreboard. These are the pulse. They are how you know the 30% is still out there and still listening, while you wait for the number that actually counts.

Your 30% will almost never arrive through the channel that looks best on a report. They will arrive quietly, take something you offered, and go back to waiting. Whether they are still waiting for *you* when the moment finally comes depends entirely on whether you kept talking.

Before you turn the page

1. List every channel currently producing leads for you, including the ones you do not think of as channels. Referrals. Your networking group. Your own past clients.
2. For each one, write down what that person arrives with, and what they lack. Trust, urgency, knowledge. Be honest.
3. For each one, write down the shelf life. Hours? Days? Months? A year?
4. Now look at your actual follow-up, and count how many of those channels are running through the same sequence. That number is the size of your problem.

CHAPTER 14

It's the Message, Stupid

You now know your ideal prospect, you know what they are buying, and you know what kind of lead each channel sends you.

So what do you actually say to them?

This is the part so many people minimize or get wrong. Messaging gets treated as a writing problem, something to hand off, something to fix later once the real work of picking tools and building funnels is done. Or it is left to boilerplate content designed to work with everyone. Effective messaging is not an afterthought. It is not generic. It may be the most important part of your entire system. You can have perfect targeting, perfect timing, and perfect technology, and if the message does not resonate, none of it matters. Your prospect has been trained by twenty years of noise to ignore anything that sounds like a pitch, or worse, to unsubscribe from it.

Three things make a message work. What you say. The cadence in which you say it. And how you know your prospect has started listening.

Let me tell you about Nina

Nina runs a commercial insurance agency. Property, casualty, workers' compensation, mostly for manufacturers and contractors across the state.

She had done the work in Chapter 12. She knew her ideal client. She had interviewed her best accounts and heard, in their words, what they actually valued. And she had a list of four hundred people, built over years of relationships, sitting in her system.

Her marketing was still not working.

Here is what she was sending them. A quarterly newsletter. It led with agency news, a photo from the golf outing, and a paragraph explaining that Nina's team shops the market on your behalf to secure the best coverage at the best price.

Open rate: eleven percent.

And here is the part that will sound familiar, because almost every insurance broker in America does it. After eleven months of near silence, three weeks before a client's policy came up for renewal, Nina's team would call. Out of nowhere. Hoping to catch them before somebody else did.

Nina was not a bad marketer. She was doing exactly what the industry does. And what the industry does is go quiet for a year and then show up with an ask.

Then she changed three things.

One: she stopped selling insurance

Nina's message had been about insurance. Coverage, carriers, competitive rates, the shopping of the market.

Nobody lies awake at night thinking about coverage.

What her clients actually lay awake thinking about, and she knew this because they had told her, was getting a claim denied. Discovering a gap they did not know existed, on the worst possible day. Watching a workers' comp experience modifier creep up for reasons nobody had ever explained to them. Their concerns focused on hidden risks and shifting terms that could cost them thousands of dollars a year, or put the viability of the business at risk.

In the terms of Chapter 4, Nina had been speaking Decision-stage language, rates and coverage and shopping the market, to a list that was mostly back at Awareness. No wonder it fell flat. She was answering a question none of them had asked yet.

So she stopped writing about products and started writing about problems. Not "our carriers offer competitive workers' comp rates." Instead: *what your experience modifier actually is, why it goes up, and the three things you can do this quarter to bring it down.*

Notice what that piece does. It is useful whether or not you ever become her client. You could read it, act on it, save real money, and never call her.

That is not a bug. That is the entire strategy. Because the person who reads that article and saves four thousand dollars now believes two things about Nina. She knows what she is talking about. And she is a trusted advisor offering value without insisting on an invoice.

Most marketing answers the question "what do we do?" Almost nobody answers the question "what are you worried about?"

Run your message through three tests.

Is it about them, or about you? Take your last five emails and count the sentences. How many are about your company, your services, your team, your awards? How many are about the reader's problem? If the ratio is not lopsided in the reader's favor, you are writing a brochure.

Could your closest competitor send this exact message? This is the same test we used on your brand promise in Chapter 12, and it is just as unforgiving here. If a competitor could copy and paste your email, put their logo on it, and send it without changing a word, then it is not your message. It is the industry's message, and you are just one of the voices saying it.

Is it useful even if they never buy from you? This is the hardest one, because it feels like giving away the store. It is not. It is how trust gets built with people who do not know you yet and have plenty of other things on their agenda. This is your 30%.

Two: she showed up every month

Nina's quarterly newsletter went monthly.

That sounds like a small change. It is not. It is the difference between being a stranger who occasionally appears and being a name they know.

Here is the math nobody runs. Nina's clients make a switching decision roughly once a year, on a date she can predict. But the *thinking* that leads to a switch starts months earlier, and it is triggered by something she cannot predict at all. A denied claim. A rate increase. A phone call not returned.

At quarterly, Nina got four chances a year to be in front of someone at the moment their thinking started. At monthly, she got twelve. Same list. Same content budget. Three times the presence.

And presence is the point. Every message you send is a deposit, and you do not get to choose the withdrawal date. You are not writing this month's email for this month. You are writing it for a Tuesday nine months from now when a claim gets denied and somebody has to decide whose name they trust.

Two rules on cadence.

Consistency beats brilliance. A good email every month, forever, will outperform a brilliant one every eight months, every time. You are not trying to be remarkable. You are trying to be *present*, which is a much lower bar and a much rarer achievement.

Cadence is a promise, so only promise what you can keep. Monthly is enough. Monthly is plenty. If you launch a weekly and quit in six weeks, you have taught your list that you do not finish things, which is worse than never having started. Pick the rhythm you can hold for twelve months on your worst month, not your best one.

And then the thing nobody wants to hear: silence is what costs you. Not a bad email. Not a boring one. Silence. Your 30% is not sitting there evaluating the quality of your writing. They are forgetting you exist. And when you lose the top-of-mind status you had built, you start to become spam. At that point you have lost your edge, and you risk losing your access to that prospect entirely.

Three: she started noticing

This is the part that changed everything, and it is the part almost no small business does.

Your 30% will rarely tell you outright that they are ready to buy. Waiting on the email that says "I have become dissatisfied with my current broker and am now open to a conversation" is like waiting on the rain in a summer drought. It might happen, but you better have a plan for watering the fields.

But they will *behave* differently before they buy. Long before.

Behavior arrives before intent. People do things for weeks or months before they are willing to say out loud what those things mean, sometimes before they have admitted it to themselves. The person who is going to leave their broker starts reading about brokers. The company that is going to buy equipment starts pricing equipment. The thinking shows up in the clicking long before it shows up in a phone call.

A trigger is anything that tells you somebody just started thinking.

They come in two kinds, and most businesses use neither.

Known-date triggers are the ones sitting in plain sight, and they are free. Renewal dates. Contract end dates. Fiscal years. Lease expirations. The age of a piece of equipment. Seasonal cycles. Nina knew the renewal date of every account in her book and every prospect she had ever quoted, and she had never once used that information except to make a panicked phone call three weeks out.

She moved her clock. Ninety days before a renewal date, not three weeks, that person started getting content built specifically for someone about to make a decision. Not a pitch. A different message, because they are now in a different place.

Go find your known-date triggers. Most owners, when they actually look, find three or four they have been sitting on for years.

Behavioral triggers are the ones that require you to be paying attention. Somebody clicks on one specific article after ignoring six months of them. Somebody comes back to a page they have already read. Somebody downloads a second thing. Somebody forwards your note to a colleague.

Any one of those is small enough to mean nothing. Together, they are a person leaning forward.

One warning, and it will save you from calling the wrong people. Do not build triggers on email opens. Since 2021, Apple and other providers pre-load the images in an email before any human sees it, and that registers as an open. Roughly half of all reported opens are now machines. If you chase opens, you will eventually pick up the phone and call a proxy server.

A click is a different animal entirely. Nobody clicks by accident. Somebody read the subject, decided which thing they cared about, and reached for it. That is a person telling you what is on their mind this week, and it is the most honest signal you will ever get for free.

And here is the essential point, the one that separates a marketing system from a mailing list: most businesses cannot see any of this, because nobody ever built a system that watches for these signals and tells you when they happen. The signals are being sent right now, today, by people on your list. They are simply not being registered. They are effectively being ignored.

That is what the technology layer is actually for. Not the sending. The *noticing*. Everything else about a marketing system is a convenience. The behavioral tracking is the point.

Nina's system flagged that the controller at a mid-size manufacturer had read her article on experience modifiers, and then read it again four days later. The system, built to watch for exactly that, notified her.

So Nina called. Not to pitch. To ask.

The company had taken two claims that year and their modifier was about to jump. The controller had been quietly trying to understand how bad it was going to be. Nina now had five months before their renewal instead of three weeks, and she spent those five months being useful.

She won the account. But notice the actual mechanism. She did not win it because her message was clever, or because her cadence was disciplined, though both of those had to be true first. She won it because she was the only broker in that company's world who knew that something had changed.

A trigger is not permission to pitch

One warning, and it matters more than anything else in this chapter.

When a trigger fires, the temptation is to pounce. You have a signal. They are interested. Close them.

Resist the urge. You have not earned the right to start your pitch.

A trigger does not tell you that somebody is ready to buy. It tells you what they are thinking about. Those are two different things, and confusing them will cost you the relationship you just spent nine months building.

The correct response to a trigger is a better-matched message, or an honest human question. Nina did not call and say "I see you have been reading about experience modifiers, let me quote your insurance." She called and asked how their year had gone.

A trigger earns you the right to be relevant. It does not earn you the right to sell. Get that backwards and you become the thing your 30% has been avoiding this whole time. You become that villain from Chapter 1: the Pushy Salesperson.

Your 30% will send you subtle signs as they move from "not now" to "maybe it's time to start looking." They will show you, quietly, in small ways, months in advance. Build the thing that watches.

Before you turn the page

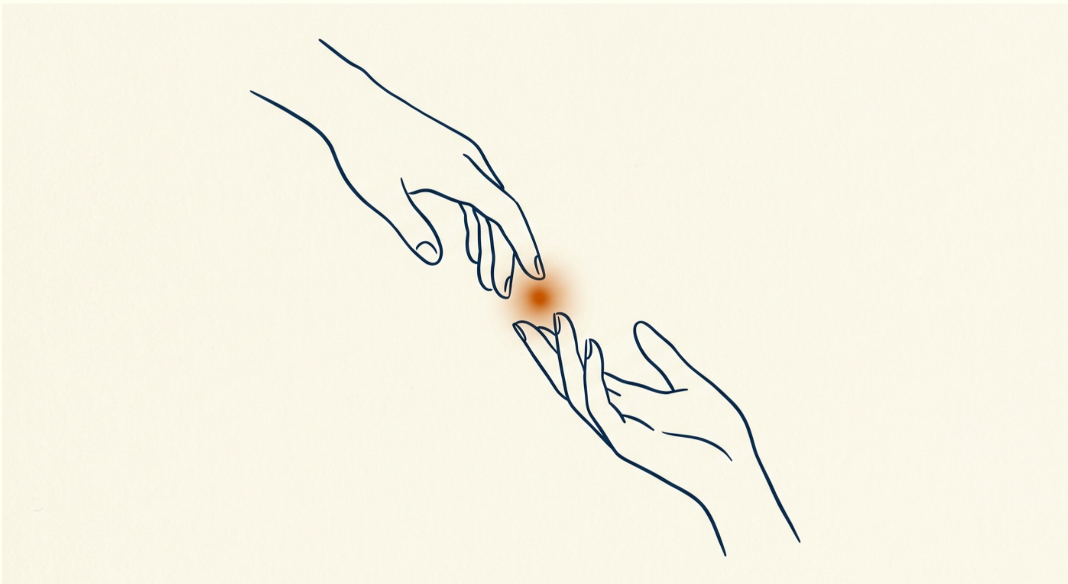
1. Take your last five marketing emails. Count the sentences about you against the sentences about the reader's problem. Write down the ratio. Do not flinch.

2. Apply the competitor test. Could your closest competitor have sent that exact email with their logo on it? If yes, it is not your message. Rewrite it around a problem your reader actually worries about.
3. Pick a cadence you can hold for twelve months on your worst month. Monthly is enough. Put it on the calendar now.
4. List every known-date trigger in your business. Renewals, contract ends, equipment age, seasonal cycles, fiscal years. Most owners find three or four they have never used.
5. Ask your system one question: if someone on my list read the same article twice this week, would I know?

If the answer to number five is no, you have just found the most valuable thing you are not doing.

CHAPTER 15

When They Raise Their Hand



When they step forward, stay the person they stepped forward to reach.

Everything up to now has been about the wait. Building the list, writing the message, keeping the rhythm, watching for the small signals that someone is starting to lean in.

This chapter is about the moment the waiting ends.

Because, for a real 30%, it does. One day, after months of your useful, unhurried presence, somebody from your 30% does the thing you have been patient for. They engage. They click the link to book a call. They forward your note to a partner and copy you. They write the one line you have been waiting for: “Do you have time to meet with me?”

In the language of Chapter 4, they have finally reached the Decision stage. The pain is old news to them and the criteria are set. That changes what they need from you, and it is the thing most owners get wrong in this exact moment.

Because here is where most of the work quietly gets wasted. The owner who was so patient for nine months panics in the ninth minute. They pounce. They pitch. They send the calendar link and the proposal and the case studies all at once, because they have been waiting so long that the moment feels fragile and they are terrified of losing it.

You just spent nine months earning the right to be different from every other vendor this person knows. Do not throw it away in the first conversation.

The handoff is where deals die

Let me tell you something I learned the expensive way, and it is the same lesson from the Money Pit chapter seen from the other side.

The most dangerous moment in your entire pipeline is not the cold open and it is not the close. It is the handoff. It is the instant a nurtured, trusting, quietly-watching prospect stops being a name in your marketing and becomes a live opportunity that somebody has to actually talk to.

In a big company, this is a literal handoff, from marketing to sales, and it is where the trust you built leaks out on the floor. Marketing spent a year making this person feel known, and then a salesperson picks up the phone who has never read a word of it and opens with "so, tell me about your business." The prospect deflates. The warmth is gone. They have become a stranger again.

In your business, you are both people. That is a gift and a trap. The gift is that the person who built the relationship is the same person who gets to have the conversation, so nothing has to be lost. The trap is that the moment a prospect raises a hand, the pressure of a possible sale can make you forget everything the relationship was built on, and you turn into the salesperson you spent a year not being.

So the whole job of this chapter is one sentence. When they step forward, stay the person they stepped forward to reach.

The first move is not a pitch. It is a question.

When a hand goes up, resist every instinct to present. You do not yet know what changed. You know that something did, because people do not raise a hand for no reason. But you do not know what changed, and until you do, anything you present is a guess.

So you ask. Warmly, like the peer you have been.

Nina did this exactly right in the last chapter. Her system flagged that a controller had read her article on experience modifiers twice. She did not call and say "I see you're interested in switching your workers' comp, let me put a quote together." She called and asked how his year was going.

What came out was that the company had taken two claims and their modifier was about to jump. He had been quietly trying to understand how bad it would get. That is the real reason the hand went up, and Nina would never have learned it if she had led with a pitch. The pitch answers a question the prospect has not asked yet. The question uncovers the one they are actually carrying.

Three things you are listening for, and you can hold all three in your head:

What changed? Something moved them from watching to acting. A renewal date. A bad experience with their current provider. A new hire. A number that finally got too big to ignore. Find the event, because the event is the whole conversation.

How urgent is it, really? A raised hand is not always a fire. Sometimes it is genuine urgency and they need help this week. Sometimes it is a person who has simply decided to start looking and is in no rush at all. Chapter 13 taught you that the wrong pace loses the deal in either direction. This is where you find out which pace you are in.

What does a good outcome look like to them? Not to you. To them. You have opinions about what they need. Keep them for now. First understand what they think they need, in their words, because that is what they will actually buy.

You do not get those three things by interrogating anyone. You get them by asking a few good questions and then listening. There are three I learned from my sales training that draw all of it out:

1. How long has this been a problem for you?
2. What have you tried to do about it?
3. Is doing nothing a reasonable solution?

Those three will tell you the concerns they are carrying, the things they have already tried without success, so you do not embarrass yourself recommending an option that already failed them, and their real sense of urgency to fix it. Ask, then let them talk. You stay a calm advisor, not a salesperson.

Then help before you sell

Here is the move that separates you from everyone else who will talk to this person, and it is the same move that earned the relationship in the first place.

Before you propose anything, give them something useful. On the call.

Answer the real question. Point them to the resource. Tell them the one thing you would do first if you were in their chair, even if doing it does not require you at all. You spent a year being useful without an invoice attached. Do not stop the instant money comes into view, because the moment you do, the prospect feels the switch flip, and everything you built gets recategorized in their mind as "that was all just marketing."

It was not all just marketing. Prove it when it counts.

This is not a tactic and I do not want you to run it as one. It works precisely because it is not a tactic. You genuinely help, the way you have all along, and the sale becomes the natural next step rather than a lever you pull.

Now, and only now, make it easy to say yes

Once you understand what changed, how fast they need to move, and what they are actually trying to accomplish, then ask the final question: "If I could help you, how do you see that happening?" Their answer is the basis for your proposal. Ask their permission to put your thoughts together, confirm how quickly they want to hear back, ask whether they have considered a budget, and set the follow-up before you hang up. Now you are ready for a real sales conversation, and you built it on their words instead of your pitch.

Chapter 12 told you to make saying yes effortless for a referral. It is the same here, and for the same reason. This person is not a stranger who is unaware of you and your capabilities. They are someone who already trusts you and has just told you what they need. Your job is not to convince them. Your job is to remove every obstacle between them and the outcome they described.

Name the next step. Make it one step. Make the price and the process clear enough that saying yes does not require courage. A trusting prospect who understands exactly what happens next will say yes far more often than a cornered one who is being sold.

What this looks like when you are the sales team

You do not have a sales department. In your world there is no difference between sales, operations, and administration. So here is the whole thing, stripped down to what you can actually do.

When a hand goes up, do three things, in this order, and do not skip to the third.

First, respond like a human, promptly. Do not send a proposal. Send a real, personal reply that matches the urgency they demonstrate to you. If it seems like a fire, call back in minutes. If it is a casual email, a thoughtful note the same day is plenty.

Second, when you are face to face or on a call, don't tell, ask. How long has this been a problem, what have they tried, is doing nothing an option. Help them with something real before the conversation is over.

Third, and only third, make the yes easy. One clear next step, clear price, clear process.

That is the entire conversion motion. It is not clever and it is not aggressive. It is just the same person, being the same useful presence they were during the wait, now that the waiting is over.

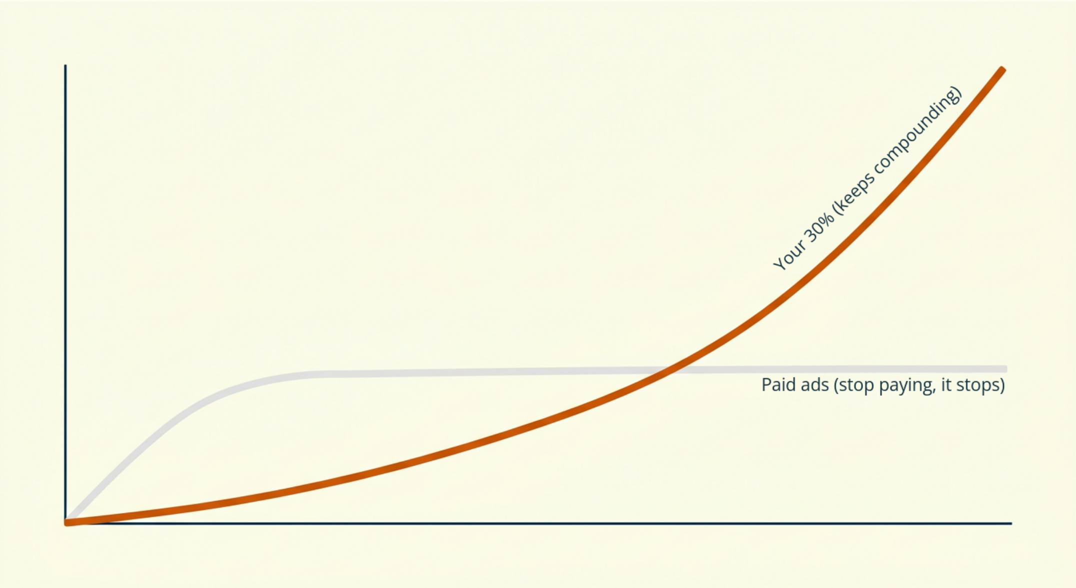
Your 30% did not raise a hand because your closing technique was sharp. They raised it because over time they have been able to see you and know you, even from afar. Now, on the day their moment arrives, they look to a trusted partner for an important solution. Do not become a different person in the last ten feet.

Before you turn the page

1. Write down what happens today, in your business, the moment someone replies to a marketing email or fills out a form. Be honest. If the answer is "it depends on whether I see it," you have found the leak.
2. Put three questions on a card by the phone: how long has this been a problem, what have you tried, is doing nothing an option. They are how you learn what changed, how urgent it is, and what a good outcome looks like to them.
3. Decide, in advance, the one useful thing you can give almost any prospect on a first call, before any talk of price. Knowing it ahead of time is what lets you lead with it.
4. Write your one clear next step. When someone says yes, what is the single, simple thing that happens next? If you cannot say it in one sentence, neither can they.

CHAPTER 16

What Your 30% Is Worth



Your 30% is the only asset in your marketing that appreciates.

Everything up to this point has been a framework. This chapter is where it stops being a theory and becomes a number.

Before I show you the math, you should know something, and you should hold it against me.

I sell the thing this arithmetic justifies. That is a real conflict of interest, and any number I put in front of you deserves vigorous scrutiny. So I am going to handle it the only way that seems fair. I am going to use the most pessimistic version of every input. Every time there is a range, I will take the bottom of it. Every time there is a rounding decision, I will round down. Every time there is a legitimate way to make the number bigger, I will leave it out and tell you I left it out.

And I will make this disclaimer plainly: the math shown here is a fictional example of what might happen. Your results will vary. Use your own judgment to decide whether the effort is worth your investment, whether that investment is time, money, or both.

The five inputs

One. Your warm network.

Not your market. Not your total addressable anything. The people who already know your name and have some real history with you.

Past clients. Prospects who went quiet. People who got a proposal and never got back to you. Referral partners. Vendors. People you have actually worked alongside. The folks who took a meeting two years ago and said "not right now." Your email list, if it is real. Your LinkedIn connections, but only the ones you could email without explaining who you are.

Count them. Most owner-led firms land somewhere between 300 and 1,000, and most owners guess low before they actually count.

Two. Take 30% of it.

That is your quietly-watching segment.

Be honest about this one, because it is a rule of thumb and not a measurement. A list made of past clients is richer than 30%. A list made of badge scans from a trade show is thinner. If you have reason to think your list is weak, cut the number. I would rather you finish this chapter arguing that the total is bigger than I said than the other way around.

Three. The activation rate.

Over twelve months, what portion of that group does a working system move into a real conversation? Not a click. Not an email open. A true person-to-person conversation.

The honest range is five to ten percent. I am going to use five.

Four. Your close rate.

Use your own, whatever it actually is. Do not use the one you tell people at parties.

I will note in passing that your close rate on a nurtured 30% prospect should be better than your close rate on a cold prospect, for all the reasons Chapter 13 laid out. The 30% arrive knowing you, trusting you, and understanding what you do. They are less likely to put you out to bid. But let us keep this conservative. Use your actual close number.

Five. Your average engagement value.

First year only. Not lifetime.

If you are not sure what it is, do some simple math. Take last year's total revenue and divide it by the number of clients you served. If there are outliers, unique situations that were abnormally large or small, you can remove those if you choose.

Let's run it on a real business

Dale spent more than thirty years in engineering, most of it in leadership, before a reorganization ended his job at fifty-three. He expected to land another role in a few months. He did not. What he learned the hard way is that a senior engineering executive in his mid-fifties is expensive to hire and easy to pass over, and the full-time offers never came.

So he did what a lot of experienced people are doing now. He went fractional. A former colleague hired him two days a week to run engineering for a growing manufacturer that could not yet afford a full-time leader. Within six months he had added two more clients like it, and the thing was suddenly real. He had a business.

Then he hit the wall this whole book is about. His first engagements matured, and finding the next one turned out to be the hard part. He tried the obvious things. Paid ads were expensive and brought him leads nothing like the relationships he was used to closing. Networking groups ate his evenings and produced almost nothing for a service as specialized as his. What worked, every time, was someone he already knew.

And demand from that direction came faster than one person could serve it. So Dale started building a firm. He brought on associate engineers to deliver the work he sold, took an office, stood up the beginnings of IT and HR. That changed his math in a way that matters here. As a solo, nearly every dollar he billed was profit. As a firm with payroll and overhead, he keeps only a fraction of what he invoices, like any real business. And business development stopped being something he could wing between engagements. It had to become a system, because now other people's paychecks depended on the pipeline staying full.

Here is what his 30% is worth, run on the same pessimistic rules I promised.

Dale counted his warm network. Three decades of former colleagues, direct reports who moved on and moved up, vendors, the clients from his fractional engagements and the people they introduced him to, and an industry association he had belonged to for years. Seven hundred people. A long career builds a large network, and his is real.

Take thirty percent of that network. That leaves two hundred and ten people who will need engineering leadership at some point, or know someone who will, and are not looking today.

Over twelve months, a working system turns about five percent of that group into a real conversation. Five percent of two hundred and ten is ten and a half, and because I promised to round down, call it ten conversations.

Then apply his close rate. On a warm prospect who has known him for years and arrives through someone they both trust, Dale closes better than this, but I am going to hold him to one in four to stay pessimistic. So Dale had ten conversations, and at a close rate of one in four, that is two and a half. I round down as promised, so call it two new clients.

Those two new clients each sign an average first-year engagement of fifty thousand dollars, the low end of what fractional engineering leadership costs. Two engagements at fifty thousand each is one hundred thousand dollars of new business in a year with no ads and no cold calls.

But crediting one hundred thousand dollars in new revenue is not a fair representation. Since Dale is now building a business, that new business has to help pay for the overhead it takes to operate. That includes associate engineers, office rent, and IT systems. It also has to pay Dale's own salary. After the cost of delivering the work, an engineering firm like his keeps somewhere between thirty-five and fifty cents on the dollar. Since I said I would always estimate conservatively, we will use thirty-five percent as the benchmark. That leaves thirty-five thousand dollars in new, profitable revenue.

That thirty-five thousand dollars is the number that belongs in the decision. It is the true return against the eight thousand dollars a year Dale invested to have a firm help him set up his CRM and create a messaging strategy to nurture his 30%. That was a decision he had to work through. It came down to one thing: his time had become too valuable to make this a do-it-yourself project, the way he might have a few years ago.

One more thing the math misses. I ran it as if Dale's two hundred and ten were a fixed pool he was slowly drawing down. They are not. Every useful thing he sends gets forwarded. Every talk he gives adds names. Every associate he hires arrives with a network of their own. The few who need him now become live opportunities. The larger share, the not-yet, join the 30%. The pool fills while he works it, and the number above is only the opening balance.

And I still have not told you the best part.

The number is not the point

Three things about that number matter far more than its size.

It compounds, and nothing else in your marketing does.

Dale spent a year in front of two hundred and ten people. Two of them hired him. Most of the rest did not leave. They are still there, one year further into knowing him, one year deeper into trusting him, and they are still getting the monthly note.

And the pool did not hold still. It grew. Every new client, every referral partner, every associate's own network, every person who found one of his notes useful enough to hand over an email address got added to the list. The ones who were ready became live opportunities. The rest, the larger share, joined the two hundred and ten. So he did not begin year two with two hundred and ten people. He began it with more, and warmer ones.

That is the quiet engine underneath this whole book. The work you do to nurture the 30% is the same work that grows the 30%. You are watering the garden and planting it at the same time.

So year two does not start over. Year two starts with a bigger pool and a warmer one. Year three is better still. And the effort to refresh the content is far smaller than the effort to create it the first time. Costs go down and stabilize while the system keeps working.

Your 30% is the only asset in your marketing that appreciates. An ad you stop running is worth nothing the day it ends. A growing list of prospects, properly engaged, is worth more every month you keep going. That is not true of any other line in your marketing budget, and it is the entire reason this is worth the investment.

You already own the audience. The question is whether you will benefit from owning it.

Ask yourself what it would cost to buy ten qualified conversations with people who already know your name and trust your work. Not ten clicks. Ten conversations with warm, informed prospects.

Lead vendors will tempt you with "qualified prospects delivered to your calendar." But those prospects do not know you, they have no relationship with you, and they are rarely cheap. You cannot buy relationships. There is no channel that sells trust. What closes business is comfort and confidence, and those are available to you for the price of an honest follow-up campaign aimed at the people who are already in your world. They have been there the whole time. The question is whether you are willing to work with them.

These are better clients than the ones you chase.

I held Dale to a colder close rate than he actually earns, and Chapter 13 already told you why the real number is likely higher. A prospect who arrives out of a year of useful contact does not price-shop you the way a stranger does. They have already decided you know what you are talking about. The negotiation is shorter, the margin is better, and they do not put you out to bid against three firms they found on Google that morning.

And I used first-year value only. Dale's engagements rarely stop at one year. A fractional relationship that works tends to renew and expand, and a satisfied client sends the next one. So the first year is not the whole story. Counting the renewals a good engagement earns and the referrals a happy client sends, each of those two clients is worth well more than the first-year number, often two or three times it, over the life of the relationship.

I left that out of the math on purpose. Put it back in if it is true for your business. The real numbers can be eye-opening, and they are worthy of your consideration.

What would make this number smaller

Marketing is not an exact science, and it is important to weigh the downside before you act. This is also the section that makes the rest of the chapter trustworthy, so read it carefully.

Your list is not as big as you think. You may have four hundred email addresses and only a hundred and fifty relationships. An email address or a phone number is not a relationship. Run the math on the number of people who would recognize your name, not the number of rows in your database.

Your list may be stale. If you have not spoken to a group of people in three or four years, the 30% assumption is generous. Some have moved, some have bought from someone else, and some do not remember you. Cut it. Then start rebuilding it, which takes about six months of being useful. And do not be afraid to prune the people who have clearly chosen to stop listening. Spend your effort creating value for the ones who show signs of engagement.

Your purchase cycle may be long or rare. If your clients buy from you once a decade, your 30% is genuinely thinner than the rule of thumb suggests. That does not make the system useless. It makes patience the price of admission.

And here is the one that actually kills the number. The math above assumes you send a useful message every month for twelve straight months. Most owners will do four and quit, because by month four they have spent time, and perhaps money, and produced nothing visible.

If you quit at month four, the number is not smaller. It is zero. You will have spent the money, done the work, built the list, and walked away one month before the compounding started.

I would rather you not begin than begin and stop. Stopping teaches the people on your list that you do not finish what you start, and that is a worse position than the one you are in today.

Now run yours

Take a piece of paper. Do not open a spreadsheet, because a spreadsheet invites you to be optimistic.

Write down the number of people who would recognize your name. Take thirty percent. Take five percent of that. Multiply by your real close rate. Multiply by your real average first-year value.

Round down at every step. Be stingy with yourself. Argue against the number.

Whatever you end up with, there is only one truth about it that matters.

If you don’t take action to build a 30% Solution, you will earn none of it.

Not because those people are not there. They are there. You know most of their names. Some of them liked you. Some of them wanted to work with you and the timing was wrong, and they have been quietly getting on with their lives ever since, waiting for a reason that never came.

Your 30% is not a market you have to go out and win. It is a market you already have, and are not serving.

Before you turn the page

1. Count your warm network. Actually count it. Export the list, open the contacts, go through the referral partners. Most owners guess low by half.
2. Run the five steps. Round down every time.
3. Write the number on something you will see again. A sticky note on the monitor is fine.
4. Now write down what it costs you to do nothing about it for one more year. That is the same number.

CHAPTER 17

The First 90 Days

You now have all of it. The split that governs every market. The six ways a pipeline breaks. Strategy before tactics. Different leads, different follow-up. Message, cadence, triggers. And a number, written on a piece of paper, that belongs to you.

Everything you need is in your hands. So here is the uncomfortable truth about what happens next.

Almost nobody fails at this because they did not understand it. They fail because they did it in the wrong order, or because they did it for four months instead of twelve.

This chapter is the step by step process. It will stand or fall on your stamina, and I cannot give you that one.

There are no new ideas from here on. There are no more examples. This is a build sheet.

Month One: Decide. Build nothing.

The single most important rule of the first thirty days is this. Do not buy software this month.

I mean it. The moment you open a browser tab and start comparing marketing platforms, you have quit thinking about your customer and started thinking about features, and you will not come back. The owners I have watched struggle with this almost always struggled in month one, with a shopping cart open.

Month one is Chapter 12, executed. Four weeks, four decisions.

Week one. Name your ideal client. Pull your last twenty clients into a spreadsheet. Score each on two things: how profitable they were, and how much you enjoyed the work. Look at the top five. Find what they have in common. Write it down in a sentence specific enough to disqualify somebody.

Week two. Make the ten calls. This is the slowest week and the most valuable one. Ten of your best clients. Three questions. What motivated you when you were considering vendors? What made the others worth considering? What were the top three things that made you choose us?

Booking ten calls takes longer than making them. Start on Monday.

Week three. Find the empty lane. Open your five closest competitors' websites with your ranked attribute list beside you. Mark what each one claims. Find the thing that is true about you and that nobody has bothered to say.

Week four. Write one sentence. Your brand promise. Then run the test: could a competitor put it on their site tomorrow morning without changing anything about their business? If yes, write another one.

What you have at the end of month one: a single page. Your ideal client, your top three buying attributes in your clients' words, the empty lane, and your promise.

Not software. A strategy blueprint. That blueprint is worth more than any software you could have purchased in the same thirty days.

Month Two: Build. Quietly.

Week five. Build the list.

This is the grimmest week in the whole ninety days and I am not going to pretend otherwise. It is data entry. It is boring. It is where most people stop.

Export everything. Your email contacts. Your phone. Your accounting system's client list. Your LinkedIn connections, the real ones. The proposals folder, which is full of people who wanted to hire you and did not. The business cards in the desk drawer. The networking group roster. Have AI search your email inbox for connections you have made in the last six months that are now long forgotten.

Deduplicate it. Then tag every person by how you know them: past client, lost bid, referral partner, event contact, inbound lead. Those tags are what let you send different messages to different people, which is the entire lesson of Chapter 13.

You will find more people than you expected. Almost everyone does.

Week six. Pick one tool.

One. Not a stack. The requirements are smaller than the software industry wants you to believe.

It has to send an email. It has to hold your tags. And it has to tell you when somebody does something.

That third one is not optional, and it is the only one worth being picky about. A tool that sends beautifully and notices nothing is a mailing list. You are building a system, and the difference between the two is whether anybody is home when a signal arrives.

Now choose one that fits the size and trajectory of your business. Inexpensive tools like Mailchimp and ActiveCampaign work well, but evaluate all the options carefully. Features such as automation and send limits will move your price around based on your contact count, how often you mail, and how much automation you need. The free and low-price tiers of any platform come with limits that can quietly cap what your system is able to do, so know which limits you are accepting before you accept them. There is a CRM review chart in the appendix of this book to help you compare.

And resist the pull of the big name. The temptation is to buy the platform that sounds most impressive rather than the one that fits the job in front of you. An enterprise tool you use ten percent of is worse than a modest one you use completely.

Set it up. Import the list. Do not spend three weeks on this. Spend one.

Week seven. Write three pieces of content.

Three. Not twelve. Not a year's worth. You will burn out and quit if you try to bank a year in a week.

Each piece has to pass Chapter 14's tests. Is it about their problem or your company? Could your competitor have sent it? And the hard one: is it useful even if they never buy from you?

Write about the thing your ten clients told you they worry about. You already know what it is. They told you in week two.

Is this more effort than you want to take on every month? If so, find a writer. Writing is either a passion or a chore, and there is no prize for suffering through it. Figure out which one it is for you, and budget for the answer.

Week eight. Load the known-date triggers.

Renewal dates. Contract ends. Equipment age. Fiscal years. Seasonal cycles. Lease expirations. Birthdays. Holidays. Seasonal milestones. Go through your list and put every date you know into the calendar, ninety days ahead of the event, not three weeks.

When owners actually go looking, most discover they already know several of these dates for dozens of people, and have never once acted on a single one. The information is already in your files. Using it costs nothing, nobody else in your market is watching it, and loading it takes an afternoon.

What you have at the end of month two: a clean, tagged list. One tool that can notify you. Three useful things to say. And a calendar full of dates nobody else in your market is watching.

Month Three: Ship. Then hold.

Week nine. Send the first one.

The first email is the most important one you will ever send, and it is also the one most likely to get you into trouble. Your list has people on it with wildly different levels of engagement, and the downside of mass email is real: you can get flagged as a spammer and lose the channel entirely.

A few rules, and they are not optional.

- If you have not emailed someone in the last twelve months, warm them up before they go into your marketing system. A short personal note letting them know you would like to include them in what you are sending. One at a time, from you.
- Give them a clear chance to say no, and honor it immediately. Every email platform measures unsubscribes and complaints against the engagement of your list. If that ratio gets bad enough, your account can be throttled or shut off.
- Do not bulk email from Gmail or your standard business account. The rules for mass sending are strict, and breaking them can get your personal email locked.
- Never put multiple unrelated people on the same To: line. Everyone on it can see every other name and address, which is a privacy violation you cannot take back. It also invites a reply-all avalanche into inboxes that did not ask for it. If you truly must, use BCC. Use it rarely.

If you have been silent for a long stretch, more than a year, say so. One honest sentence, no groveling: *"It has been a while. I have been heads-down running the business. I have been putting together some things I think will actually be useful to you, and this is the first one."*

Do not apologize elaborately. Do not pretend you were never gone. People are busy and they appreciate transparency. They will forgive the silence. What they will not sit through is a story, or a request for forgiveness for something that never hurt them in the first place.

And do not ask for anything. Not a call, not a meeting, not a reply. Nothing. The first send is a deposit. You are banking a relationship, and you do not get to choose the withdrawal date.

Week ten. Watch.

Who opened it? Who clicked? Who read the same thing twice? Who forwarded it? Who, after two years of nothing, suddenly looked at your website?

This is the week you find out whether the tool you picked in week six actually notices anything. If it does not, you picked the wrong tool, and it is much cheaper to learn that now than in month eight.

Be prepared for another possibility. Some lists are simply cold. If yours is, the honest response is not to send harder. It is to start filling the top of the pipeline: a lead magnet, a contact form on the website, a real social presence. A cold list tells you the 30% you need is not in the room yet, and no amount of nurture can change that.

Week eleven. Respond to what you saw.

Not with a pitch. With a question.

A trigger earns you the right to be relevant. It does not earn you the right to sell. If somebody reads your piece on the thing they are worried about, send them a link to a useful article you came across, from your personal email, with a note that says you thought of them. Or call and ask how their year is going. That is the whole play, and it works because it is not a play.

Week twelve. Send the second one.

Same day of the month as the first. That symmetry is the promise being kept, and your list will register it whether or not they consciously notice.

You have now done the thing twice, in a row, on schedule. That is more than most of your competitors have managed in a decade.

What you will have on day ninety

Let me be real, because this is where you might be thinking of checking out.

On day ninety you will most likely have a clean list, a working system, two messages sent, a few names behaving interestingly, and no new inquiries, much less revenue.

That is normal. It is to be expected.

If it lands badly anyway, go back and reread Chapter 16. The activation window in that math was twelve months, not three. What you have built in ninety days is not revenue. It is the machine that produces revenue, and it has not been running long enough to produce any.

A machine that has not produced anything yet is not a broken machine. It has just not completed its cycle.

Month four is the month you will quit

I want to name this precisely, because this is where too many people squander the work they have done and give up.

Somewhere in month four, the following will happen. You will have spent real money and real hours. You will have nothing tangible to point to. No appointments, no quotes, no orders. Someone will ask you how the marketing is going, and your answer will mirror the frustration you are starting to feel.

And every instinct you have as an owner, every instinct that has kept your business alive, will tell you that this is not working and you should stop.

Nothing is wrong. It is working exactly as designed. Month four is what month four feels like.

Here is what you do instead of quitting.

Point at the pulse, not the scoreboard. Closed revenue is the scoreboard, and it will tell you nothing for most of a year. So watch the signs of life. Is anyone clicking? Is anyone reading a piece twice? Has a single person who ignored you for three years suddenly started paying attention? Those are not vanity numbers. They are the first sprouts in a new garden. Not ready to harvest, but growing, slowly and steadily.

Do less rather than stopping. If sustaining the work in month four is crushing you, cut the content from three pieces to one. Shorten it. Make it plainer. What you cannot do is go quiet, because going quiet costs you everything you have spent four months buying.

But keep an eye on the right numbers. Ignore your open rate. Your software will show it to you, prominently, and it is close to meaningless: since 2021 the mail providers pre-load images before anyone reads the message, so roughly half of all reported opens were performed by a machine.

Watch clicks instead. Nobody clicks by accident. If almost nobody is clicking, your content is not landing, and the fix is not to send more of it. Go back to Chapter 14 and count your sentences. Are you writing about their problem, or about yourself again?

And reuse what you make. If you are writing a blog or posting on social, coordinate it with the newsletter. Not all of your audience is in every place you publish. It is fine, and smart, for a newsletter article to also be a LinkedIn post and a Facebook post. Same effort, three times the reach.

From here to month twelve, the job is small and it does not change. Send one useful thing a month. Echo it on social. Put the newsletter signup somewhere prominent on your website and add a link to it in your email signature. Then notice what people do, and respond like a human.

That is it. That is the entire remaining assignment.

What this actually costs

The investment here is real, and it makes sense to look honestly at what it entails.

Time. Month one is roughly fifteen hours, most of it on the phone with clients, which you should be doing anyway. Month two is closer to twenty-five, and the list is most of it. From month three onward it is four to six hours a month, forever.

Money. The tool runs from free to several thousand dollars a month, depending on your needs and what you choose. A writer is optional, and worth it if writing is not a passion. Their content is often more compelling than yours, and it takes a task off your plate that most non-writers are eager to be rid of.

And now let us have a conversation about AI. AI is a wonderful tool. I would not have written this book without it. But I strongly urge you not to hand your writing over to it. At least not in 2026. Unless you have real expertise in training AI to speak in your brand voice, and the patience to edit heavily, what you get back will be less than what you needed. And in today's world, content that reads like AI gets discounted the moment it is recognized. By the way, this is one paragraph my AI did not write.

And the real cost, which is none of the above. The real cost is creating value for people who are not paying you, for longer than feels reasonable, without knowing which of them will ever pay you at all.

You have seen the math. Over time it will be validated or it will not. Stick with the commitment, and treat every message as an investment in a future client.

That is the price of the 30%. It is not immediate, and that is exactly why so few businesses are willing to pay it.

Before you turn the page

1. Put four dates on your calendar right now. End of month one, two, three, and four. Name each one with the thing that must be true by then.
2. Block week two now. Ten client calls will not happen unless the time already exists.
3. Write “do not buy software until day thirty” somewhere you will see it.
4. Decide, today, what you will do in month four when it feels like it is not working. Write that down too. You will need it, and you will not think clearly when you get there.

Afterword

We started with a question.

Where is your next customer coming from?

When you read it on the first page, the honest answer was probably some version of "it's hard to say." Not because you are bad at what you do. You have clients, a team, and a track record. You have built something real, and you did it without a marketing department.

Ask yourself the question again now.

You still cannot give me a name. Nobody can. But you can do something better than name a person. You can name the place. It is the group of people who already know you, who will need what you sell eventually, and who are not shopping today. It is a group you can size, on paper, in about ten minutes. It is a group you can reach on purpose, every month, without asking them for anything.

That is a different answer than the one you started with, and it is the whole point.

What you have now

You have a diagnosis. Six patterns, and you almost certainly saw yourself in two or three of them. A Referral Black Hole. Stale Lead Flow. A Quiet Brand. A Heavy Lift Pipeline. A Founder Bottleneck. A Marketing Money Pit. Whichever one you recognized, you now have a name for a thing that used to just feel like bad luck.

You have a method. Strategy before tactics. The right follow-up for the right kind of lead. A message about their problem instead of your company, sent on a rhythm you can keep, with a system that notices when somebody starts paying attention.

You have a number, written in your own handwriting, that belongs to you.

And you have a build order, ninety days long, that you could start today.

There is exactly one thing I cannot give you, and you already know what it is.

The twelve months

The method is not complicated. I have said that from the beginning, and I want to be careful, because there is a version of that sentence that is deceptive. Doing this well is not easy. Knowing your ideal client well enough to say no to a bad fit with a check in hand is hard. Writing something useful every single month, when nothing appears to be happening, can be a struggle.

But it is not *complex*. It does not require an agency, a platform, or a person with a title. It requires you to be useful to people who are not paying you yet. And that "yet" may run longer than feels reasonable, without your ever knowing which of them will pay you at all.

That is the price. It has always been the price.

Most businesses will not pay it, and I want to be honest about why. It is not because they are lazy. It is because keeping faith with a process that gives you little or nothing back for eight months is genuinely difficult. Every instinct that has kept your business alive will argue against it.

And that is exactly why it works for the ones who do.

I told you back in Chapter 2 that I was once a top salesperson for my company and never made a cold call. That is true. But it is not the whole story, and the rest of it is the part that matters.

I spent more than five years in that organization providing support to those accounts before a single one of those calls ever came in. I built my book of business on hard work, on nurturing relationships, and on patience.

And here is the thing I have never quite gotten over. It worked mainly because I never thought of those first years as *building a system.* My ignorance was the key to my success. Had I been sitting there from day one measuring results, I would have quit long before any of it paid off.

You do not have my ignorance. You have read this book, so you know exactly what you are waiting for, and that makes the waiting harder, not easier.

Wait anyway.

Why I wrote this

There is a reason this book exists, and it is not a marketing reason.

I spent years on the other side of it.

I have been the guy in the agency conference room, working hard, doing good work, and unable to tell a client what any of it had actually bought him. I sat across from the owner while he did the math out loud and came up short, and I did not have a good answer for him. Those were painful experiences, and they stayed with me.

I did not start Leadstra because I had a clever idea. I started it because I got tired of watching good businesses spend real money in a fog, and I wanted to build the thing I wish somebody had handed me back then.

This book is that thing. It is yours now.

A word about the 60%

One last thing, and it matters more to me than the arithmetic.

Sixty percent of your market is never going to buy from you. Not this year, not ever. And the entire marketing industry is built on refusing to accept that, which is why your inbox is full of pathetic outreach offers, and why your phone rings with people who have not bothered to learn what you do.

Let them go. Do not try to save something that was never there.

The 30% is different. They are not a target and they are not a lead to be worked. They are people who will one day have a problem you can solve, and who deserve to be treated well in the meantime, on the chance that day never comes.

Do that, with honest intent, for long enough, and something happens that no funnel diagram can explain. They start telling other people about you before they have ever bought anything.

I have no math for this effect. But I have watched it happen in my own business. Prospects I have never met call me, and they talk to me like an old friend.

Doesn’t this give away the whole business?

It is a fair question. You just read a book that lays out, step by step, how we do what we do for a living. So why hand it over?

Partly, we haven’t. But we have tried to give you every key element you need to succeed, and I meant it when I said there is nothing important being withheld.

Here is the real answer, though. For a great many business owners, their time is too valuable to do this work, and the strategy is too valuable to go without. Those are our clients. The ones who see it clearly, want it badly, and do not have the internal resources to build it. Our team works with them to execute the very systems laid out in these pages.

Our client base is a small slice of the audience who can benefit from this book, so we share it happily. We want the owners just getting started to be able to use it. And we welcome the thinking and the pushback from larger organizations who are already doing much of this internally.

If you want to know where you stand

Take the Marketing Scorecard. Ten questions, about ten minutes.

leadstra.com/scorecard

It is free and takes just a few minutes. The results identify the Scenario you are most likely facing and give you actionable steps to address it. Along with this book, you can take that answer and go build the thing yourself.

And yes, if you give us your contact information to get the PDF report, you will join our 30%, and you will get to watch us do the exact thing we just spent sixteen chapters teaching you. Judge the messaging for yourself. That seems fair.

But whether or not we ever speak, I hope this book gives you some insight, some strategy, and some tactics that elevate your work and improve your results.

And if you would rather not build it alone

Some owners read all of this, recognize themselves on every page, and know with total clarity that they are not going to do it. Not because they cannot. Because they are already working sixty hours and this would be the sixty-first.

That is what we do.

The Marketing Blueprint is the diagnosis, done with you instead of by you: your ideal client, your buying attributes, the empty lane, your promise, and a ninety-day plan built for your actual business. LeadstraOS is the system itself, built and run alongside you, so the monthly thing that has to happen actually happens in the month it is supposed to.

That is the whole offer. It is on our website. I am not going to spend the last page of this book selling it to you.

One last thing

If you do nothing else from this book, do this.

Send one useful thing, once a month, to the people who already know your name. No pitch. No ask. Just something they can use.

Do it for a year.

That is The 30% Solution, stripped to the bone. Everything else in these pages is refinement.

Where is your next customer coming from?

They are already in your world. They have been the whole time. Go be useful to them.

Dave Anderson

Indianapolis, 2026

APPENDICES

Tools You Can Use

Worksheets, a nurture campaign, sources, and the cadence, ready to copy.

Appendix A: A Nurture Campaign You Can Copy

Throughout this book I told you to be useful, on a rhythm, without pitching. Owners who have never written a marketing email read that and freeze on the same question: *what do I actually say?*

So here is a complete campaign, written out. It is built for one common case, a new inbound lead who found you, filled out a form, and is not yet ready to buy. Read it as a pattern, not a script. Change the words to sound like you and to fit what you sell. The structure is what matters.

Two rules before you start.

The examples below are written for a fictional business, a firm that helps small companies with their bookkeeping, so the pattern is easy to follow. Yours will be different. Keep the shape, replace the specifics.

And every message here follows the test from Chapter 14: it is useful even if the reader never buys. If any email you write fails that test, it is a pitch wearing a costume, and it belongs in the trash, not in your sequence.

The map

A real campaign is not one sequence. It is a few short ones, plus the rules that move a person between them. Here is the whole thing on one page.

Sequence 1, the Warm-Up. For a brand-new lead. Five messages over about two weeks.

Sequence 2, the Long Nurture. For anyone who finishes the Warm-Up without buying. One useful message a month, indefinitely. This is the 30% engine.

Sequence 3, the Re-Engagement. For a lead who went cold mid-conversation. Three messages, then back to the Long Nurture or out.

The triggers. The rules that pull someone out of an automated sequence the instant they behave like a real prospect, and hand them to you.

Sequence 1: The Warm-Up

The goal is not to sell. It is to make a good first impression, deliver something genuinely useful, and prove you are worth hearing from again.

Email 1, within minutes of the form. Subject: You're in, here's what happens next.

> *Hi [First name],*
>
> *Thanks for reaching out. I got your note, and a real person (me) will follow up personally within one business day.*
>
> *In the meantime, here is the thing most owners ask us first: [link to your single most useful resource, a short guide, a checklist, a two-minute video].*
>
> *Talk soon,*
>
> *[Your name]*

Why it works: it sets expectations, it proves a human is on the other end, and it hands over value before anyone has done anything to earn it.

Email 2, day 2. Subject: The mistake I see most often.

> *[First name],*
>
> *Since you are thinking about [the problem they came in for], here is the one mistake I watch small businesses make with it, over and over: [name the mistake, explain the fix in three sentences].*
>
> *You can fix this yourself in an afternoon. If you want a hand, just reply.*
>
> *[Your name]*

Why it works: it teaches, it costs them nothing, and the only "ask" is an open door, not a push.

Email 3, day 5. Subject: How [type of business] handled this.

> *A quick story. A [similar business to theirs] came to us with [the same problem]. Here is what we changed and what happened: [one short, specific result].*
>
> *Not every situation is the same, but the principle holds: [the one transferable lesson].*
>
> *[Your name]*

Why it works: proof, in the form of a story, with a lesson they can use whether or not they hire you.

Email 4, day 12. Subject: A checklist you can steal.

> *[First name],*
>
> *I put together a short checklist for exactly the situation you are in: [link]. Work through it and you will know where you stand.*
>
> *No sign-up, no catch. It is yours.*
>
> *[Your name]*

Why it works: a second, bigger gift, with no ask at all. This is the email that earns you the right to keep showing up.

Email 5, day 20. Subject: Want me to take a look?

> *We have covered a lot. If you would rather just talk it through with someone, I am happy to. Fifteen minutes, no pitch, and you will leave knowing your next move whether or not we work together.*
>
> *[Link to book a short call]*
>
> *And if now is not the time, no problem at all. I will keep sending things I think are useful, about once a month. Reply "stop" any time and I will take you off.*
>
> *[Your name]*

Why it works: it makes the first real offer, keeps it low-pressure, and tells the truth about what happens next. The person who is not ready is not lost. They roll into Sequence 2.

Sequence 2: The Long Nurture

This is the heart of The 30% Solution. Everyone who finishes the Warm-Up without buying lands here, and stays until they either become a client or ask to leave.

One message a month. Each one useful on its own. No countdown, no urgency, no "just checking in."

A simple twelve-month rotation, so you never stare at a blank page:

1. A short how-to they can act on
2. A client story with one transferable lesson
3. An answer to a question you get asked constantly
4. A relevant industry change and what it means for them
5. A checklist or template
6. A "here is what we are seeing this quarter" note
7. A myth in your field, and the truth
8. A behind-the-scenes look at how you do the work
9. A short how-to
10. A client story
11. A seasonal or timely piece
12. A year-in-review, and what is coming

That is it. Repeat it, refreshed, next year. The people on this list are not judging your prose. They are noticing that you are still there, still useful, month after month, while your competitors have gone silent.

Sequence 3: The Re-Engagement

For a lead who was talking to you and then went quiet. Three messages, spaced about a week apart. If none land, they go back to the Long Nurture, not the trash.

Message 1. Subject: Still worth doing?

> *[First name], we were talking about [their thing] a few weeks back and then life got busy, for both of us. Is this still on your list, or should I set it aside for now?*

Message 2. Subject: One useful thing while you decide.

> *No pressure either way. In case it helps, here is [a resource tied to their exact situation]. Circle back whenever the timing is right.*

Message 3. Subject: I'll stop bugging you.

> *I will leave this here. You know where I am, and I will keep sending the occasional useful note. Whenever you are ready, one reply gets us going.*

Why it works: it gives them a graceful exit, which is what actually earns a reply. "Should I set it aside?" gets answered far more often than "just following up."

The triggers: the part that actually matters

The sequences run on autopilot. The triggers are what keep autopilot from embarrassing you. Each one pulls a person out of the automation and hands them to you, a human, the instant they act like a real prospect.

Build these five, at a minimum.

They reply to anything. Stop all automation immediately. A person who wrote back should never receive the next canned email. This is the single most important rule in the entire system, and it is the one people most often get wrong.

They click to book a call. Stop the sequence. This is a raised hand. Go to Chapter 15 and run the conversation, ask before you tell.

They click a specific link, twice, or come back to a key page. This is the quiet signal from Chapter 14. Not a fire, but a lean-in. Get a notification, and reach out personally with a useful note, not a pitch.

A known date arrives. Ninety days before a renewal, a contract end, a fiscal year, move them into a short, decision-stage sequence built for someone who is about to choose. Different message, because they are in a different place.

They go silent for a long stretch, or unsubscribe. If engagement dies for six months, drop the frequency or prune them, as Chapter 16 describes. If they unsubscribe, honor it instantly and completely. Your deliverability, and your integrity, both depend on it.

The one thing to get right

If you build only one piece of this, build the reply trigger.

Nothing does more damage to a warm relationship than a prospect who writes "yes, let's talk" and receives, the next morning, an automated email that opens "still thinking it over?" It tells them the warmth was never real. It was a machine the whole time.

The machine sends the mail. The moment a human answers, the human takes over. Get that handoff right and everything else in this appendix is just useful content on a calendar.

The internal version of this campaign, with the exact GoHighLevel triggers, timing, and stop-logic that the Leadstra team runs, lives in a separate build sheet. This appendix is the pattern. Make it yours.

Appendix B: Sources and Notes

I have tried to be careful in this book about the difference between what is measured, what is observed, and what is my own opinion from years of doing the work. This section is where I show that work. Where a number comes from research, I name it. Where a number comes from my own experience, I say so plainly, because you deserve to know which is which.

The Buyer's Pyramid (Chapter 2)

The 10 / 30 / 60 split is adapted from Chet Holmes' Buyer's Pyramid, introduced in his book *The Ultimate Sales Machine* (Portfolio, 2007) and taught by Chet Holmes International. Holmes' original tiers: 3% buying now, 7% open to it, 30% not thinking about it, 30% who think they are not interested, and 30% who know they are not interested.

I have grouped his top two tiers into "the 10%," kept his "not thinking about you" tier as "the 30%," and combined his two bottom tiers into "the 60%." Holmes' own teaching is that the middle group can be won over time through education, which is the foundation this entire book is built on.

A note on the numbers: Holmes derived the 3% figure by polling live audiences, not through formal research. More recent work from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute (Professor John Dawes, "The 95-5 Rule," 2021) estimates that the share of buyers in-market at any moment depends on how often a category is purchased, and lands anywhere from about 3% to 12% for most business categories. I use 10% as a working number for service businesses. The exact figure is not the point; the shape is.

The Rule of 7 (Chapter 2)

The common claim that a sale takes seven touches has no research behind it, which is exactly why I use it the way I do. It is marketing folklore of uncertain origin. The real lesson is that no one knows the number, so you build a rhythm rather than counting to a magic figure.

The buyer's journey (Chapter 4)

The three pre-sale stages, Awareness, Consideration, and Decision, are standard marketing framework, popularized in their modern form by HubSpot and taught widely since. The mapping of Awareness to problem and pain, and Consideration to evaluation criteria, is well established in the marketing literature. Adding Experience and Promotion as post-sale stages reflects the lifecycle and flywheel thinking that has become common in the last decade.

The idea that each stage runs on a single dominant driver, and specifically that the brand promise is what tips the Decision stage, is my own synthesis rather than a textbook claim. I offer it as a lens, not a law. It does line up with the research on how buyers actually decide: studies of B2B buying (including work from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute and industry research summarized by B2B International and Gartner) consistently find that trust, clear differentiation, and proof are what separate the winner at the decision stage, and a provable brand promise is precisely those things made concrete.

Net Promoter Score (Chapter 5)

NPS was introduced by Fred Reichheld ("The One Number You Need to Grow," *Harvard Business Review*, 2003). It has been fairly criticized as a predictor of company growth; the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute and others have published evidence that it does not reliably forecast growth at the company level. I do not use it as a growth predictor. I use it for the one narrow thing it does well: telling you which individual clients are willing to refer you. That is all it is asked to do in this book.

The cost of replacing an employee (Chapter 7)

The estimate that replacing an employee costs between 50% and 200% of their annual salary is drawn from published figures by Gallup and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). The exact figure varies widely by role, with senior and specialized positions at the high end and frontline roles at the low end.

The hunting ladder (Chapter 8)

The image of sorting prospects like a hunter sorts game, from small and plentiful to large and rare, is a common sales-training metaphor. I first encountered a version of it in sales training years ago. Similar animal-tiering frameworks appear across the sales and startup worlds. I claim no origin for it, only that it is a useful way to see the trade-off between the size of a client and the effort they take.

SEO timelines (Chapter 10)

The estimate that search optimization takes three to six months for early movement, six to twelve for competitive terms, and longer for a new website reflects the general consensus among SEO practitioners. Published analyses by Ahrefs and others have found that only a small share of new pages reach the top of search results within a year, and that most top-ranking pages are well over a year old.

Apple Mail Privacy Protection and email open rates (Chapters 13, 14, 17)

The point that email open rates became unreliable in 2021 refers to Apple's Mail Privacy Protection, introduced with iOS 15 in September 2021, which pre-loads email images through Apple's servers and registers an "open" whether or not a person viewed the message. Because Apple Mail accounts for a large share of email opens, reported open rates are now materially inflated. This is why the book directs you to measure clicks, replies, and appointments, which reflect a deliberate human action, rather than opens.

The composite characters (throughout)

Tom, Rosa, Dana, Marcus, Ray, Elena, Curtis, Nina, and Dale are composites. Each is drawn from real patterns across many businesses I have worked with or observed, but no one of them is a specific, identifiable client, and the names and details are invented. The situations are real. The people are illustrations.

The math (Chapters 6 and 16)

Every calculation in this book is illustrative. The activation rates, close rates, and dollar figures are examples, chosen to be conservative, so you can follow the method and then run it on your own real numbers. They are not forecasts, and I have tried never to present them as anything more than arithmetic you should redo for yourself. Your results will vary.

Appendix C: The 12-Touch Cadence

Appendix A gave you the shape of a nurture campaign. This one gives you the exact rhythm: twelve touches over about ninety days, for a warm prospect who has signaled interest but is not ready to buy yet. Think of it as the standard follow-up you run whenever someone raises a hand a little, an inbound inquiry, a content download, a completed assessment, a good conversation at an event.

The whole point is that no single touch is a pitch. Each one earns its place by being useful on its own. If someone reads all twelve and never buys, they should still feel they got something worth their attention. That is what keeps you welcome in the inbox instead of filtered to spam.

Four rules govern the whole thing.

Every touch is useful by itself. If a touch only makes sense as a step toward a sale, cut it.

Vary the channel. Twelve emails in a row is a newsletter nobody asked for. Mixing in a call, a personal note, and a short video makes you a person instead of a sender.

Match the message to their situation. If you know why they raised a hand, the Scenario they are in or the problem they came for, aim every touch at that. Generic is what gets deleted.

The moment they engage, the cadence stops. A reply, a booked call, a form filled out: the automation ends and a human takes over. This rule matters more than the other three combined. Nothing does more damage than a real “yes, let’s talk” answered the next morning by a canned “still thinking it over?”

The cadence

Three of these touches, shown in bold in the Channel column, are personal and cannot be automated. Your CRM cannot record a video or make a call. What it can do is alert you when one is due. Build those alerts in, or the personal touches quietly get skipped, which is the fastest way to break the whole sequence.

#	Day	Channel	Purpose	What you send
1	Day 0	Email	Deliver, and deliver value	Whatever they asked for (the guide, the result, the answer), plus one quick win they can act on today. Set the expectation that more useful things are coming.
2	Day 2	Email	Name the common mistake	The single most common mistake people in their situation make, and the three-sentence fix. Costs them nothing, proves you know the terrain.
3	Day 5	Email	Proof by story	A short story of someone like them who had the same problem, what changed, and the one transferable lesson. Not a case study with your logo on it. A story.
4	Day 9	Personal note or short video	Be a human	A 30-second video or a two-line personal note. No ask. “Saw you grabbed the guide, here’s the one thing I’d focus on first.” This is the touch that breaks the automated feel.
5	Day 14	Email	Give a tool	A checklist, template, or worksheet they can use whether or not they ever hire you. A second real gift, no strings.
6	Day 21	Email	Answer the FAQ	The question you get asked constantly at this stage, answered plainly. You are resetting their buying criteria, teaching them what a good decision looks like.
7	Day 30	Call or voicemail	A human check-in	A genuine, low-pressure call or ringless voicemail. Not “ready to buy?” Instead: “Wanted to make sure the guide was useful and see how things are going.” If no answer, a voicemail and a follow-up email the same day.
8	Day 40	Email	Proof by numbers	A concrete result. A before-and-after, a metric, a specific outcome. This is where you show, quietly, that the thing works.
9	Day 52	Email	A fresh angle	Reframe their problem from a different direction, or tie it to something timely in their world. Keeps you from sounding like a loop.
10	Day 66	Personal note or social	Light touch	A relevant article you found (not yours), forwarded with “thought of you.” Or a genuine comment on something they posted. Presence, not pursuit.
11	Day 80	Email	The soft, direct offer	Now you make a clear, low-pressure offer to talk. “If it would help to walk through your situation, I’m glad to. Fifteen minutes, no pitch, and you’ll leave knowing your next move whether or not we work together.”
12	Day 90	Email	The graceful shift	Tell the truth about what happens next. “I’ll stop the frequent notes here. I’ll keep sending something useful about once a month. Whenever the timing is right, one reply gets us going.” Then they roll into the monthly Long Nurture from Appendix A.

Reading the cadence

It front-loads value and back-loads the ask. The first offer to actually talk does not appear until touch eleven, on day eighty. Everything before it is you being useful. By the time you make the ask, you have given six or seven genuinely helpful things and asked for nothing. That is what earns the yes.

It escalates channel intimacy on purpose. Emails carry the early value. A human video or note lands at touch four, before anyone could feel spammed. The one real call sits at day thirty, the midpoint, after you have earned the right to it. This is not an accident of scheduling. It is the trust curve.

Automate around the human touches, do not skip them. A CRM cannot make a video or place a personal call, at least not yet, and you would not want it to. What it can do is notify you or the contact's owner a day before one of these personal touches is due, and hold the sequence until you confirm it was done. Build those notifications into your automation. The personal touches are the ones that break the machine feel, and they are exactly the ones a busy owner drops first. The alert is what keeps them from being dropped.

Nobody reaches touch twelve if the system is working. Most people who are going to engage will engage somewhere in the middle, around the call at day thirty or the proof at day forty, and the cadence stops for them the instant they do. Touch twelve is only for the people who stayed quiet the whole way, and even for them it does not end the relationship. It downshifts it.

Ninety days is a floor, not a ceiling. If your buying cycle is long, stretch the spacing. A prospect who buys once every five years does not need touch six on day twenty-one; they need the same twelve touches spread across six months. Keep the sequence, change the clock. Chapter 13 is the reason: the channel and the buyer set the pace, not the calendar.

Then comes the next touch, which never ends. When this ninety-day sequence finishes, the contact does not fall off a cliff. They join your monthly cadence, the ongoing rhythm that keeps you top of mind for every one of your 30% contacts, and they stay there until the day they raise their hand for real.

The one that undoes all the others

Build the stop-trigger first, before you write a single email.

If a prospect replies to touch three and then receives touch four on schedule, you have told them, in the clearest possible way, that the warmth was never real. It was a machine the whole time. Every good thing the previous touches earned is spent in that one moment.

The machine runs the cadence. The instant a human answers, the human takes over, and you go to Chapter 15 and have the conversation. Get that handoff right and this cadence is a quiet, patient engine. Get it wrong and it is an insult with a schedule.

The internal version Leadstra runs on completed Scorecards, with the exact timing, Scenario-specific content, and GoHighLevel stop-logic, lives in a separate build sheet. This appendix is the template. Set the clock to your own business.