Founders AI
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PRACTICAL AI FIELD GUIDE

AI Lead Research

How to Find Better Prospects Before You Write a Single Message

A practical prospecting guide for founders, business owners, consultants, salespeople, and creators who want better leads before better messages.

- Build an ICP
- Spot buying triggers
- Research accounts
- Map buyer roles
- Score lead quality
- Know what not to automate

Start here

Most people use AI for lead research the wrong way.

They ask for "a list of prospects," copy whatever comes back, and then wonder why the outreach feels generic. The problem is not that AI is bad at research. The problem is that the person using it skipped the thinking step.

AI can help you move faster, but it needs a target. If your ideal customer is vague, your AI research will be vague. If your buying trigger is fake, your outreach will feel forced. If your prospect list is just a spreadsheet of names, you do not have a lead system. You have a list.

This guide shows you how to use AI to research better prospects before writing a single message.

Use it if you are:

- A founder trying to find early customers.
- A business owner looking for better-fit leads.
- A consultant, freelancer, or agency owner trying to stop chasing random prospects.
- A salesperson who wants better account context before outreach.
- A creator building a B2B audience and trying to understand who your real buyer is.
- An everyday AI learner who wants to understand how AI can support research without replacing judgment.

> **The goal is not more leads. The goal is fewer bad leads.**

The Founders AI rule

Lead research is not lead scraping.

Scraping asks, "How many names can I collect?"

Research asks, "Who is most likely to care, why would they care now, and what do I need to understand before I contact them?"

That difference matters more than ever because buyers are already doing their own research. Gartner reported in 2026 that 67% of B2B buyers prefer a sales-rep-free experience and 70% prefer a completely digital self-service buying experience (Gartner via BusinessWire). Forrester wrote in April 2026 that modern B2B buyers do more self-guided research, form opinions before engaging sellers, and have less patience for generic outreach (Forrester).

So the job of AI-assisted lead research is not to help you interrupt more people. It is to help you become relevant before you interrupt anyone.

What this guide will help you build

By the end, you should have three reusable tools:

1. An ICP worksheet that tells AI who you are looking for.
2. A lead research checklist that tells AI what to look for.
3. A lead scorecard that tells you whether a prospect is worth your time.

This guide stops before outreach. That is intentional. If you skip research and jump straight into writing cold emails, every message starts to sound like AI wrote it. Better outreach starts with better inputs.

The five layers of a good lead

A good lead is not just a person with a title.

A good lead has five layers:

Layer	Question	Why it matters
ICP fit	Is this the type of person or business you actually serve?	Prevents random lists.
Buying problem	What problem could they realistically care about?	Prevents fake personalization.
Trigger	Why might this matter now?	Gives you timing.
Buying committee	Who else may influence the decision?	Prevents one-contact thinking.
Research proof	What evidence supports your reason for reaching out?	Prevents hallucinated assumptions.

Most bad outreach skips at least three of these layers.

Layer 1: ICP fit

ICP means ideal customer profile. It is the description of the customer you are best built to help.

A weak ICP sounds like this:

> **“Small businesses that need AI.”**

A stronger ICP sounds like this:

> **“Owner-operated service businesses with 5 to 50 employees that rely on inbound calls, manual quoting, repetitive admin work, and inconsistent follow-up.”**

The second version is better because it gives AI something concrete to evaluate. It includes business type, size, operating pattern, pain points, and likely workflow gaps.

Use these fields:

Field	Example
Business type	Roofing companies, HVAC contractors, small law firms, agencies, solo founders, local clinics
Size	Solo, 2 to 10 employees, 11 to 50 employees, 51 to 200 employees
Buyer role	Founder, owner, operator, sales manager, office manager, head of growth
Pain pattern	Slow follow-up, messy admin, poor lead tracking, manual quoting, weak content output
Urgency sign	Hiring, expansion, new offer, bad reviews, slow response, outdated website
Exclusion	Too small, too enterprise, regulated beyond your ability, no visible demand, no buyer access

Prompt: ICP builder

Copy this into your AI tool:

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Act as a practical B2B lead research strategist.

My offer is:
[Describe your offer in plain English.]

My best customer is likely:
[Describe who you think you help.]

Help me turn this into a sharper ideal customer profile.

Return:
1. The strongest ICP hypothesis.
2. The top 5 buyer roles.
3. The top 5 business pain patterns.
4. The top 5 signals that suggest they may need this now.
5. The top 5 types of prospects I should exclude.
6. A plain-English version I can use to guide lead research.

Do not write outreach messages yet. Focus only on who is worth researching.
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Layer 2: the buying problem

A buying problem is not the same as a pain point.

A pain point is what annoys someone.

A buying problem is what costs enough time, money, risk, attention, or opportunity that someone may actually act.

For example:

Weak pain point	Stronger buying problem
"They need AI."	"They lose hours every week rewriting the same customer replies."
"Their website is outdated."	"Their website fails to answer pricing, service area, proof, and booking questions before a buyer calls."
"They need content."	"Their founder is the only person who understands the offer, so marketing output bottlenecks around them."
"They need automation."	"Their sales team manually qualifies leads, causing slow response and inconsistent follow-up."

Good AI lead research should connect a prospect to a buying problem you can plausibly help with.

Prompt: buying problem finder

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Act as a skeptical sales researcher.

Offer:
[Describe my offer.]

Target prospect type:
[Describe ICP.]

List 10 buying problems this prospect type might care about.

For each buying problem, include:
- What the problem looks like in daily work.
- Why it costs time, money, risk, or missed opportunity.
- What public signals might suggest the problem exists.
- What evidence would be too weak to rely on.

Do not write outreach yet.
```

Layer 3: the buying trigger

A buying trigger is a reason this might matter now.

Without a trigger, your outreach often feels like a random pitch. With a trigger, your research has timing.

Useful triggers include:

- Hiring for roles connected to your offer.
- Opening a new location.
- Launching a new product or service.
- Raising funding.
- Posting about a bottleneck.
- Publishing new content around the problem.
- Receiving repeated negative reviews around speed, communication, scheduling, quality, or support.
- Using outdated tools or manual processes.
- Showing signs of growth without signs of operational maturity.

Highspot's sales outreach guidance recommends researching a prospect's website, case studies, recent news, press releases, and digital channels to find clues such as expansion, partnerships, funding, product launches, team announcements, or business challenges (Highspot).

Trigger quality ladder

Not every trigger is equal.

Trigger level	Example	Usefulness
Weak	"They are in my target industry."	Good for list inclusion, weak for timing.
Better	"They are hiring for operations roles."	Suggests growth or process pressure.
Strong	"They opened a second location and reviews mention slow response."	Connects growth to a visible problem.
Strongest	"They posted about needing better systems and are hiring an ops manager."	Combines intent, pain, and timing.

Do not force a trigger. If the evidence is weak, say it is weak.

Prompt: trigger finder

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Act as a lead research analyst.

Prospect:
[Company name and website]

My offer:
[Describe offer]

Research this prospect using only the information I provide below.

Information available:
[Paste website notes, LinkedIn notes, review snippets, job posts, news, or other public notes.]

Return:
1. Possible buying triggers.
2. Evidence for each trigger.
3. Confidence level: high, medium, or low.
4. Why this trigger might connect to my offer.
5. What I should verify before using this in outreach.

Do not invent facts. If the evidence is weak, say so.
```

Layer 4: the buying committee

Even if one person replies, one person may not decide.

Forrester wrote in February 2026 that 73% of B2B purchases involve three or more departments, with an average of 13 internal people and nine external people involved in the decision (Forrester). That does not mean every small business has a giant buying committee. It means you should stop assuming that the person you found is the only person who matters.

For small businesses, the committee may be simple:

- Owner.
- Office manager.
- Sales manager.
- Operations lead.
- Spouse or business partner.
- Outside agency or consultant.

For startups and larger teams, it may include:

- Founder or CEO.
- Head of growth.
- Sales leader.
- RevOps.
- Finance.
- Legal.
- IT or security.
- End users.

AI can help you map likely roles, but you should treat the map as a hypothesis.

Prompt: buying committee mapper

```
Act as a B2B buying committee researcher.

Target company:
[Company]

Company type and size:
[What I know]

Offer:
[What I sell]

Based on this context, map the likely buying committee.

Return a table with:
- Role.
- What they care about.
- What objections they may have.
- What evidence they would need.
- Whether they are likely a decision maker, influencer, user, blocker, or budget owner.

Make clear what is a hypothesis versus what is confirmed.
```

Layer 5: the reason to reach out now

This is the final filter.

Before writing a message, you should be able to complete this sentence:

> **“I am reaching out to this prospect now because _____, and I believe they may care because _____.”**

If you cannot finish that sentence without making things up, the lead is not ready.

Examples

Weak reason	Stronger reason
“They are a roofing company.”	“They are a roofing company expanding service areas, and their reviews repeatedly mention slow callbacks.”
“They are a startup founder.”	“They launched a new product, are posting daily about customer acquisition, and have no visible onboarding automation.”
“They need AI.”	“They publish repetitive educational content manually, and their team is hiring for content operations.”

The reason to reach out now does not need to be dramatic. It needs to be honest.

The AI lead research workflow

Use this workflow whenever you research a prospect.

Step 1: define the target

Write one clear sentence:

> **“I am looking for [type of business/person] who likely has [problem] because [trigger or context].”**

Example:

> **“I am looking for local HVAC companies with 5 to 50 employees that likely lose booked jobs because of slow response, weak follow-up, or manual admin.”**

Step 2: collect raw evidence

Do not ask AI to guess first. Give it material.

Useful inputs

- Website homepage.
- Service pages.
- Pricing page, if available.
- About page.
- Careers page.
- Case studies.
- Reviews.
- LinkedIn company page notes.
- Founder or executive posts.
- Job posts.
- News.
- Technology clues.
- Public directories.
- Existing CRM notes.

Step 3: ask AI to summarize only what is supported

Your instruction should include:

> **"Do not infer beyond the evidence. Separate confirmed facts from hypotheses."**

This one sentence prevents a lot of bad research.

Step 4: connect evidence to possible problems

Ask:

- What problem might this suggest?
- What evidence supports that?
- What evidence is missing?
- What would make this a stronger lead?

Step 5: score the lead

Score the lead before writing outreach.

Score	Meaning	Action
0 to 4	Weak fit or weak evidence	Do not pursue yet.
5 to 7	Possible fit	Save, research more, or test low-effort contact.
8 to 10	Strong fit with trigger	Prioritize.

Prompt: company research brief

```
Act as a careful lead research analyst.

My offer:
[Describe offer]

Ideal customer profile:
[Paste ICP]

Prospect:
[Company/person]

Raw notes:
[Paste website notes, LinkedIn notes, reviews, job posts, news, CRM notes, or other public
information.]

Create a research brief with:
1. Confirmed facts.
2. Possible buying problems.
3. Possible buying triggers.
4. Likely buyer roles.
5. Reasons this may be a good fit.
6. Reasons this may be a bad fit.
7. Missing information.
8. Lead score from 0 to 10.
9. A one-sentence reason to research this prospect further.

Rules:
- Do not invent facts.
- Separate facts from hypotheses.
- Do not write outreach messages.
- Flag anything that would be risky or non-compliant to use.
```

Lead research checklist

Use this before you add someone to a priority list.

Question	Yes/No	Notes
Does this prospect match the ICP?		
Do they have a likely buying problem?		
Is there a real trigger or timing reason?		
Is the evidence specific enough to reference?		
Do you know the likely buyer role?		
Are there other likely influencers or blockers?		
Is the contact information from a reasonable source?		
Can you explain why this lead matters now?		
Is there anything you should not mention?		
Is this worth writing a personalized message for?		

If you cannot answer most of these, you do not have a researched lead yet.

Lead scorecard

Score each category from 0 to 2.

Category	0	1	2
ICP fit	Poor fit	Possible fit	Clear fit
Problem fit	No clear problem	Possible problem	Clear business problem
Trigger	No timing signal	Soft signal	Strong current signal
Evidence	Mostly guesses	Some support	Clear public or internal evidence
Buyer access	No clear buyer	Possible buyer	Clear likely buyer or influencer

Add the points:

- 0 to 4: not ready.
- 5 to 7: possible, research more.
- 8 to 10: priority lead.

Prompt: lead scoring

```
Act as a skeptical lead qualification analyst.

Use this scorecard:
- ICP fit: 0 to 2
- Problem fit: 0 to 2
- Trigger: 0 to 2
- Evidence: 0 to 2
- Buyer access: 0 to 2

Prospect research:
[Paste research brief]

Score the prospect.

Return:
1. Score by category.
2. Total score.
3. Short explanation.
4. What would raise the score.
5. What would disqualify the prospect.
6. Whether this lead is ready for outreach, needs more research, or should be skipped.

Do not be generous. Penalize weak evidence.
```

What AI is good at in lead research

AI is useful for:

- Turning messy notes into a structured research brief.
- Comparing a prospect against your ICP.
- Finding possible problems from public evidence.
- Separating strong signals from weak signals.
- Mapping likely buyer roles.
- Summarizing reviews or website copy.
- Building a repeatable checklist.
- Creating a lead scorecard.
- Drafting research notes for a CRM.

AI is not reliable enough to:

- Confirm private intent.
- Guess budgets.
- Verify email addresses without a data source.
- Know internal politics.
- Know whether someone is actively buying.
- Replace compliance rules.
- Replace human judgment.

ZoomInfo’s 2025 AI survey found that 42% of respondents were dissatisfied with AI tools because of issues such as data quality, security, and hallucinations, and 80% of non-users were concerned about accuracy (ZoomInfo). Treat AI as a research assistant, not the source of truth.

What not to do

Do not use AI lead research to:

- Invent a reason someone needs your offer.
- Pretend you read something you did not read.
- Reference personal details that feel creepy.
- Scrape lists and spam every contact.
- Send outreach without a working unsubscribe process.
- Ignore opt-outs.
- Use fake scarcity or fake familiarity.
- Claim a business has a problem without evidence.
- Put sensitive personal data into tools you do not trust.
- Let AI decide who to contact without review.

The FTC says commercial emails must use accurate header information, non-deceptive subject lines, a clear opt-out method, and a valid physical postal address, and opt-out requests must be honored within 10 business days (FTC). The ICO says marketers using business contact personal data need a lawful basis, cannot assume public data means consent, and must stop direct marketing processing when someone objects (ICO).

Saveable tool: ICP worksheet

Fill this out once before building a lead list.

Field	Your answer
My offer helps people do this	
The business/person type I want to reach	
The buyer role most likely to care	
The problem I solve	
What the problem costs them	
Public signals that may reveal the problem	
Strong timing triggers	
Bad-fit prospects to exclude	
Proof I can help	
What I should avoid claiming	

Saveable tool: prospect research card

Use one card per prospect.

Field	Notes
Prospect name	
Website/profile	
Business type	
Size/stage	
Likely buyer role	
Confirmed facts	
Possible buying problem	
Trigger or timing signal	
Evidence	
Missing info	
Lead score	
Next action	

Saveable tool: research quality check

Before outreach, ask:

1. Did I confirm this from a real source?
2. Am I making an assumption?
3. Would the prospect understand why I reached out?
4. Would this feel relevant if they read it cold?
5. Is there anything in my notes that would feel invasive?
6. Do I have a clean way to stop contacting them?
7. Is this lead worth human attention?

If the answer to #7 is no, do not automate your way around it.

Example: turning a weak lead into a researched lead

Weak lead:

> **"ABC Roofing is a roofing company. They might need AI."**

Better research:

> **"ABC Roofing appears to serve three nearby cities, has recent reviews mentioning slow callbacks, and has a careers page hiring office/admin help. That may suggest growing demand and a follow-up bottleneck. The owner or office manager may care about faster lead response, quote tracking, or customer communication. Confidence is medium because the evidence is public and indirect."**

Notice what changed.

The better version does not pretend to know their internal process. It uses evidence. It separates facts from hypotheses. It gives a reasonable reason to research further.

The daily 20-minute lead research routine

Use this routine before you write messages.

Minutes 0 to 3: pick a narrow target

Choose one segment only.

Examples:

- HVAC companies hiring office staff.
- Seed-stage founders launching a product.
- Agencies posting about AI services but not showing internal systems.
- Local clinics with poor review patterns around scheduling.
- Consultants publishing content but not capturing leads.

Minutes 3 to 10: collect evidence

Review:

- Website.
- Reviews.
- Careers page.
- Social posts.
- Recent news.
- Public directories.
- Case studies or customer pages.

Minutes 10 to 15: run the research brief prompt

Paste your notes into the company research brief prompt. Ask AI to separate facts from hypotheses.

Minutes 15 to 18: score the lead

Use the lead scorecard. Do not round up just because you want the lead to be good.

Minutes 18 to 20: decide

Choose one:

- Skip.
- Save for later.
- Research more.
- Prioritize for outreach.

The simplest lead research stack

You do not need a complicated tool stack to start.

Begin with:

- A spreadsheet or Notion table.
- One AI assistant.
- Public websites and reviews.
- LinkedIn or public company pages.
- A simple CRM if you already use one.
- A suppression list for people who should not be contacted again.

Add advanced tools later only when the manual process is clear.

Fields to track in your lead table

Use these columns:

Column	Purpose
Company/person	Who the lead is.
Website/profile	Where the evidence came from.
Segment	Which ICP bucket they belong to.
Buyer role	Who likely cares.
Problem hypothesis	What might be happening.
Trigger	Why now.
Evidence	What supports the hypothesis.
Confidence	Low, medium, high.
Score	0 to 10.
Status	Skip, research more, prioritize, contacted.
Notes	Anything useful or risky.
Do-not-contact flag	Compliance and respect.

Final reminder

AI lead research is not about pretending you know everything.

It is about becoming specific enough to be useful.

The best prospecting system is not the one that finds the most people. It is the one that helps you spend your attention on people who are more likely to have the problem you solve, more likely to care now, and more likely to understand why you reached out.

Use AI to do the heavy lifting.

Use judgment to decide what deserves action.