



FIELD NOTES / 01

The Early-Stage Software Growth Playbook

For founders who have built something and need to find out, quickly and cheaply, whether people will pay for it. Then how to make growth repeatable.

THE 80/20 RULE

**FOCUS. PROVE.
REPEAT. THEN
SCALE.**

Do the few things that produce most of the result.



BEFORE YOU START

You've built something. Now you need to know if people will pay for it.

People who have seen your product have been encouraging, and some said they would buy it. But sales are harder than you expected. Conversations stall, people don't get back to you, and you wonder whether to build more, drop the price or start again. Whether you have no customers yet or a few lukewarm ones, you are not behind and you are not alone.

WHY I WROTE THIS

I have spent more than 30 years in technology sales and leadership, 18 of them at Microsoft, and I now spend much of my time with early-stage founders. Selling is hard, and when people ignore you or say no it can feel personal. It is not. Two things I have learned make it easier.

Sales is a science before it is an art. A few well-proven practices, followed consistently, matter far more than flair: talk to the right people, ask good questions, make clear offers, and write down what actually happened.

People buy from people they trust, and trust cannot be faked. Think how it feels to get a message from a stranger who is plainly focused on their own agenda. A trusted introduction can open a conversation that a cold message never would. That is why this guide starts with relationships.

THE 80/20 RULE: A FEW THINGS PRODUCE MOST OF THE RESULT

THE 20% THAT MATTERS NOW

- Talking to the people who live with the problem.
- Asking for a real commitment, even a small one.
- Watching what customers do, not what they say.
- Fixing whatever stops customers getting the result.

THE 80% THAT CAN USUALLY WAIT

- More features.
- More marketing channels or paid advertising.
- A polished website, deck or brand.
- Hiring salespeople, and tools to manage them.

You do not need to read all of this. Turn to page 4, find the situation that sounds like yours, and start there.

Paul Mason



THE GUIDE ON ONE PAGE

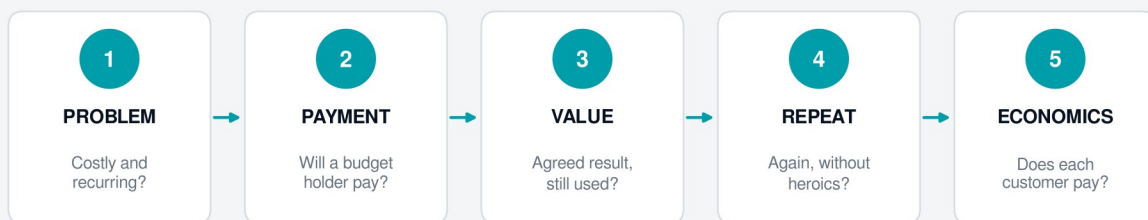
Prove the market, then grow it

Part I helps you find out, quickly and cheaply, whether people will pay. Part II helps you make winning and keeping customers repeatable, once the evidence says it is worth it.

PART I | PROVE THE MARKET

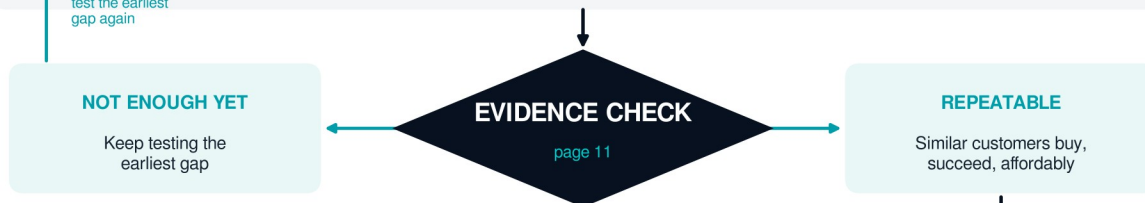
pages 4-11

Find out if people will pay



Five tests, in order. Judge on what customers do. You will be selling here: to learn, not yet to scale.

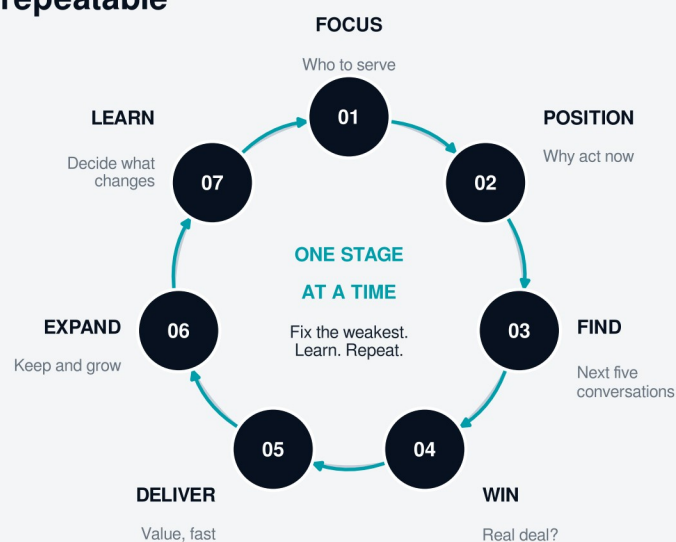
test the earliest gap again



PART II | THE GROWTH LOOP

pages 12-13

Make growth repeatable





START HERE

Where are you stuck?

Find the row that sounds most like you. Different problems need different fixes, so each row points to a different next step.

YOUR SITUATION	WHAT IT OFTEN MEANS	YOUR NEXT MOVE	PAGE
Nobody will talk to you, or conversations go nowhere	The wrong people, the wrong message, or the wrong route to reach them	Start with introductions, and change who you approach and what you ask	8
People are interested, but nobody is serious	The problem may be real but not urgent, or it may matter only to a narrower group	Find who has the problem badly (Test 1)	6
People like it but will not pay	Wrong buyer, not urgent enough, or an unclear offer	Make a clear, priced offer to whoever holds the budget (Test 2)	9
You have one or two paying customers	Encouraging, but you do not yet know whether they got the result, or why they bought	Check they got the result (Test 3), then find what they share (Test 4)	6
Customers buy but rarely use it	The product, the set-up or the type of customer is not delivering the result	Check the result customers actually get (Test 3)	6
Customers succeed, but each one takes huge effort	Selling or delivery is too custom to repeat	Find and fix the steps that take the most time (Test 5)	7
Similar customers keep buying and succeeding	You may be ready to grow, carefully	Check the evidence, then Part II	11

If you recognise yourself in the first three rows, that is normal at this stage. It is not a verdict on you or your idea. It tells you where to put the next few weeks.

**PART I: PROVE THE MARKET**

Customers are not the same as a market

A few customers, a good demo and a growing list of contacts can all exist without a market. The difference matters, because spending to grow only works once there is a market to grow into.

WHAT FOUNDERS SAY**WHAT IT MAY ACTUALLY MEAN**

"People love our demo."	They like the idea but have no urgent reason to buy.
"We have ten customers."	Each bought something different, or needed a custom build.
"A big name signed."	A personal relationship or discount made one unusual deal possible.
"Lots of people are interested."	Interest is rising, but nobody is committing money.
"Our customers are happy."	They rarely use it, or depend on constant help from you.

WHAT "PRODUCT-MARKET FIT" MEANS

A clear group of customers share a problem, pay to solve it and keep using what you have built, and more customers like them do the same. It is the evidence that says spending to grow will work. It is rarely proved in one moment: it builds up, test by test.

ONE RULE FOR EVERY TEST

Judge by what customers do, not what they say. Run the five tests on the next two pages in order, and stop at the first one you cannot pass with evidence.

Not passing a test does not mean give up. It means you have found the assumption that deserves your attention before you spend more time or money.



PART I: THE FIVE TESTS

Problem, payment, value

Each test needs a belief that could be wrong, a time limit and a decision. The Experiment Card on page 15 helps you run them.

TEST 1

PROBLEM

The question: Do people in one narrow group have a costly, recurring problem they want solved now?

How: Talk to people who live with the problem, including some who have never heard of you. Ask about the last time it happened. Do not demo the product.

Good evidence: Unconnected people describe the same problem, what it costs them and how they cope today.

If it stalls, check: are you talking to the people who live with it, and asking about their work rather than your product? Narrow the group before deciding there is no problem.

TEST 2

PAYMENT

The question: Will someone who controls a budget commit money to solve it?

How: Put a clear offer to a budget holder: the result, the price, how long, and how success is judged. Ask for a decision, not feedback.

Good evidence: A paid pilot, purchase order or signed commitment. In long buying cycles, a named budget holder moving it through approval.

If it stalls, check: can this person spend? Is the problem urgent now? Is the offer clear? Ask the people who said no why. Their answers are evidence too.

TEST 3

VALUE

The question: Does the product deliver the result the customer paid for?

How: Before the pilot, agree one measurable result and note the starting point. Log the help you give. Check the result, then check usage again a month or two later.

Good evidence: The customer gets the agreed result, describes it in their own words and keeps using it without being chased.

If it stalls, check: compare customers who succeeded with those who did not. The difference is often set-up, the user or the type of customer, not the product.



PART I: THE FIVE TESTS

Repeatability and economics

Tests 1 to 3 can be passed with one or two friendly customers. Tests 4 and 5 are where most early-stage companies find out whether they have a market or a handful of exceptions.

TEST 4**REPEAT**

The question: Can you do it again with similar customers, without heroics?

How: Sell the same offer to more customers of the same type, with no prior relationship, special discount or custom build. Write the set-up steps down and log every exception.

Good evidence: Several unconnected paying customers of the same type share the problem, the reason to buy and the result. Three is a sensible default; in long enterprise sales, comparable paid pilots can count.

If it stalls, check: if every customer wants something different, you are probably selling to too wide a group. Go back to the customers who succeeded and find what they share.

TEST 5**ECONOMICS**

The question: Can you win, set up and support each customer for less than they pay you?

How: Record the hours to win, set up and support every customer. Separate the one-off cost of winning and setting up a customer from the monthly cost of keeping them.

Good evidence: Each customer pays back the one-off cost well within the time they are likely to stay, and effort per customer is flat or falling.

If it stalls, check: find the one or two steps that take most of the time, often set-up, and fix those first.

WORKED EXAMPLE: WHEN DOES A CUSTOMER PAY BACK? (ILLUSTRATIVE FIGURES)

A customer pays €400 a month. Winning them takes 20 hours and setting them up 25 hours. Valuing your time at an illustrative €40 an hour, that one-off cost is €1,800. Support takes 4 hours a month (€160), leaving €240 a month. So the customer pays back after about 7.5 months, before hosting and other costs. Cut set-up to 10 hours and the one-off cost falls to €1,200: payback in 5 months. The real question is whether customers stay well beyond that point.

**PART I: GETTING THE EVIDENCE**

Getting people to talk to you

People talk to people they have a reason to trust. Start where trust already exists, and earn it everywhere else by being relevant, honest and brief.

WHO TO APPROACH, IN THIS ORDER

- Introductions first: ask customers, contacts and advisers who they know with the problem.
- Then shared ground: the same trade body, group, forum or event.
- Then people who said no before, or deals you lost.
- Cold messages last, and only well-researched ones.
- Friends, colleagues and investors can be great for introductions. Just do not count their encouragement as evidence.

WHAT TO ASK WHEN YOU GET THE CONVERSATION

- Tell me about the last time this happened.
- What did it cost: time, money, quality or risk?
- What do you do about it today, and what have you tried?
- What would make fixing it a priority now?
- Who else would be involved in deciding?

WHAT GETS A REPLY FROM A STRANGER

- One real observation about their business, so it is clearly not a mass email.
- The problem as something you have heard from people like them, not something you assume.
- An honest reason for asking.
- A small first request: a reply, not a meeting.

EXAMPLE: A FIRST MESSAGE (ILLUSTRATIVE)

"Hi [name], I noticed [company] runs its own delivery fleet. Operations managers I have spoken to at similar firms tell me chasing signed delivery notes takes up most of a day each week. Is that true for you, or have you already solved it? I am building software for this, so I am trying to find out how big the problem really is before I go further. A one-line reply would genuinely help. If it is a headache, I would value 15 minutes to understand how you handle it."

IF NOBODY REPLIES

Follow up once, after a week, then stop. Then check the list (do these people have the problem?), the message (is it about them or about you?) and the route (would an introduction work better?). Change one thing at a time before drawing conclusions about the market.

**PART I: GETTING THE EVIDENCE**

Asking for money

Asking for money feels uncomfortable, especially with a product that is still rough. But a paid commitment is the clearest evidence you will get, and a clear offer respects the buyer's time.

WHEN TO MAKE AN OFFER

Once someone has told you the problem matters to them now. Keep it specific: one result, a fixed scope, a price, an end date and how you will both judge success.

EXAMPLE: AN OFFER AFTER A GOOD CONVERSATION (ILLUSTRATIVE)

"Thanks for walking me through how you handle delivery paperwork. You mentioned it takes about a day a week. I would like to offer a 60-day pilot: we set it up with your drivers, and we measure the hours spent chasing paperwork before and after. It costs €400 a month, and you can stop at the end if it has not saved the time. Would it be worth putting to whoever signs off the spend?"

HOW TO CHOOSE A PRICE

Start from what the problem costs the customer and what fixing it would let them do, not from what the software cost you to build. Time saved only counts if they can use it for something that matters to them. Then test a real price in a real offer and see what happens. If you are unsure, ask: "If this worked, what would it be worth to you each month?"

FREE OR PAID?

A paid pilot is the strongest early evidence, but it shows only that this buyer will commit money on these terms, not that they will pay your long-term price or renew. Sometimes a free pilot is unavoidable, for example when a large company's purchasing process makes quick payment impossible. If so, ask for a different commitment: a named sponsor, an agreed measure of success, and an agreed price if it works.

You will be selling before you have proved the market. That is how you get the evidence. What should wait is spending to scale selling: hiring, paid campaigns and partner programmes.



PART I: WHAT REAL EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

One business, five tests

An illustrative software business that helps logistics firms stop chasing delivery paperwork. The figures are invented to show how imperfect evidence turns into decisions.

TEST	WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN	WHAT THEY DID NEXT
1 Problem	14 operations managers interviewed. 9 described the same weekly paperwork chase; 5 did not.	All 9 ran their own delivery fleets. The other 5 used outside carriers.	Narrowed to firms that run their own fleet.
2 Payment	12 saw the offer. 8 said it was useful. 2 signed a €400 a month pilot.	Most who declined said the budget sat with the finance director. Wrong buyer, not wrong problem?	Same offer to 8 finance directors, framed as monthly cost. 3 signed.
3 Value	Of 5 pilots, 3 cut paperwork chasing from about a day a week to under half a day. 2 stalled.	In the 2 that stalled, drivers never used the app. It worked when drivers did.	Made driver set-up part of onboarding and restarted the 2.
4 Repeat	Next 4 prospects of the same type, standard offer. 3 bought for the same reason. 1 wanted a custom integration.	An early pattern, not yet proof.	Declined the custom work. Wrote the set-up steps down.
5 Economics	Set-up took about 25 hours per customer at first, about 10 once written down.	On the page 7 figures, payback falls from about 7.5 to 5 months, if support stays at 4 hours a month.	Kept tracking support hours. Did not hire a salesperson.

Their conclusion: promising, not yet repeatable. Sales are starting to repeat: 8 firms of one type have paid. Results and costs are not yet proven: 2 of 5 pilots needed a restart, the 3 newest customers have not reached their result yet, and support time over a year is unknown. Selling repeatably is not the same as delivering repeatably.

Notice what helped most: the people who said no. Each "no" pointed to the next, cheaper test.



PART I: THE EVIDENCE CHECK

What does the evidence justify doing next?

There is no single moment when product-market fit is proved. The useful question is what your evidence justifies doing next. Start by sorting what you know from what you hope.

WHAT WE KNOW
(CUSTOMERS DID IT)

WHAT WE SUSPECT

WHAT WE NEED TO FIND
OUT NEXT

WHERE YOU ARE

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

WHAT IT JUSTIFIES

Not enough evidence yet

Tests 1, 2 or 3 are unclear

Keep testing the earliest assumption you cannot support

Promising, not repeatable

Some customers pay and get value, but the pattern or the cost is unclear

Win and serve more customers of the same type, without spending significantly more

Evidence of repeatability

Similar, unconnected customers buy, succeed and are affordable to serve

Begin carefully testing ways to win more customers economically (Part II)

USEFUL DEFAULTS, NOT RULES

Around 10 problem conversations, including people who have not bought, and around 3 unconnected paying customers of the same type (or comparable paid pilots in long enterprise sales). Meeting these does not prove a market. Falling short means you cannot yet tell. An annual contract does not fail because its first renewal has not arrived: look at usage and what the budget holder says about renewing.

Optional, once you have about 40 active users: ask "How would you feel if you could no longer use the product?" Fewer than 40% answering "very disappointed" is a warning sign. Credit: Sean Ellis (source: First Round Review, "How Superhuman Built an Engine to Find Product/Market Fit").



PART II: THE GROWTH LOOP

Make winning and keeping customers repeatable

You will already have been finding people, explaining the value and winning a few deals to get your evidence. Part II is about making that work without heroic effort, one stage at a time. Still working through Part I? Skip to page 14.

01 FOCUS**Choose who to serve**

Ask: Which customers have the most important problem we already solve well?

Do now: Find what your best customers have in common. Write one sentence on who you will serve for 90 days, and who you will turn away.

Not yet: Market sizing models and detailed personas.

02 POSITION**Make the value obvious**

Ask: Why should this customer change, choose us and act now?

Do now: Describe their problem, its cost and the result in their words before any feature. Use the same story in every call, email and proposal.

Not yet: A rebrand, or different messages for many different buyers.

03 FIND**Reach the right customers**

Ask: Where are our next five good customer conversations most likely to come from?

Do now: Check how your best customers found you, and ask them for introductions. Pick no more than two ways to reach more like them and test each with a set time and budget.

Not yet: Five channels at once, or big paid budgets.



PART II: THE GROWTH LOOP

Win, deliver, expand, learn

04 WIN**Turn interest into commitment**

Ask: Is there a real problem, someone able to buy and a reason to act now?

Do now: Agree what the buyer needs to see, show only that, and keep a dated next step. Make the offer easy to buy: a standard package and a clear price.

Not yet: Heavy sales process on every deal.

Watch for: never qualified? Requalify or drop it. Qualified but stuck in their process? Help them through it rather than discounting.

05 DELIVER**Get customers to value fast**

Ask: What must happen for this customer to see the value they paid for?

Do now: Define the first result they will notice. Remove every step that does not lead to it.

Not yet: Automating onboarding before the manual path works.

Watch for: a finished set-up is not value. If customers finish set-up but never get the result, fix the path.

06 EXPAND**Keep customers, then grow them**

Ask: Which customers have had enough value to renew, refer or buy more?

Do now: Check every important account for use and risk. Offer more only once the first use works.

Not yet: Scoring systems while you can still talk to every customer.

Watch for: risk shows months before renewal: falling use, or the main user leaving.

07 LEARN**Turn evidence into decisions**

Ask: What did customers do this week that should change what we do next?

Do now: A short weekly review (page 14). One weak stage, one experiment, decisions written down.

Not yet: Dashboards and reporting that nobody acts on.



NEXT STEPS

Your next seven days, and the next 90

The aim this week is not a number of calls. It is one thing you know on day seven that you did not know on day one.

THE NEXT SEVEN DAYS

- 1 Find your row on page 4. Write down the one assumption you are least sure of.
- 2 Fill in boxes 1 to 4 of an Experiment Card (page 16) for that assumption.
- 3 List the people most likely to live with the problem, starting with introductions (page 8).
- 4 Reach out personally and hold whatever conversations you can get. Record what people did, as well as what they said.
- 5 On day seven, review progress: what have you learned so far, and what will you do next week? An experiment ends at its agreed limit, not after seven days.

THE NEXT 90 DAYS

STILL PROVING THE MARKET

- Work on the earliest test you cannot yet pass.
- One Experiment Card at a time, each with a time limit.
- Narrow the customer type before widening it.

EVIDENCE OF REPEATABILITY

- Confirm who you serve and why they buy.
- Pick the one Growth Loop stage holding you back.
- Run one or two experiments on it, with a set budget.

Every week, 20 to 45 minutes: what did customers do, what might it mean, what is the smallest next step and who owns it, and what will we stop doing?

WHEN TO STOP, OR CHANGE DIRECTION

Before you start, decide how much time and money you are prepared to invest before you step back and reassess, and write it down. Then watch for three signs: no costly problem found across several credible customer groups; realistic offers repeatedly turned down; costs that stay above what customers pay, even after sensible improvements.

None of these alone proves an idea is dead. But perseverance without a limit can become the most expensive assumption of all. Stopping or changing direction on evidence is a good decision, not a failure.



TOOL 1

Experiment Card

Write down what you expect before you start, so the result cannot quietly be reinterpreted afterwards.

HOW TO USE IT

- 1 One card per test. Fill in boxes 1 to 4 before you start.
- 2 Run the test until the limit in box 4. Do not move the goalposts.
- 3 Record what happened (5) and at least two possible explanations (6): "no budget" can mean several things.
- 4 Choose the smallest sensible next step (7). Keep every card.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE: TEST 2 FROM PAGE 10 (ILLUSTRATIVE)

BOX	EXAMPLE
1 Test	2 Payment
2 We believe	Operations managers at firms running their own delivery fleet lose about a day a week chasing paperwork and will pay €400 a month to fix it.
3 We expect	At least 3 of 12 sign a paid 60-day pilot. Fewer than 2 means our belief is wrong as stated.
4 Who and limit	12 named operations managers, none of them friends. Six weeks, 25 hours, no ad spend.
5 What happened	8 said it was useful. 2 signed. 6 of the 10 who did not said the budget sits with the finance director.
6 Possible explanations	Wrong buyer: the problem is real, the budget is elsewhere. Or the problem is not costly enough for the price.
7 Next step	Refine. 2 is between the pass mark (3) and fail mark (under 2): inconclusive. Same offer to 8 finance directors, framed as monthly cost.

The 3, the 12 and the six weeks are choices made for this example, not benchmarks. Pick yours by asking: what result would genuinely change my mind?

A GOOD CARD

The belief is specific enough to be wrong
The expected result is written down first
Looks for more than one explanation

A WEAK CARD

"Businesses need better reporting"
Success is defined after seeing the results
Picks the explanation it hoped for



TOOL 1

Experiment Card: your test

Fill in boxes 1 to 4 before you start. Fill in 5 to 7 when the limit is reached.

1 WHICH TEST

- ☐ 1 Problem ☐ 2 Payment ☐ 3 Value
☐ 4 Repeat ☐ 5 Economics

2 WE BELIEVE

Who has what problem, and what they will do about it. Specific enough to be wrong.

3 WE EXPECT

The result that would support our belief, and the result that would not.

4 WHO AND LIMIT

Named people, including some who have never bought. Weeks, hours and cash.

5 WHAT HAPPENED

What people did: paid, signed, used, referred, declined, went quiet.

6 POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

At least two. What else could explain this result?

7 DECISION AND SMALLEST NEXT STEP**TICK ONE****WHEN****THEN**

☐ Double down	The result supports the belief	Move on to the next test
☐ Refine	The result is mixed or inconclusive	Change one thing (buyer, offer or price) and rerun
☐ Stop	The result contradicts the belief	Rethink the problem or the buyer

Our next step, owner and date: _____



TOOL 2

Customer evidence tracker

One row per customer or pilot. Do not hide discounts, custom work or rescues behind an average.

CUSTOMER	PAID / TERMS	AGREED RESULT REACHED?	STILL USING?	EXCEPTIONS	HOURS: WIN / SET- UP / SUPPORT
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PAYBACK, PER CUSTOMER

One-off cost = (hours to win + hours to set up) x the value of your time. Monthly margin = monthly price - (support hours a month x the value of your time). Months to pay back = one-off cost / monthly margin. Then compare that with how long customers are likely to stay.

WHAT DO THE CUSTOMERS WHO SUCCEEDED HAVE IN COMMON?



TOOL 3

Growth Loop stage check

For Part II. Score each stage 0 to 2 every few weeks. The lowest score, earliest in the loop, is a starting point: check that fixing it would make a real difference before you act.

0 NO

Not true, or no evidence.

1 PARTLY

True sometimes, or only with a lot of founder effort.

2 YES

True consistently, and you can point to results, not just activity.

STAGE**0****1****2**

01 Most recent successful customers fit our written 90-day focus.

☐☐☐

02 Prospects repeat our value story and see a reason to act now.

☐☐☐

03 One or two routes reliably produce conversations that reach a serious next step.

☐☐☐

04 Qualified deals progress through the buyer's process at a predictable pace.

☐☐☐

05 Most new customers reach first value, and we know how long it takes.

☐☐☐

06 Customers who reach value keep using it, and we spot risk before renewal.

☐☐☐

07 Our weekly review produces decisions that change what we do.

☐☐☐**THE STAGE WE WILL IMPROVE FOR THE NEXT 90 DAYS**



THE 80/20 RULE

Focus. Prove. Repeat. Then scale.

The purpose of this guide is not to make an early-stage software company look like a large one. It is to help you find out what is worth growing, and then grow it without wasting the time and money you do not have.

YOUR NEXT MOVE

Turn to page 4, find the situation that sounds like yours, and fill in one Experiment Card this week.

For larger teams, the fuller Chief Growth Officer Playbook in the Field Notes series covers the complete operating system.

PAUL MASON CONSULTING

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