

Sandbox
Réseau

early start up
playbook

A step-by-step guide to finding out if anyone actually
wants what you're building.

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● THE PROBLEM THIS DOCUMENT SOLVES

Founders confuse motion with progress.

There's a pattern we keep seeing in the community. A founder has an idea. They get excited. They start building. They spend three months writing code, designing screens, picking a name, incorporating a company, building a pitch deck, talking to investors, going to demo days, adding features, redesigning the landing page, and posting "exciting things coming soon" on LinkedIn.

Six months later, they've built a product. They've burned through their savings. They have a beautiful pitch deck. **And they have zero users.**

Not zero paying users. Zero users. Nobody is using the thing. Or worse — 200 people downloaded it, 15 opened it, and 2 came back. But the founder doesn't know this because they never checked. They were too busy building.

This is the most common way startups die in Accra. Not from bad ideas. From building the wrong thing for too long without checking.

This document is the antidote. It's a stage-by-stage playbook for the earliest phase of building — from "I have an idea" to "people are using this and coming back." It will stop you from wasting months building something nobody wants, stop you from raising money too early, and stop you from confusing motion with progress.



If you follow this, you'll either validate your idea fast or kill it fast. Both are wins.

Maxwell Cofie, Sandbox Réseau

The golden rules

Before we get into the stages, burn these into your brain:

01

Don't Build Yet

Your first instinct is wrong. The idea hits you, and you want to open your laptop and start coding. Don't. The first thing you build should be a conversation, not a product. Talk to the people you think have the problem. If the problem isn't real, no amount of code will fix that.

02

Revenue Before Raising

Fundraising is not a milestone. Revenue is. If you can get 10 people to pay you GH¢50/month for something, you have more proof than any pitch deck will ever give you. Investors invest in traction, not ideas. The best time to raise is when you don't desperately need to.

03

Traction Before Features

Stop adding features. Seriously. If your first 50 users aren't coming back, adding a dark mode, a referral system, and an AI chatbot won't help. Features don't fix a product nobody wants. Fix the core value first. Everything else is decoration.

04

Speed Over Perfection

The startup that launches a rough product this week and learns from real users will always beat the startup that spends 6 months building the "perfect" version. Your first version should embarrass you a little. If it doesn't, you launched too late.

05

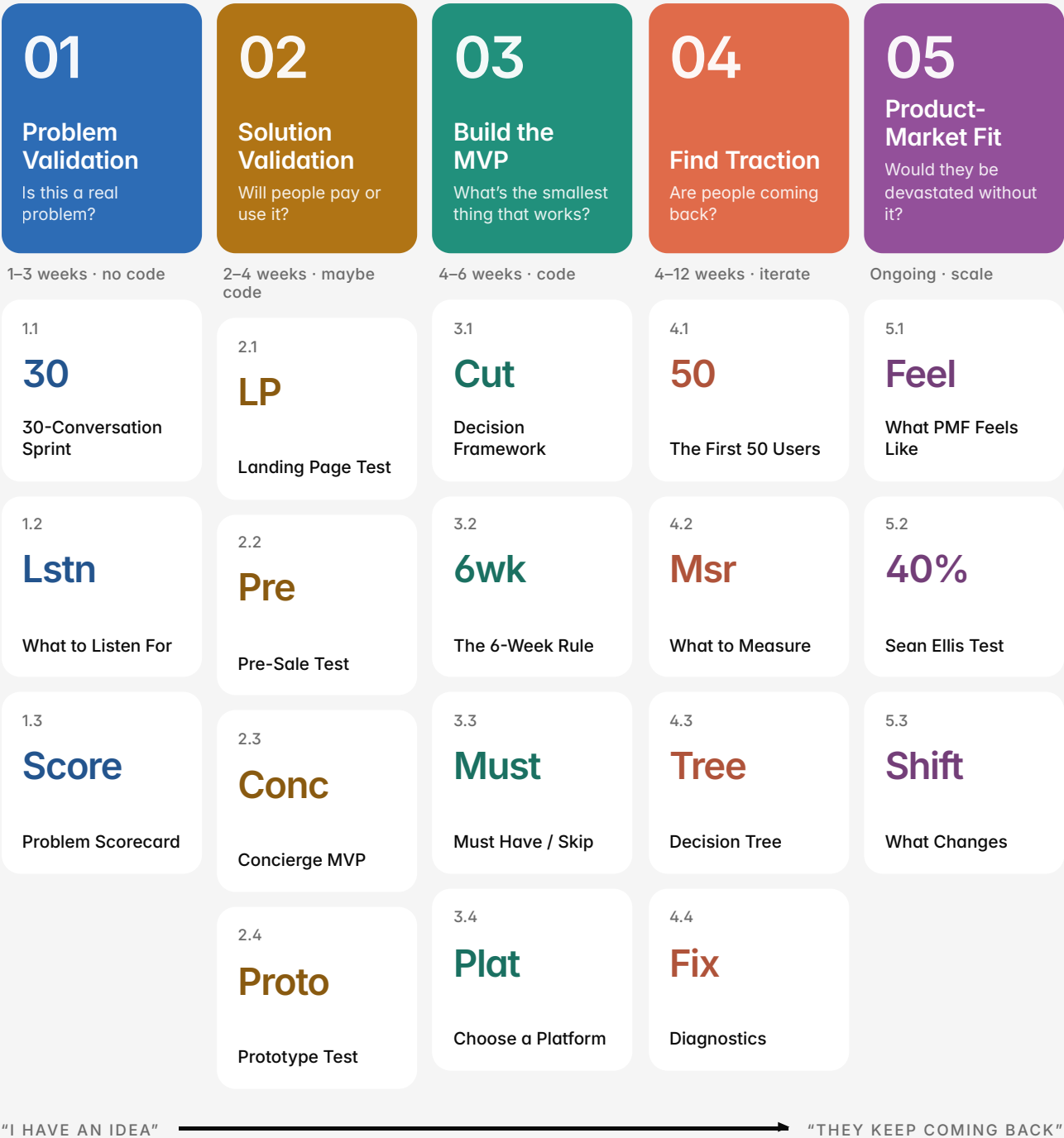
Evidence Over Instinct

"I just know there's a market for this" is not evidence. Evidence is: 30 people told you they have this problem. 10 people said they'd pay to solve it. 5 people actually paid. Your gut is a hypothesis. Data is proof.

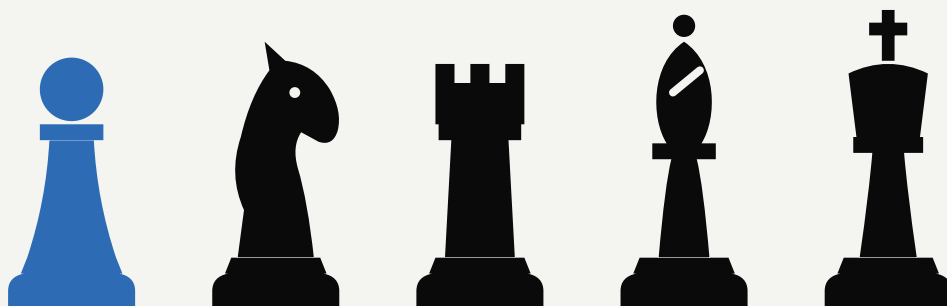
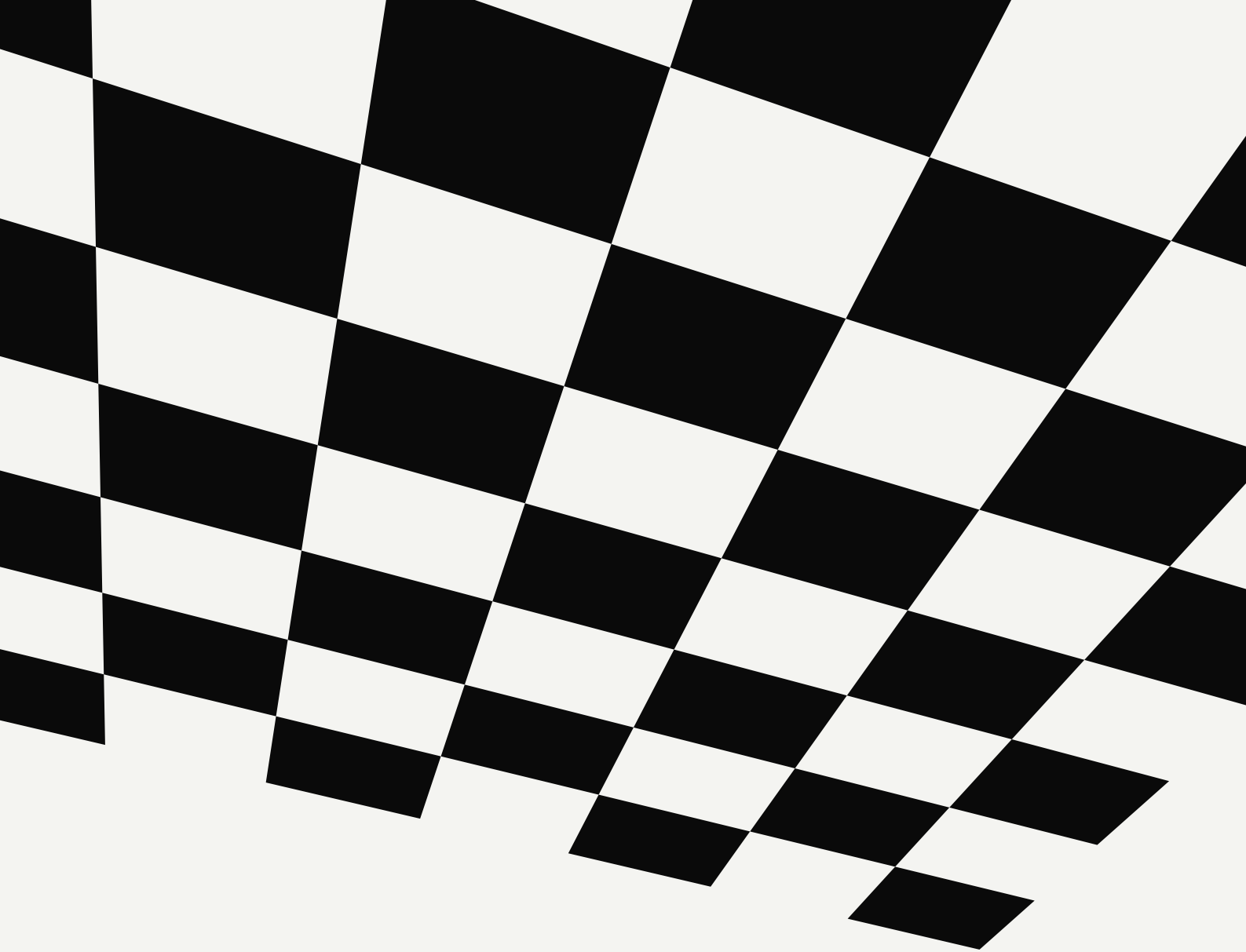
FIGURE 0.1

The stages

The full journey from idea to product-market fit. Each stage exists because the one before it must be validated first.



Most founders try to skip stages. Don't. **Most founders start at Stage 3.** They jump straight to building. They skip the two stages that tell you whether you should be building at all. That's why they fail.



STAGE 01

PROBLEM VALIDATION

IS THIS A REAL PROBLEM?



WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO LEARN / THE 30-CONVERSATION SPRINT /
WHAT TO LISTEN FOR / THE PROBLEM VALIDATION SCORECARD

1-3 WEEKS • ZERO CODE

DURATION 1–3 weeks	GOAL Confirm that real people have the problem you think they have
TOOLS NEEDED Your mouth, your ears, a notebook	CODE WRITTEN Zero

● 1.1 · PROBLEM

1.1 What You're Trying to Learn

You're not testing your solution. You're not pitching your idea. You're testing whether the problem is **real**, **painful**, and **frequent** enough that people would use (and eventually pay for) something that solves it.

You need answers to five questions:

QUESTION	WHY IT MATTERS
1. Who has this problem?	You need a specific person, not "everyone"
2. How painful is the problem?	Mild annoyance ≠ something worth paying for
3. How do they solve it today?	If there's no current workaround, the problem might not be real
4. How often does it happen?	A problem that happens once a year won't sustain a business
5. Would they pay to make it go away?	This is the only question that ultimately matters

● 1.2 · PROBLEM

1.2 How to Do It: The 30-Conversation Sprint

Talk to **30 people** who you think have the problem. Not your friends. Not your co-founder. Not your mum. People who fit the profile of your target user.

Where to find them

- WhatsApp groups relevant to the industry
- This community (post in #feedback-wanted)
- LinkedIn DMs (be direct, be respectful)
- Industry events, meetups, trade associations
- Your existing network, but only people who actually fit the profile

- Walk into the physical places where your target users are (markets, shops, offices)

How to run the conversation (20–30 minutes)

● THE RULE

Don't pitch. Don't describe your idea. Don't ask leading questions. Ask about their life, their work, their problems. Let them talk.

The script

- 01 "Tell me about how you currently handle [the area your idea relates to]."
- 02 "What's the most frustrating part of that process?"
- 03 "How often does that come up?"
- 04 "What have you tried to solve it?"
- 05 "If something could fix [the problem], what would that look like?"
- 06 "Would you pay for that? How much?"

● 1.3 · PROBLEM

1.3 What to Listen For

SIGNAL

MEANING

● "I actually tried [workaround]..."	Gold. They've already spent time/money trying to solve it.
● "Oh, don't get me started..."	Real pain. They've thought about this before you asked.
● "I'd pay for that tomorrow"	Validate this. Words are cheap — would they actually pay?
● "Yeah, it's kind of annoying"	Mild problem. Not worth building for.
● "I never really thought about it"	Not a problem. Move on.

● 1.4 · PROBLEM

1.4 The Problem Validation Scorecard

After 30 conversations, fill this out honestly. *The blanks are fillable in a PDF reader.*

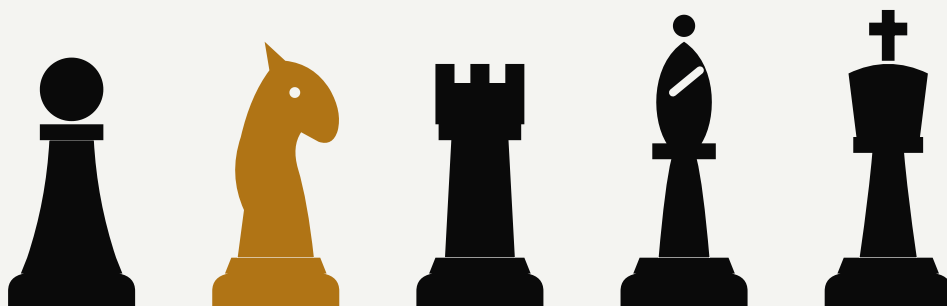
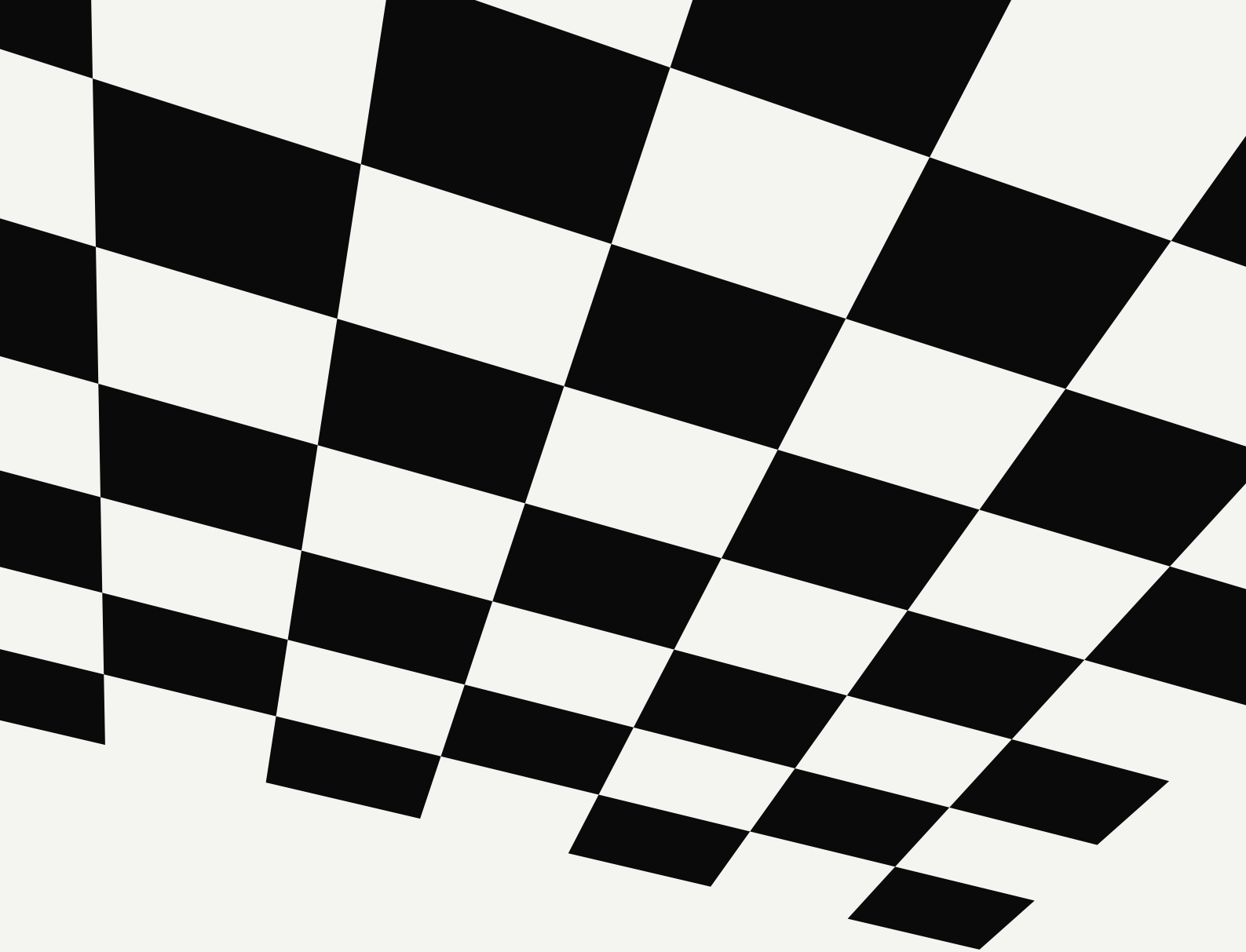
CRITERIA	YOUR SCORE	PASS MARK
How many people confirmed the problem exists?	_____ /30	At least 20/30
How painful is the problem? (1 = mild, 5 = hair-on-fire)	_____ /5	At least 4
Do they have existing workarounds?	Yes / No	Yes = good (proves they care)
Would they pay for a solution?	_____ /30	At least 10/30 saying yes
How often does the problem occur?	_____	Daily/weekly = strong. Monthly/yearly = weak.

Decision point

RESULT	WHAT TO DO
● Strong across the board	Move to Stage 2
● Mixed signals (some strong, some weak)	Do 15 more conversations. Narrow the target user.
● Weak everywhere	Kill the idea. Find a new problem. This is not failure — this is intelligence.

● WHAT NOT TO DO IN STAGE 1

- ✗ **Don't build anything.** Not even a landing page. Not even a prototype. You don't know what to build yet.
- ✗ **Don't pitch your solution.** The moment you describe your idea, people become polite. They'll nod and say "yeah, that sounds cool." That's not validation. That's social courtesy.
- ✗ **Don't ask friends and family.** They love you. They'll lie to you. Talk to strangers who have no reason to be nice.
- ✗ **Don't skip this because you "already know."** You don't. Every failed startup founder "already knew" their market. The ones who succeeded checked anyway.
- ✗ **Don't incorporate a company.** Don't pick a name. Don't design a logo. Don't register a domain. None of that matters if the problem isn't real.



STAGE 02

SOLUTION VALIDATION

WILL PEOPLE USE, AND PAY FOR, A SOLUTION?



WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO LEARN / FOUR WAYS TO VALIDATE /
THE SOLUTION VALIDATION SCORECARD

2-4 WEEKS · MAYBE CODE

DURATION 2–4 weeks	GOAL Confirm that people will use/pay for your specific solution to the problem
TOOLS NEEDED A landing page, a waitlist, a prototype, or a manual version of your product	CODE WRITTEN Minimal. Maybe none.

● 2.1 · SOLUTION

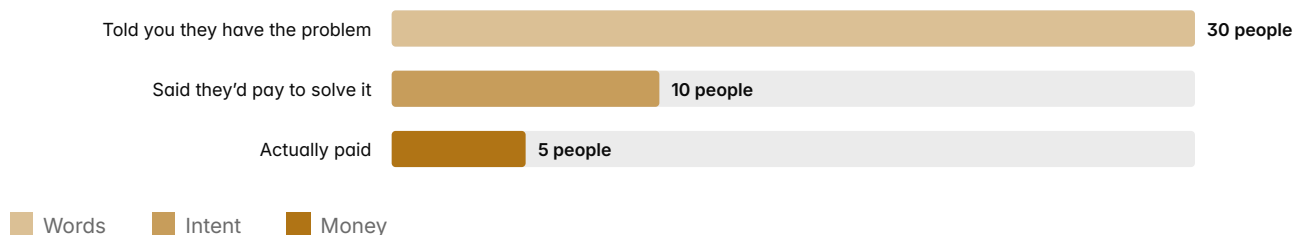
2.1 What You're Trying to Learn

You've confirmed the problem is real. Now you need to confirm that **your approach** to solving it resonates. There are usually many ways to solve a problem. You need to find out if your way is the one people will choose.

FIGURE 2.1

From words to money

Rule 5 in practice: your gut is a hypothesis, data is proof. Each step is stronger evidence than the last.



● 2.2 · SOLUTION

2.2 Four Ways to Validate Without Building the Full Product

Option A: The Landing Page Test

Build a single page that explains what your product does and has one call-to-action: "Join the waitlist" or "Sign up for early access."

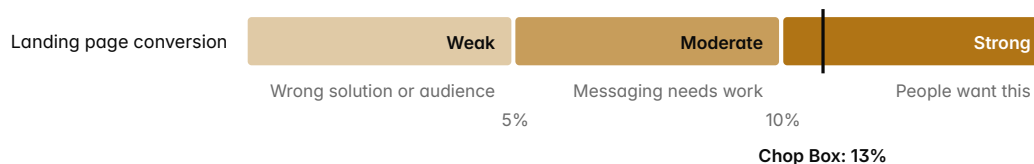
What you need: a clear headline (what it does), 3–4 bullet points (how it helps), a signup form (email or phone number), and a way to drive traffic to it (share in communities, run a small ad, post on LinkedIn).

What you're measuring: conversion rate. What percentage of people who visit the page sign up?

FIGURE 2.2

Reading your landing page

Share of visitors who join the waitlist. Bands: under 5%, 5–10%, over 10% (worked-example result marked).



Tools: Carrd (\$19/year), Typedream (free tier), or a simple HTML page. **Time to set up:** 1–2 hours.

Option B: The Pre-Sale Test

Offer the product for sale before it exists. This is the ultimate validation. If someone gives you money for something that doesn't exist yet, the demand is real.

How to do it: describe what you're building, set a price, ask for payment (even a small deposit), and be transparent: "This launches in [X weeks]. You'll be the first to use it. If we don't deliver, full refund."

What you're measuring: Did anyone pay? Even 5 pre-sales is a powerful signal. What price did they accept? This tells you your willingness-to-pay. What objections did they raise? This tells you what to build and what to skip.

● FOR THE AFRICAN MARKET

Mobile money makes this frictionless. Send a payment link via WhatsApp. If someone sends you GH¢20 via MoMo for a product that doesn't exist yet, you have validation no pitch deck can match.

Option C: The Concierge MVP

Deliver your product's value manually, without building any technology. **You become the product.**

IDEA

CONCIERGE VERSION

An app that matches freelancers with clients	You manually match them via WhatsApp for 4 weeks
A tool that automates invoice reminders	You send the reminders yourself via SMS
A platform for booking event vendors	You take bookings via a Google Form and call vendors yourself
An AI that summarises meeting notes	You attend the meetings and write the summaries by hand

Why this works: you learn exactly what users need because you're doing it by hand. You see every edge case, every frustration, every moment of delight. When you eventually build the product, you'll build the right thing because you were the product.

What you're measuring: Are people willing to use this service, even in its manual form? Do they come back for it again? Will they pay for it?

Option D: The Prototype Test

Build a clickable prototype (not a real product) and put it in front of people. Watch them use it. See where they get confused, excited, or stuck. **Tools:** Figma (free), Marvel, or even a series of screenshots stitched together.

- 01 Recruit 5–10 people who fit your target user profile.
- 02 Give them a task: "You want to [do the thing your product does]. Use this to do it."
- 03 Shut up and watch. Don't guide them. Don't explain. If they need you to explain, your design is broken.
- 04 Note where they hesitate, tap the wrong thing, or say "wait, what?"

What you're measuring: Can people figure out how to use it without help? Do they get excited at any point? ("Oh, this is cool") Do they express a willingness to use/pay for it?

● 2.3 · SOLUTION

2.3 The Solution Validation Scorecard

CRITERIA	RESULT	SIGNAL
Landing page conversion rate	_____ %	> 10% = go
Waitlist signups	_____ people	> 100 in first 2 weeks = strong
Pre-sales collected	_____ sales	Any > 0 = powerful
Concierge users who came back	_____ / total	> 50% = strong
Prototype test: could users complete the task without help?	Yes / No	Must be Yes
Would users pay? (asked directly)	_____ / total	> 50% = go

Decision point

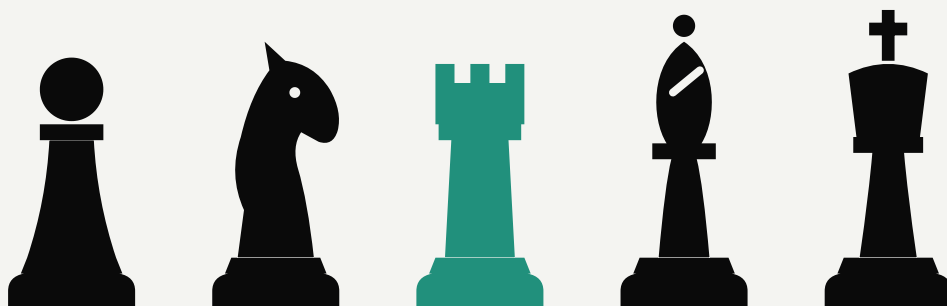
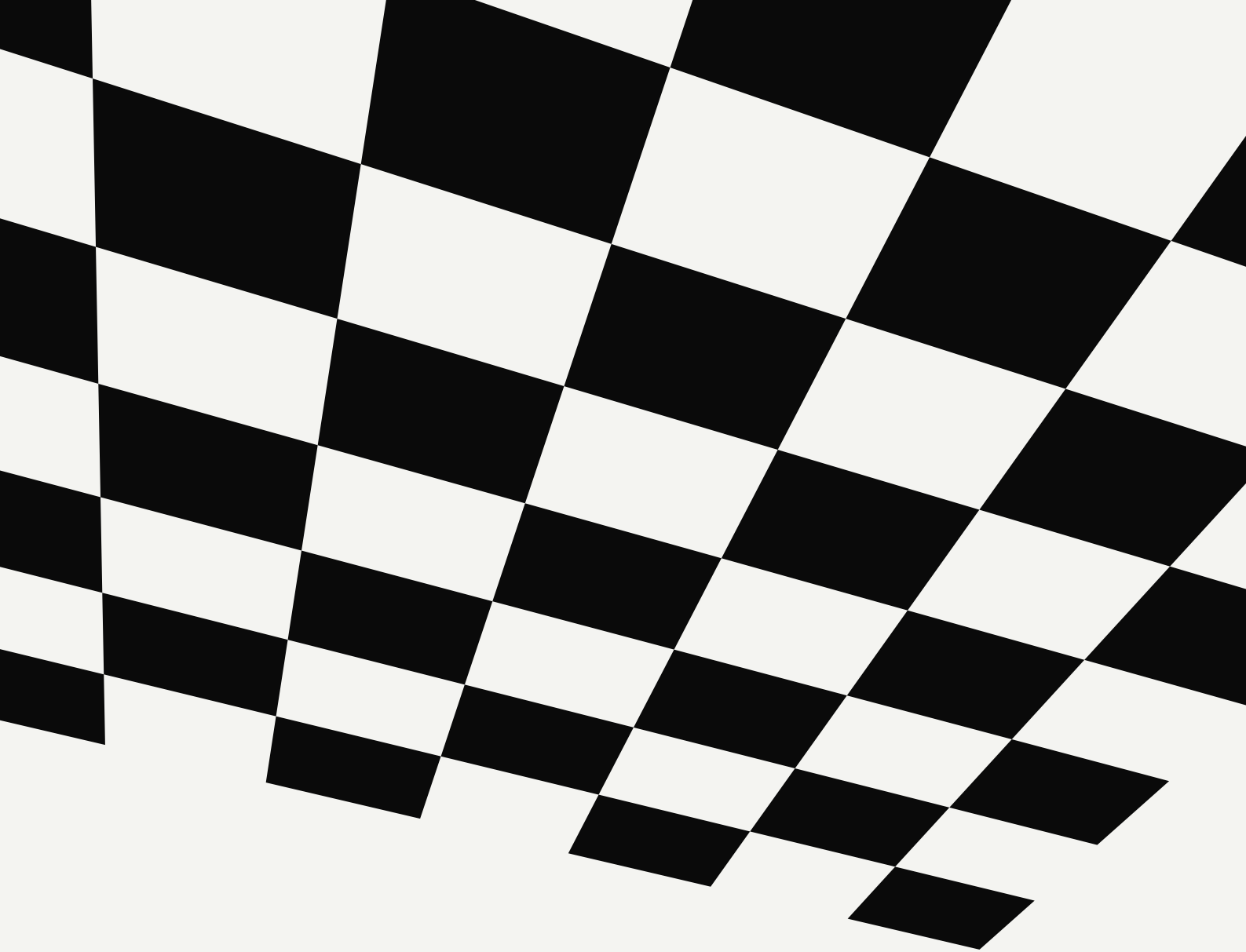
RESULT

WHAT TO DO

● Strong validation signals	Move to Stage 3. Build the MVP.
● Mixed signals	Iterate on the solution. Try a different approach to the same problem.
● No one engaged	Go back to Stage 1. You might have the wrong solution OR the wrong problem.

● WHAT NOT TO DO IN STAGE 2

- ✗ **Don't build the full product.** You're testing whether the solution is right, not shipping version 1.0.
- ✗ **Don't start fundraising.** You have a hypothesis, not a business. No serious investor funds a hypothesis.
- ✗ **Don't hire a team.** You don't know what you're building yet. Hiring now is burning money.
- ✗ **Don't obsess over the name, logo, or brand.** These matter later. Right now, "Untitled Project" with a Google Form is more valuable than a beautiful brand with zero users.



STAGE 03

BUILD THE MVP

WHAT'S THE SMALLEST THING THAT WORKS?

WHAT AN MVP ACTUALLY IS / THE MVP DECISION FRAMEWORK / THE 6-WEEK RULE
/ WHAT YOUR MVP MUST (AND MUST NOT) HAVE / WHICH PLATFORM TO LAUNCH ON

4-6 WEEKS · AS LITTLE CODE AS NECESSARY

DURATION 4–6 weeks (strict)	GOAL Build the smallest possible version of the product that delivers the core value
TOOLS NEEDED Whatever your stack is. Keep it simple.	CODE WRITTEN As little as necessary

● 3.1 · MVP

3.1 What an MVP Actually Is

An MVP is not a bad product. It's not a broken product. It's not a prototype. It's not a demo.

An MVP is the smallest complete product that delivers the core value to the user.

The definition

The keyword is **smallest**. Not “feature-rich.” Not “polished.” Not “what we’d want version 2.0 to look like but launched earlier.” The smallest thing that solves the problem you validated in Stages 1 and 2.

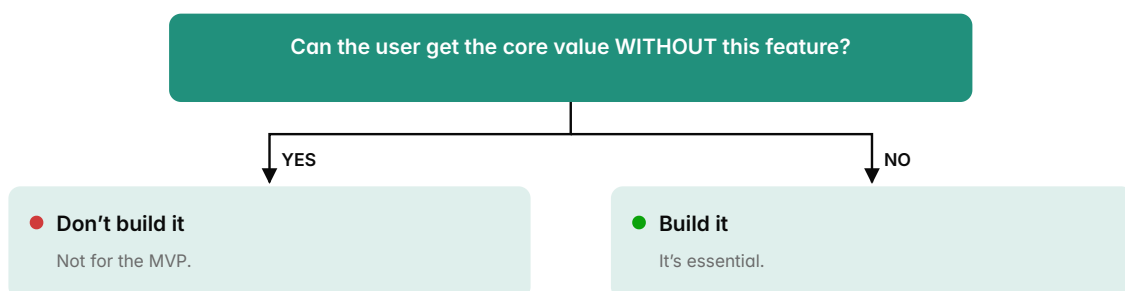
● 3.2 · MVP

3.2 The MVP Decision Framework

FIGURE 3.1

The MVP decision framework

Ask this of every feature you're considering



EXAMPLE

A food delivery app. Browse restaurants, place an order, pay via mobile money: **essential, in the MVP**. Track delivery in real time, rate and review, loyalty points, schedule orders, multi-language, dark mode, referral programme: **not essential, cut**. The MVP is: browse, order, pay. That's it. Ship it.

● 3.3 · MVP

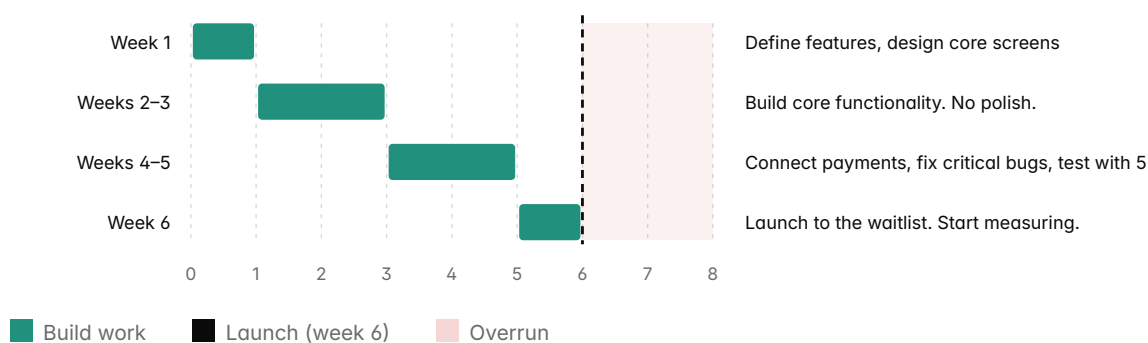
3.3 The 6-Week Rule

Your MVP should take no longer than **6 weeks** to build. If it's going to take longer, you're building too much. Cut scope until it fits in 6 weeks.

FIGURE 3.2

The 6-week build

Weeks along the bottom. Dashed line: launch. Shaded: weeks 7–8, where something is already wrong.



If you're still building after 8 weeks, something is wrong. You're either building too much, you're over-engineering, or you're procrastinating the launch because you're scared of feedback. **Launch scared. Launch ugly. Launch now.**

● 3.4 · MVP

3.4 What Your MVP Must (and Must Not) Have

MUST HAVE**WHY**

● The core action works	The one thing your product exists to do must work reliably
● A way to sign up	Keep it simple. Email, phone, or social login.
● A way to pay (if applicable)	Integrate one payment method. In Ghana, that's MoMo.
● Basic analytics	You must know: who signed up, who activated, who came back. Even a spreadsheet counts.
● A feedback channel	A WhatsApp number, an in-app feedback button, or a simple form. You need to hear from users.

DON'T BUILD THIS**WHY NOT**

● Admin dashboard	Use the database directly or a spreadsheet
● Notification system	Send messages manually for now
● User settings / preferences	One default experience is fine
● Multiple payment methods	One is enough
● Onboarding tutorial	If you need a tutorial, your product is too complex
● Multi-platform (iOS AND Android AND Web)	Pick one. Launch on one.
● Perfect design	Functional > beautiful at this stage
● Social features	You don't have enough users for social to matter

● 3.5 · MVP

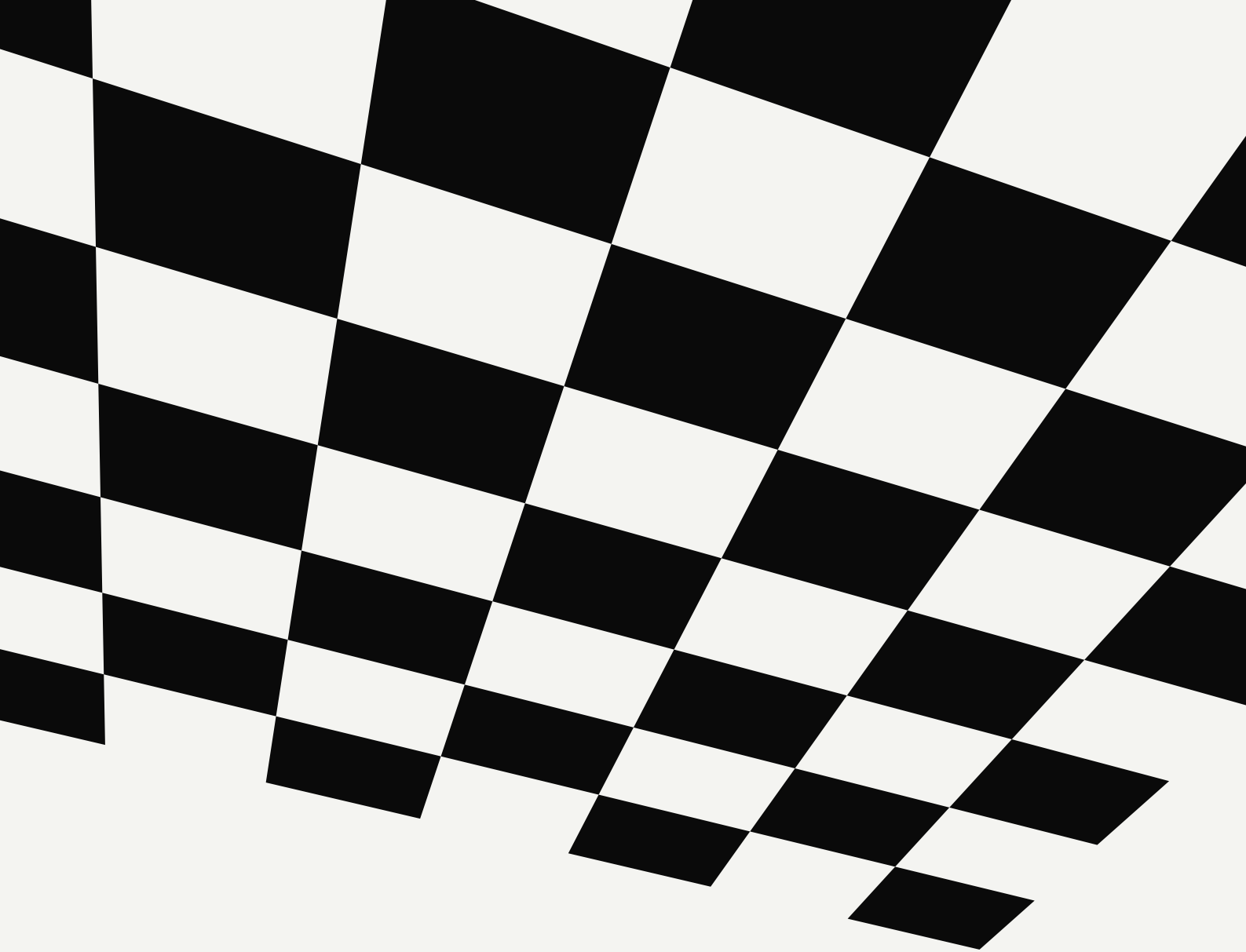
3.5 Which Platform to Launch On

IF YOUR USERS ARE...	LAUNCH ON...	WHY
Smartphone users in urban Africa	Android (or mobile web)	Android has 80%+ market share in most African markets
Professionals / businesses	Web app	They're on laptops during work
Everyone (consumer app)	Mobile web first	Works on any phone, no app store needed
A niche community	WhatsApp group + Google Form	Seriously. This works. Ship the value, not the tech.

Don't build iOS first in Africa unless you're targeting the diaspora or high-income segments.

● WHAT NOT TO DO IN STAGE 3

- ✗ **Don't add "just one more feature" before launching.** This is the #1 killer. There is always one more feature. Ship without it.
- ✗ **Don't rebuild the tech stack mid-build.** Use whatever you know. Django, React, Flutter, WordPress, Bubble, a Google Sheet with Zapier — whatever gets you to launch fastest.
- ✗ **Don't design for scale.** You don't have a scale problem. You have a "does anyone want this?" problem. Build for 100 users, not 100,000.
- ✗ **Don't spend more than 10% of your time on branding.** Name, logo, colours — pick something decent in an hour and move on.
- ✗ **Don't soft-launch.** Don't "quietly" release it and wait for people to find it. Tell everyone. Post everywhere. Send it to your waitlist. The point of launching is to learn, and you can't learn from zero users.



STAGE 04

FIND TRACTION

ARE PEOPLE COMING BACK?

WHAT TRACTION ACTUALLY MEANS / THE FIRST 50 USERS / WHAT TO MEASURE /
THE TRACTION DECISION TREE / WHEN TRACTION ISN'T HAPPENING

4-12 WEEKS · ONLY WHAT THE DATA ASKS FOR

DURATION 4–12 weeks	GOAL Get real users using the product regularly and identify whether they retain
TOOLS NEEDED Your MVP, analytics, and your ears	CODE WRITTEN Only what the data tells you to write

● 4.1 · TRACTION

4.1 What Traction Actually Means

Traction is not signups. Traction is not downloads. Traction is not press coverage. Traction is not “we’re in talks with [big company].”

Traction is: people are using your product repeatedly, unprompted, and ideally paying for it.

The definition

SIGNAL	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
Retention	People who used it last week came back this week. Without you begging them.
Organic growth	New users are showing up that you didn’t directly acquire. Someone told them.
Willingness to pay	People pay. Or they get angry when you suggest taking it away.

● 4.2 · TRACTION

4.2 The First 50 Users

Your first 50 users will not come from ads. They will not come from SEO. They will not come from a viral moment. **They will come from you, personally, one by one.**

CHANNEL	HOW
Your waitlist	You built this in Stage 2. Email/message everyone. Personally.
This community	Post in #testing-pool. Ask for real feedback.
WhatsApp	Message people individually. Not a broadcast. A personal message.
LinkedIn	Post about what you're building. Be honest about the stage you're at.
In person	Go to where your users are. Market, office, campus, event. Show them the product on your phone.
Partnerships	Find one person or organisation who already has access to your target users.

FIGURE 4.1

The magic number is 50

Not 5,000. Not 500. Each dot is one person you recruited yourself.



15–20 come back the following week = you have something.

Nobody comes back = the product isn't working yet.

■ Back next week (15) ■ Up to 20 ■ Didn't return

● 4.3 · TRACTION

4.3 What to Measure (and Nothing Else)

At this stage, you only need to track five things. Use a spreadsheet if you have to. Fancy analytics tools don't matter yet.

METRIC	WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR
Signups	How many people created an account
Activation	How many completed the core action for the first time
Day 1 Return	How many came back the next day
Week 1 Return	How many came back within a week
Week 4 Return	How many are still active after a month

● THE NUMBER THAT MATTERS MOST: WEEK 1 RETURN

If people try your product and come back within a week without you pushing them, the product has pull. If they don't, something is wrong with the core experience.

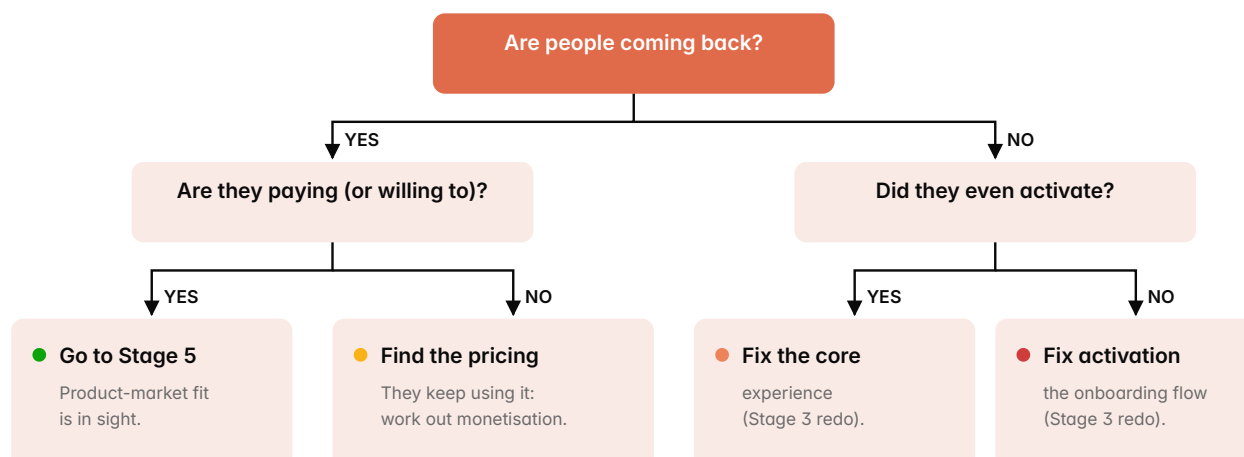
● 4.4 · TRACTION

4.4 The Traction Decision Tree

FIGURE 4.2

The traction decision tree

After 4–8 weeks with real users, you should be on one of these four branches



● 4.5 · TRACTION

4.5 What To Do When Traction Isn't Happening

This is the hardest part. You've built the thing. You've launched it. And... nothing. Or not enough. Before you add features, run this diagnostic:

DIAGNOSTIC	CHECK	SOLUTION
1. Acquisition: are people even hearing about it?	< 50 people have tried it	You haven't distributed it enough. Go back to the channels above. Push harder.
	People see it but don't sign up	Your messaging is wrong. The value prop isn't clear. Rewrite your landing page / app store listing.
2. Activation: they sign up but don't do the core action	Signup → activation rate < 25%	Your onboarding is broken. Too many steps, too confusing, too much friction.
	They get stuck on a specific step	Identify the exact step and fix it. Watch someone use the product in person.
3. Retention: they try it once and never come back	Day 1 return < 30%	The first experience didn't deliver enough value. The "aha moment" isn't happening fast enough.
	Week 1 return < 15%	The product isn't solving a recurring need. Either the problem isn't frequent enough, or your solution isn't sticky enough.

Diagnostic 4: Is it the wrong product?

"None of the above fixes are working." This is the hardest truth. Sometimes the product just isn't right. Not the features, not the design — the fundamental approach. Signs you might need to pivot:

- You've iterated 3–4 times and retention still won't improve
- Users consistently ask for something different from what you built
- The problem is real (you validated it in Stage 1) but your solution isn't the one people want
- You're the only person who's excited about the product

Pivoting is not failure. Slack was a game company. Instagram was a check-in app called Burbn. YouTube was a video dating site. The founders who win are the ones who listen to the data and adapt.

The feature trap

“If we just add [feature X], users will start coming back.” This is almost always wrong. And it’s the most seductive lie in early-stage building.

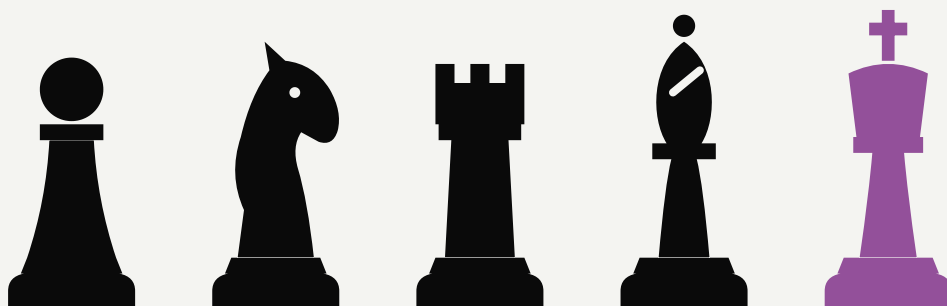
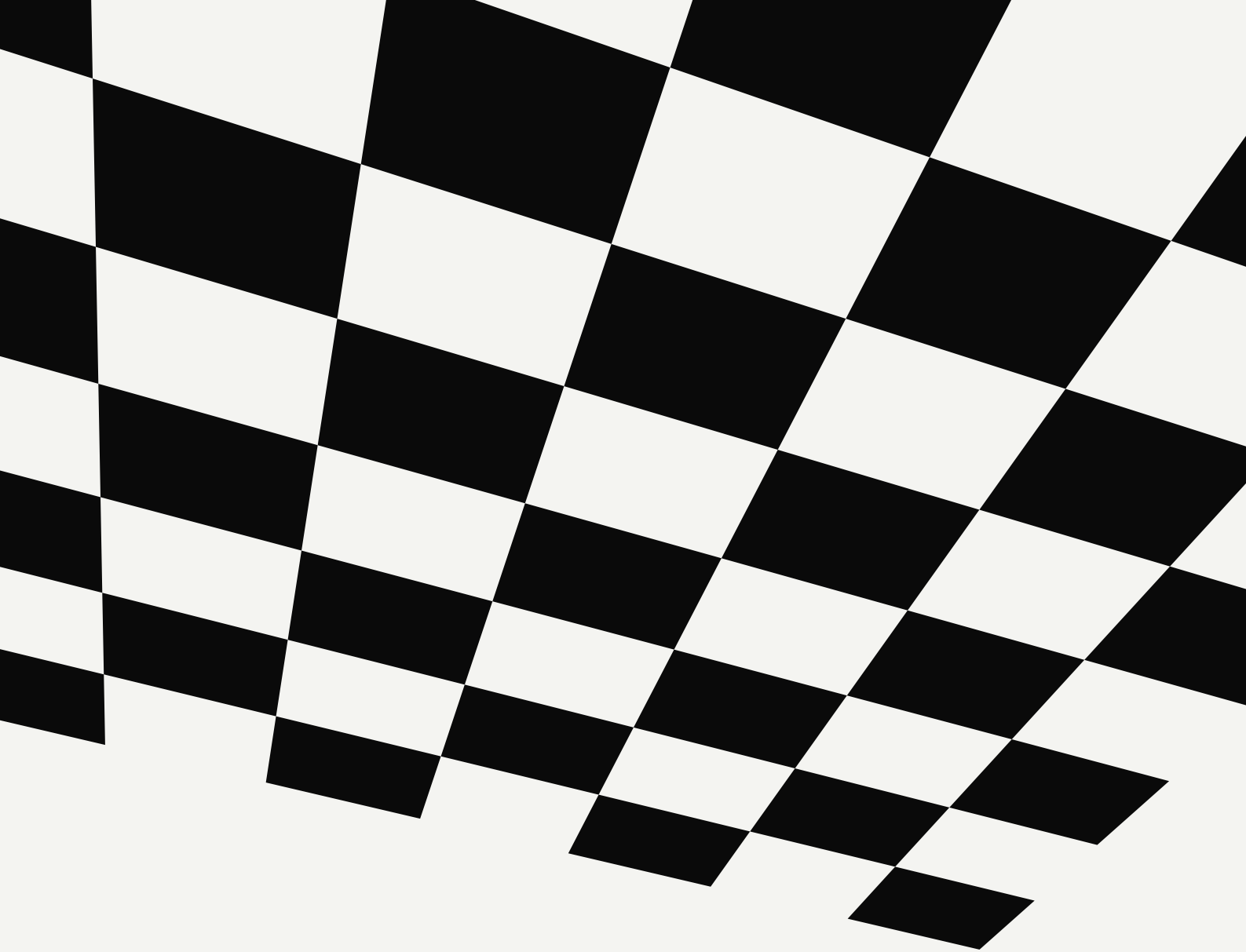
The feature trap

SITUATION	WHAT FOUNDERS THINK	WHAT'S ACTUALLY TRUE
Users aren't retaining	"We need more features"	The core feature doesn't deliver enough value
Users ask for feature X	"We should build feature X"	They're telling you what they want, not what they need. Dig deeper.
A competitor has feature Y	"We need feature Y too"	You need to be 10x better at ONE thing, not 1x the same at everything
Growth is flat	"A new feature will reignite growth"	Growth is a distribution problem, not a feature problem

The rule: don't add a second feature until the first one works. If people aren't retaining on the core experience, more features won't save you. They'll just give you more things to maintain while the fundamental problem goes unsolved.

● WHAT NOT TO DO IN STAGE 4

- ✗ **Don't start fundraising.** Not yet. You're still figuring out if the product works. Raising money now means you'll burn it faster while still searching.
- ✗ **Don't hire.** You, and at most one co-founder, should be doing everything. Hiring before traction means you're scaling a question mark.
- ✗ **Don't run paid ads.** Paid acquisition before you have retention is pouring water into a leaking bucket. Fix the bucket first.
- ✗ **Don't compare yourself to funded startups.** They have capital. You have clarity. Clarity wins in the long run.
- ✗ **Don't keep building in silence.** If you haven't talked to a user in the last 7 days, you're building blind.



STAGE 05

PRODUCT-MARKET FIT

WOULD THEY BE DEVASTATED WITHOUT IT?

WHAT PMF ACTUALLY FEELS LIKE / THE SEAN ELLIS TEST /
WHAT CHANGES WHEN YOU HIT PMF

ONGOING · YOU'LL KNOW IT WHEN YOU FEEL IT

DURATION

You'll know it when you feel it

GOAL

Confirm that the market is pulling the product from you, not that you're pushing it onto the market

● 5.1 · PMF

5.1 What Product-Market Fit Actually Feels Like

Here's the best description, from Marc Andreessen:

You can always feel when product-market fit isn't happening. Customers aren't getting value, word of mouth isn't spreading, usage isn't growing, press reviews are 'blah,' the sales cycle takes too long, and lots of deals never close. And you can always feel product-market fit when it's happening. Customers are buying as fast as you can ship. Usage is growing as fast as you can add servers. Money is piling up in your company bank account. You're hiring as fast as you can.

Marc Andreessen

For early-stage founders in Accra, it feels like this:

- Users message you on WhatsApp to tell you about a bug — because they care and want the product to work
- New users show up that you didn't acquire — someone told them
- People ask "how much does this cost?" before you've even set a price
- You get angry messages when the product goes down
- You stop having to convince people to try it — they're asking to join
- Your retention curve flattens (see the Startup Metrics Cheat Sheet)

● 5.2 · PMF

5.2 The Sean Ellis Test

Ask your users one question: **"How would you feel if you could no longer use [product]?"** Give them three options: very disappointed, somewhat disappointed, not disappointed. If **40% or more** say "very disappointed," you have product-market fit.

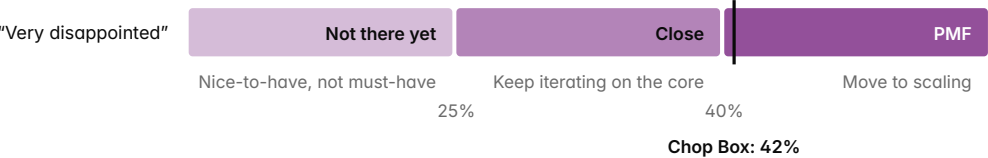
This is the simplest, most battle-tested PMF survey in startup history. Run it when you have at least

30–50 active users.

FIGURE 5.1

Reading the Sean Ellis test

Share of active users who’d be “very disappointed” without your product. Bands: under 25%, 25–40%, 40%+ (worked-example result marked).



RESULT	WHAT IT MEANS
● > 40% “Very disappointed”	You have PMF. Move to scaling.
● 25–40%	Close. You’re on the right track. Keep iterating on the core experience.
● < 25%	Not there yet. The product is nice-to-have, not must-have.

5.3 · PMF

5.3 What Changes When You Hit PMF

BEFORE PMF	AFTER PMF
You push the product onto people	People pull the product from you
Growth feels forced	Growth feels organic
You’re guessing what to build next	Users tell you what to build next
Fundraising is hard	Investors start reaching out
Every day feels uncertain	You have a clear direction

This is when you start thinking about: fundraising (you have proof now), hiring (you need to scale what’s working), adding features (to expand the value for users who already love the core), new markets (take what works and bring it elsewhere), and the Startup Metrics Cheat Sheet (now those numbers become your operating system).

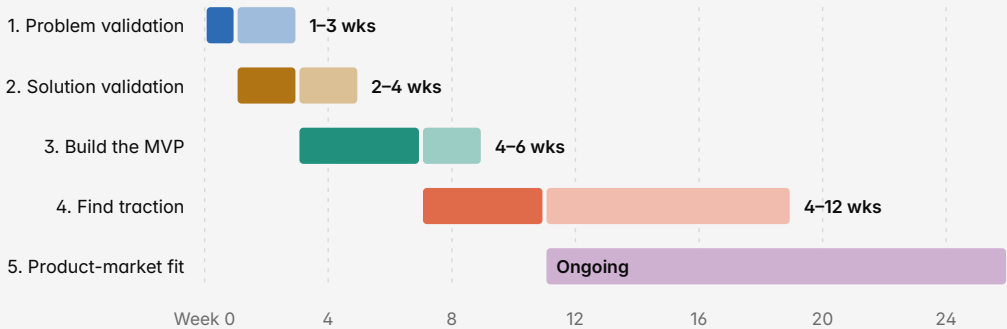
Not before.

The full timeline at a glance

FIGURE T.1

Idea to PMF signal in 3–6 months

Each stage starts when the one before it is validated. Solid: fastest case. Light: the slower end of the range.



Note

Fastest path: 1 + 2 + 4 + 4 = 11 weeks (about 3 months). Slowest: 3 + 4 + 6 + 12 = 25 weeks (about 6 months).

STAGE	DURATION	KEY QUESTION	OUTPUT	DON'T DO THIS
1. Problem Validation	1–3 weeks	"Is this a real problem?"	30 conversations, validated pain	Build anything
2. Solution Validation	2–4 weeks	"Will people use/pay for this solution?"	Waitlist, pre-sales, or concierge results	Build the full product
3. Build the MVP	4–6 weeks	"What's the smallest thing I can ship?"	A live product with the core action working	Add features beyond the core
4. Find Traction	4–12 weeks	"Are people coming back?"	Retention data, first paying users	Raise money, run ads, hire
5. Product-Market Fit	Ongoing	"Would they be devastated without this?"	40%+ on the Sean Ellis test	Celebrate too early

Total time from idea to PMF signal: 3–6 months. Not 18 months. Not "after we raise a seed round." Three to six months of disciplined, focused execution.

When to raise money

Since this is the question every founder asks too early, here's the definitive answer:

DON'T RAISE WHEN

- You have an idea but no validation → **talk to people first.**
- You have a product but no users → **get users first.**
- You have users but no retention → **fix the product first.**
- You want money to "figure things out" → **figure things out first, for free.**
- You want a salary → **get a job.** Build the startup on the side. No shame in that.

RAISE WHEN

- You have product-market fit (or very strong signals of it)
- You know your unit economics (or at least the direction they're heading)
- You need capital to scale something that's already working
- You've identified the specific bottleneck that money would remove
- You can articulate exactly how you'd deploy the capital and what milestones it unlocks

The best time to raise money is when you don't need it. When your product is working, users are growing, and revenue is building — that's when investors are most interested. When you're desperate, they can smell it. Desperation is the worst negotiating position.

The fundraising paradox

Worked example

To see the stages working together, here is Chop Box, a fictional Accra startup delivering weekday lunches to office workers, taken from idea to product-market fit. Every figure is invented for illustration; the arithmetic is real.

STAGE	WHAT THEY DID	RESULT	VERDICT
1. Problem	30 conversations with Osu and East Legon office workers	22/30 confirmed · pain 4.2/5 · 12/30 would pay	● Passes every mark. Move on.
2. Solution	Landing page: 83 signups from 640 visits	13% conversion	● Over 10%: go
	6 pre-sales at GH¢20 by MoMo	GH¢120 collected	● Any pre-sale is powerful
	Concierge: 15 people, lunches ordered by WhatsApp	9/15 came back (60%)	● Over 50%: strong
3. MVP	Order, pay by MoMo, deliver. Nothing else.	Built in 6 weeks	● Inside the 6-week rule
4. Traction	50 users recruited one by one	82% activated · 48% day 1 · 36% week 1	● 18 back in week 1: inside the 15–20 band
5. PMF	Sean Ellis survey of 45 active users	19 “very disappointed” = 42%	● Over 40%: PMF. Time to think about raising.

● WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

Chop Box never wrote a line of code until Stage 3, and by then it already had 83 people on a waitlist and GH¢120 in pre-sales. Six weeks of building later, 18 of its first 50 users came back in week one, and 42% of active users said they’d be very disappointed without it. That is the order this playbook asks for: evidence first, code second, money last.

The weekly founder check-in

Every Sunday night (or whenever your week resets), answer these seven questions. Be honest. Write the answers down. If the answers don't change for 3 weeks in a row, something needs to change.

#	QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
1	How many people used the product this week?	
2	How many of last week's users came back this week?	
3	What's the #1 piece of feedback I heard from users?	
4	What's the one thing I'll change about the product this week?	
5	Am I building features users asked for, or features I want to build?	
6	How many weeks of runway do I have left?	
7	Am I closer to product-market fit this week than last week? Why?	

If you can't answer questions 1 and 2, you're not tracking the right things. If you can't answer question 3, you're not talking to users enough. If you can't answer question 7, you're building without direction.

The answer boxes are fillable in a PDF reader. Save a copy each week.

The builder's cheat sheet

Cut this out. Tape it above your desk. Read it every morning before you start building.

- 01 Talk to 30 people before writing one line of code STAGE 01
- 02 Validate the problem first, then the solution STAGE 02
- 03 Your MVP should take 6 weeks, not 6 months STAGE 03
- 04 Launch ugly. Launch scared. But launch. STAGE 03
- 05 The only metric that matters early on: retention STAGE 04
- 06 Features don't fix a product nobody wants STAGE 04
- 07 Revenue before raising. Always. STAGE 05
- 08 If nobody's coming back, fix the core experience STAGE 04
- 09 If you haven't talked to a user this week, you're building blind STAGE 04
- 10 Default alive > default funded STAGE 05

HIGH-SIGNAL. NO FLUFF. NOW GO BUILD.

Further reading

If this playbook sparked something, go deeper:

"The Mom Test" by Rob Fitzpatrick

How to talk to customers without them lying to you. Best book on customer conversations. Read this before Stage 1.
· momtestbook.com

"The Lean Startup" by Eric Ries

The original framework for build-measure-learn. Skip the theory, focus on the practical chapters. · theleanstartup.com

"Zero to One" by Peter Thiel

Contrarian thinking about what makes a startup truly valuable.

"Do Things That Don't Scale" by Paul Graham

The essay that explains why your first 50 users come from hustle, not automation. · paulgraham.com/ds.html

"Startup Metrics Cheat Sheet", Sandbox Réseau

Our companion document on the 16 numbers every startup should track. Read after Stage 4.

The Reverb Podcast, Sandbox Réseau

Real founders from this community sharing how they built, validated, and launched. Listen to Episodes #06, #08, and #10.

Final word

The startup ecosystem loves to celebrate raises, valuations, and launches. We celebrate founders who raised \$2M before they had a single user. We put “Funded by Y Combinator” in Twitter bios before the product has retention.

But here’s what we don’t talk about enough: the founders who quietly build something 50 people love, who charge for it, who grow it from revenue, and who only raise money when the business is already working.

Those founders don’t die when the funding market dries up. They don’t pivot every quarter because their investors told them to. They don’t run out of runway because they hired 10 people before they had 100 users.

They build from the ground up. They validate before they invest. They iterate based on data, not ego.

That’s the kind of builder Sandbox Réseau exists to support. Not the ones chasing raises. The ones chasing product-market fit.

Go find it.



Maxwell Cofie

Founder, Sandbox Réseau · Accra’s Builder Community · maxwellcofie.com · The Reverb Podcast



Validate fast. Build what people want.

The Early Startup Playbook · July 2026 · Accra, Ghana

Sandbox Réseau: high-signal, no fluff. Accra's builder community.

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