STARTUP STRATEGY PLAYBOOK

Market Validation for Startups

You don't need a massive research budget or a six-month timeline. You need the right questions, the right people, and a process that fits where you are.

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SECTION 01

What Market Validation Actually Is

Market validation is the process of confirming, with real evidence, that a problem exists, that real people have it, and that they'd pay someone to solve it. Done right, it's a few weeks of structured conversations with the right people, synthesized into a clear picture you can act on. Not a six-month project. Not a survey of your network.

A side note: *"Market evaluation" is actually the more accurate term. "Validation" implies you've already decided the answer and you're just looking for confirmation. "Evaluation" keeps you honest. But we're stuck with the industry vocabulary, so here we are.*

SECTION 02

Why It Matters

The earlier you validate, the lighter the work. Validating an idea takes a fraction of the time and cost of validating a half-built product. And a fraction of the cost of launching the wrong one.

It Protects Your Runway

Every month spent building the wrong thing is a month not spent building the right one. Do it before you build and you move forward with confidence. Skip it and you're building on a guess.

It Changes the Fundraising Conversation

Investors know the difference between a founder who validated their market and one who assumed it. Real quotes from real potential customers, documented proof that people will pay: you're not asking investors to believe you. You're showing them what you found.

It Forces Clarity on the Problem

Most early-stage teams don't have a solution problem. They have a problem definition problem. It forces you to get specific: who has the problem, how often, what they do about it today, and what it's costing them.

It's Not as Heavy as It Sounds

Done lean, the core of this fits into two to three weeks. That's enough to confirm or challenge your riskiest assumptions before you've committed serious budget.

What Gets Better Downstream

- ✓ **Sharper positioning.** When you've talked to 15 real customers, you know exactly how they describe their problem. That language becomes your messaging, without guessing.
- ✓ **Faster product decisions.** Validated assumptions become decision shortcuts. Instead of debating which feature to build next, you have a reference point.
- ✓ **Stronger fundraising narratives.** You're not telling investors what you believe. You're telling them what you found. That's a fundamentally different conversation.
- ✓ **Lower churn after launch.** Products that solve validated problems have lower early churn. Users who feel genuinely understood stick around.

> BOTTOM LINE
>
> The most expensive thing you can build is the wrong product. Validation is the work that keeps you from finding that out after you've already built it.

SECTION 03

The Process

This isn't a framework you have to follow perfectly. It's a logical sequence that keeps you from building on assumptions you haven't tested. Most startups can complete the core of it in two to three weeks.

01 **Map Your Riskiest Assumptions**

Write down the three to five assumptions that, if wrong, would invalidate the entire concept. Test these first, not to confirm what you already believe.

02 **Define Your ICP**

"Small business owners" isn't a segment. "Independent restaurant owners with two to five locations in secondary markets" is. The more specific your definition, the more useful your research will be.

03 **Design a Discussion Guide**

Explore the problem space, don't pitch a solution. Good questions are open-ended, behavior-focused, and past-tense. "Tell me about the last time you dealt with X" beats "would you use something that does Y?" How you ask matters as much as what you ask. Stay curious, stay quiet, and follow the thread. Include at least one question about what they do about this today and what it costs them. That's your willingness-to-pay probe.

04 **Talk to 8 to 12 People**

Eight to twelve conversations is enough to start seeing patterns. Record everything with permission. Take structured notes. Don't rely on memory.

05 **Synthesize the Research**

Tag themes across all your conversations and look for patterns that appear regardless of how the question was asked. It's worth the extra hour or two to do it right.

06 **Understand Your Market**

Estimate how many people actually have this problem: your real addressable market, not a top-down industry number. Then pressure-test whether you can reach them: are they findable through a channel you can afford, at an acquisition cost that makes the economics work? A big market you can't reach isn't an opportunity.

SECTION 04

Before You Talk to Anyone

Validation Theater

It's tempting to talk to a handful of people, get some enthusiastic responses, and call it done. But five conversations with friendly contacts isn't validation. You need enough breadth to see real patterns, and you need to talk to people who might push back.

Mistaking Enthusiasm for Commitment

Two things trip up almost every first-time validator. First: leading questions. "Would you use a product that helped you do X?" is a pitch, not a question. Ask about past behavior, not future hypotheticals. Second: politeness. People are encouraging.

"This is awesome, keep me posted" is not proof of anything. A signed letter of intent is. A deposit is. Did they make an intro? Did they send you the internal doc showing how they handle this today? Those are the things that count.

Starting Too Late

The most common version: the team has already built the MVP before talking to customers. At that point the research tends to confirm the decisions already made rather than challenge them. If you can do one thing differently, start the conversations before you start the build.

"You don't have to validate everything. You have to validate the assumptions that, if wrong, would make the whole thing collapse."

SECTION 05

You Don't Have to Figure This Out Alone

This playbook gives you the framework. What it can't give you is 25 years of knowing where founders go wrong inside it.

The difference between a process that surfaces real insight and one that just confirms what you already believed is in how the questions get designed, how the conversations get structured, and how the findings get turned into a decision you can actually act on.

When the work is done, you'll have clear findings from real customer conversations, honest evidence of whether demand exists, and a go/no-go recommendation with the specific conditions that would change the call.

If your market is real, the research will show it. If it isn't, better to know now.

START WITH A FREE CONVERSATION

Book Time With Matt

cal.com/mattwallens

Based in Atlanta.
Working with founders and product teams nationally.

Or read more about the engagement first:
80watts.com/market-validation