



Founders AI

founders-ai.dev

PRACTICAL AI FIELD GUIDE

AI Outreach

How to Write Messages People Actually Want to Reply To

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

AI can help you write better outreach, but it cannot make strangers care about a lazy message.

That is the part most people get wrong. They open ChatGPT, ask it to "write a cold email," paste in a company name, and send whatever comes out. The message looks polished, but it feels empty. It says the right words without giving the other person a real reason to respond.

This guide is about using AI differently.

The goal is not to send more messages. The goal is to send fewer messages that feel more relevant, more useful, and more human. If you can learn that skill now, you can use it for sales, partnerships, hiring, networking, customer interviews, investor updates, creator collaborations, job searches, and local business outreach.

You do not need a large audience. You do not need an expensive tool stack. You do not need to become a full-time salesperson. You need a repeatable way to answer four questions before you send anything:

1. Who is this person?
2. Why this person?
3. Why now?
4. What is the smallest reasonable next step?

AI is useful when it helps you answer those questions faster. AI becomes dangerous when it helps you skip them.

The Founders AI rule

Before writing an outreach message, use this rule:

If the message could be sent to 1,000 people without changing anything, it is not ready.

That does not mean every message has to be a handcrafted essay. It means the first message needs at least one real reason it belongs in that person's inbox.

Good outreach usually has three traits:

- **Specific:** It points to something real about the person, company, situation, role, market, or timing.
- **Useful:** It offers a clear idea, observation, resource, question, or next step.
- **Lightweight:** It does not ask the recipient to do too much work before trust exists.

Bad outreach usually has the opposite traits:

- It sounds like it was sent to a list.
- It makes a big claim with no proof.
- It asks for a meeting before giving the recipient a reason to care.
- It uses fake personalization, like "I saw your website and was impressed."
- It hides behind vague AI language, like "unlock growth," "leverage synergies," or "take your business to the next level."

AI can help you write faster, but your job is still to make the message specific, useful, and lightweight.

Outreach is not the first step

The first step is research.

Guide #6, AI Lead Research, covered how to find better prospects before writing a single message. This guide starts after that. You already have a person, a company, or an audience segment you might reach out to. Now you need to decide what to say.

The reason research comes first is simple: modern buyers and busy people can feel generic outreach almost instantly. Forrester's 2026 analysis says younger B2B buyers form opinions through self-guided research before engaging sellers, which means outreach has to add context rather than interrupt with a generic pitch ([Forrester](#)). Gartner's 2026 reporting says buyers are using generative AI for vendor and product research, but many still want humans to help validate what AI produces, which creates an opening for outreach that helps someone make sense of information rather than just selling at them ([BusinessWire](#)).

So before you ask AI to write, ask AI to organize what you know.

You are looking for the outreach angle. An outreach angle is the reason this message should exist.

Examples:

- A roofing company has a slow, confusing estimate request page.
- A founder just launched a product but has no onboarding guide.
- A local service business is running ads to a homepage that does not match the ad promise.
- A hiring manager posted about needing better operations systems.
- A creator has a growing audience but no lead magnet.
- A friend of a friend works at a company where your experience is relevant.

The message should come from that angle, not from your desire to pitch.

The message stack

Use this five-part stack before drafting.

Layer	Question	What AI can help with
Person	Who are they?	Summarize role, likely priorities, public signals, and context.
Situation	What is happening around them?	Identify triggers like hiring, growth, launch, operational friction, recent content, or visible website gaps.
Relevance	Why does this matter to them?	Connect the situation to a likely business or personal priority.
Value	What can you offer before asking?	Suggest a useful observation, resource, idea, audit, intro, or next step.
Ask	What is the smallest next action?	Reduce the ask to a reply, permission, quick question, or clear yes/no.

Most bad AI outreach fails because it starts at the ask. Good outreach starts at the person.

Step 1: choose one person

Do not start by writing to "founders," "business owners," or "marketing managers."

Start with one person.

Even if you plan to send versions of the message to multiple people later, your first draft should be written for a single recipient. This keeps the language grounded. It also forces you to notice details that a generic template would ignore.

Write down:

- Their name.
- Their role.
- Their company or project.
- What they probably care about right now.
- One public signal that supports your guess.
- One reason you are a credible person to contact them.

Example:

Field	Notes
Name	Sarah
Role	Owner of a local HVAC company
Company	18-person service business
Likely priority	More booked estimates without adding admin work
Public signal	Website has a quote form, but no clear response expectation
Credibility	You help service businesses turn messy intake into simple AI-assisted workflows

You are not trying to know everything. You are trying to know enough to avoid sounding random.

Step 2: write the reason

The reason is the sentence that explains why you are reaching out.

Bad reasons:

- "I came across your company."
- "I wanted to connect."
- "I help businesses grow."
- "I thought you might be interested."
- "I noticed you are in the roofing industry."

Better reasons:

- "I noticed your estimate form asks for job details, but it does not tell homeowners what happens next."
- "I saw your team is hiring two coordinators, which usually means the front office is starting to feel overloaded."
- "Your latest video explains the problem clearly, but the description does not give viewers a next step."
- "You launched a new offer last week, but your onboarding page still speaks to the old product."

The reason should be based on something observable. It does not need to be long. It just needs to be real.

Use this format:

I noticed [specific thing], which made me think [relevant implication].

Examples:

- "I noticed your booking page asks homeowners to describe the issue in a blank text box, which made me think your team may be sorting through messy requests manually."
- "I noticed your lead magnet is strong, but the follow-up page does not tell people what to do next, which made me think there may be a conversion leak after the opt-in."
- "I noticed your team is hiring for sales ops and customer success at the same time, which made me think the handoff between first call and onboarding may be getting more complex."

This is the sentence that protects your message from sounding automated.

Step 3: connect to a real problem

A specific detail is not enough. You need to connect it to something the recipient might care about.

That connection should be practical, not dramatic.

Weak:

"This could be costing you millions."

Stronger:

"That kind of form can create extra back-and-forth before a quote is even scheduled."

Weak:

"Your business is leaving money on the table."

Stronger:

"If someone is comparing three contractors, a clearer next step might help you win more of the ready-to-book inquiries."

Weak:

"You need AI automation."

Stronger:

"A simple AI-assisted intake summary could help your team respond faster without changing the whole booking process."

The problem should feel believable. If the message exaggerates, it sounds like a pitch. If it calmly names a friction point, it sounds like help.

Step 4: make the ask small

Most outreach asks too much too soon.

When someone does not know you, a 30-minute meeting is a big ask. A full demo is a big ask. "Let me know when you are free" is a vague ask. "Can I send over the two changes I would make?" is smaller. "Worth a quick look?" is smaller. "Want the checklist?" is smaller.

Use one of these low-friction asks:

- "Want me to send the quick version?"
- "Worth a look?"
- "Should I send the checklist?"
- "Is this something you are already working on?"
- "Want me to record a quick walkthrough?"
- "Would a 3-point teardown be useful?"
- "Should I send the template?"

The small ask works because it does not force the recipient to evaluate your whole business. They only have to decide whether the next tiny step is useful.

For cold outreach, the first reply is often more important than the first meeting. Belkins' 2025 benchmark found that one-touch campaigns averaged an 8.4% reply rate and that a first follow-up could significantly increase replies, but later follow-ups often degraded performance, which supports a cleaner approach built around relevance and restraint rather than endless chasing ([Belkins](#)). Highspot's 2025 guidance recommends short, simple messages, plain text, minimal links, and a clear point, which fits the small-ask model ([Highspot](#)).

Step 5: remove the AI smell

The "AI smell" is the feeling that a message was generated, not written.

It usually shows up as:

- Too many adjectives.
- Corporate filler.
- Long sentences.
- Fake enthusiasm.
- Overexplaining.
- Repeating the recipient's company description back to them.
- A generic compliment in the first line.
- A pitch that could apply to almost anyone.
- Words people rarely use in normal conversation.

Watch for phrases like:

- "I hope this message finds you well."
- "In today's fast-paced digital landscape."
- "I was impressed by your innovative approach."
- "Unlock your full potential."
- "Streamline your operations and drive growth."
- "Leverage cutting-edge AI solutions."
- "I would love to hop on a quick call."

Instead, write like a human who noticed something specific.

Before:

Hi Sarah, I hope this message finds you well. I came across your impressive HVAC business and was inspired by your commitment to customer service. In today's fast-paced market, many service companies are leveraging AI to streamline operations and unlock growth. I would love to schedule a quick call to discuss how we can help.

After:

Sarah, I noticed your quote form asks homeowners to explain the issue, but it does not tell them what happens after they submit it.

>

That can create extra calls for your team and uncertainty for the homeowner.

>

I made a simple AI-assisted intake format for service businesses that turns messy form replies into a cleaner job summary.

>

Want me to send the quick version?

The second version is not magic. It is just more specific, shorter, and easier to answer.

Prompt: research-to-message

Use this prompt after you have research notes on one person or company.

You are helping me write a short outreach message.

Audience:

[Person name, role, company, industry]

What I know:

[Paste 5 to 10 bullet points from my research]

What I can help with:

[Explain the useful thing I can offer]

Constraints:

- Do not write a generic sales pitch.
- Do not use fake compliments.
- Do not exaggerate the problem.
- Keep the message under 140 words.
- Make the ask small and easy to answer.
- Use plain language.

First, identify the strongest outreach angle.

Then write 3 message options:

1. Direct and practical
2. Warm and conversational
3. Very short

For each option, explain why it might work and what could make it feel weak.

Do not send the first output. Use it as raw material.

Prompt: relevance checker

Use this after you have a draft.

Act as a skeptical recipient.

Here is the message:

[Paste message]

Score it from 1 to 10 on:

- Specificity
- Relevance
- Believability
- Usefulness
- Ease of reply
- Human tone

Then answer:

1. What line feels most generic?
2. What line feels most useful?
3. What claim feels unproven?
4. What would make me ignore this?
5. What would make this feel more personal without becoming creepy?

Rewrite the message in under 120 words.

Keep the useful parts.

Remove anything that sounds like AI, hype, or filler.

This prompt turns AI into an editor instead of a spam machine.

Prompt: human rewrite

Use this when the draft is too polished.

Rewrite this outreach message so it sounds like a smart person wrote it quickly and clearly.

Rules:

- No corporate jargon.
- No phrases like "hope this finds you well."
- No fake excitement.
- No big claims.
- Keep the first sentence specific.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Keep the ask small.
- Make it sound natural, but still professional.

Message:

[Paste message]

If the rewrite still sounds like a brochure, run it again and ask for "plainer, shorter, less salesy."

The short message formula

Use this structure when you are stuck.

```
[Name],  
  
I noticed [specific thing].  
  
That made me think [practical implication].  
  
I put together / use / built / made [useful thing].  
  
Want me to send it over?
```

Example for a local service business:

```
Sarah,  
  
I noticed your estimate form asks homeowners to describe the job, but it does not tell them what happens after they submit.  
  
That can create extra calls for your team and uncertainty for the homeowner.  
  
I use a simple AI-assisted intake format that turns messy form replies into a cleaner job summary.  
  
Want me to send the quick version?
```

Example for a founder:

```
Jake,  
  
I saw your product launch post, then clicked through to the onboarding page.  
  
The product is clear, but the first-step instructions feel like they assume users already know what to do.  
  
I made a short onboarding checklist for AI tools that might help tighten the first 10 minutes.  
  
Want me to send it?
```

Example for a creator:

Maya,

Your video on AI workflows explains the idea well, but the description does not give viewers anything to save.

That feels like a missed chance because the topic naturally fits a checklist or starter template.

I put together a simple lead magnet format for educational videos.

Want the outline?

This structure is not the only way to write outreach. It is the safest starting point because it forces relevance before the ask.

Before and after examples

Example 1: business owner

Before:

Hi, I help HVAC companies use AI to automate their operations and grow revenue. Would you be open to a quick call next week?

Why it fails:

- No specific reason.
- No proof of understanding.
- Big claim.
- Meeting ask too early.

After:

Chris, I noticed your booking form lets customers choose a service type, but the details field is completely open-ended.

>

That probably means your office still has to clean up messy requests before dispatch can use them.

>

I have a simple AI intake format that turns those messages into cleaner job summaries.

>

Want me to send the example?

Why it works better:

- Starts with a real observation.
- Names a believable operational friction.
- Offers a useful artifact.
- Small ask.

Example 2: founder

Before:

Hey, I love what you are building. I run an AI automation company and think we could help you scale faster. Are you free for a quick chat?

Why it fails:

- "Love what you are building" is overused.
- "Scale faster" is vague.
- The recipient has to do the work to understand the value.

After:

Amanda, I saw the new self-serve plan you launched this week.

>

The pricing page is clear, but I did not see a quick-start workflow for someone trying the product alone.

>

That is usually where new users stall.

>

I made a simple AI onboarding checklist for this exact gap. Want me to send it over?

Why it works better:

- Tied to a recent event.
- Makes a specific observation.
- Offers a tool instead of asking for time.

Example 3: job search or networking

Before:

Hi, I am looking to connect with professionals in operations and would love to learn more about your career path.

Why it fails:

- Too broad.
- Makes the other person responsible for creating the value.
- No context.

After:

Morgan, I saw your post about reducing manual handoffs between sales and onboarding.

>

I am working on similar AI-assisted workflow problems for small teams, especially turning messy notes into clean next steps.

>

If you are open to it, I would love to send one specific question about how you decided what not to automate.

Why it works better:

- Specific reason.
- Shows shared context.
- Makes a small, thoughtful ask.

What not to automate

AI is useful for drafting, summarizing, editing, scoring, and formatting. It is not a substitute for judgment.

Be careful automating:

- **Who gets contacted:** Bad targeting creates bad outreach even when the message is well written.
- **Personalization claims:** Do not let AI invent facts, compliments, pain points, or company details.
- **Sensitive assumptions:** Do not assume layoffs, financial stress, health issues, personal circumstances, or internal problems unless the person publicly stated them.
- **Follow-up pressure:** Automated follow-ups can quickly become annoying if they ignore silence, context, or opt-outs.
- **Compliance handling:** Unsubscribes, suppression lists, sender identity, and postal address rules need to be treated seriously.
- **Final send decisions:** A human should review messages before sending, especially early on.

AI should help you prepare and improve the message. It should not be allowed to impersonate care.

Compliance basics

This is not legal advice, but there are basic rules you should respect.

For US commercial email, the FTC's CAN-SPAM guide says the law covers business-to-business email, requires accurate header information, requires subject lines that reflect the message content, requires a clear opt-out method, requires a valid physical postal address, and requires opt-out requests to be honored within 10 business days ([FTC](#)). The FTC also says companies cannot contract away legal responsibility just because they hire another company to handle email marketing ([FTC](#)).

For Gmail delivery, Google's sender guidelines say senders who send around 5,000 or more messages per day to personal Gmail accounts must authenticate outgoing email, avoid unwanted or unsolicited email, and make unsubscribe easy, with enforcement beginning in February 2024 and ramping into temporary and permanent rejections in November 2025 for non-compliant traffic ([Google Workspace Admin Help](#)). Google recommends keeping spam complaint rates below 0.1% and avoiding rates of 0.3% or higher, because higher spam rates can damage delivery ([Google Workspace Admin Help](#)).

For UK business-to-business marketing, the ICO says UK GDPR can apply when personal data is used in a business context, that consent and legitimate interests are common lawful bases, and that publicly available data does not automatically mean a person consented to direct marketing ([ICO](#)). The ICO also says that if someone objects to direct marketing, the right is absolute and processing must stop, which makes suppression and do-not-contact handling important ([ICO](#)).

Practical version:

- Be clear about who you are.
- Do not use misleading subject lines.
- Do not invent personalization.
- Make it easy to opt out when appropriate.
- Respect opt-outs permanently.
- Keep volume low enough that quality stays high.
- Do not contact people who obviously should not be contacted.
- Check the rules for your market before scaling.

Saveable tool: outreach brief

Use this before drafting any important message.

Field	Fill this in
Recipient	Name, role, company, channel
Context	Why this person, why now, and what is publicly observable
Likely priority	What they probably care about in practical terms
Specific signal	The exact detail that made this message relevant
Possible problem	The friction, risk, missed opportunity, or confusion
Useful offer	Checklist, audit, idea, template, question, intro, resource, example
Credibility	Why you are a reasonable person to send this
Small ask	The lowest-friction next step
Do not mention	Anything too sensitive, assumptive, or unproven

Example:

Field	Filled example
Recipient	Sarah, owner, local HVAC company, email
Context	Website quote form is live, but the post-submit expectation is unclear
Likely priority	Book more qualified estimates without adding admin work
Specific signal	Form asks for job details in an open text box
Possible problem	Messy requests create back-and-forth before scheduling
Useful offer	AI-assisted intake summary format
Credibility	Works on AI workflows for service businesses
Small ask	"Want me to send the quick version?"
Do not mention	Revenue loss, staff problems, or anything not visible

Saveable tool: message scorecard

Score each draft before sending.

Category	Question	Score 1 to 5
Specificity	Does the message include a real detail?	
Relevance	Does the detail connect to something they care about?	
Usefulness	Does the message offer something helpful?	
Believability	Are the claims calm and supportable?	
Brevity	Can it be read quickly on a phone?	
Ease of reply	Is the ask small and clear?	
Human tone	Does it sound like a person wrote it?	
Compliance	Is identity, intent, and opt-out handling appropriate?	

Send only if the message scores at least 28 out of 40.

If the score is low, do not ask AI to "make it better" in general. Fix the weak category.

- Low specificity: add a real observation.
- Low relevance: connect the observation to a practical issue.
- Low usefulness: offer a better next step.
- Low believability: remove the big claim.
- Low brevity: cut the intro and extra explanation.
- Low ease of reply: make the ask smaller.
- Low human tone: remove jargon and fake enthusiasm.
- Low compliance: check sender identity, subject, opt-out, and suppression handling.

Saveable tool: pre-send checklist

Before sending, answer these questions:

- Can this message only make sense for this recipient or this narrow group?
- Did I use at least one real, observable reason for reaching out?
- Did I avoid inventing facts?
- Did I avoid fake compliments?
- Did I avoid exaggerated claims?
- Is the message short enough to read on a phone?
- Is the ask easy to answer?
- Did I remove corporate filler?
- Would I feel comfortable if the recipient posted this publicly?
- If this is commercial email, have I handled identity, opt-out, and compliance basics?

If the answer to any of these is no, fix the message before sending.

Final reminder

AI outreach is not about replacing thought. It is about making your thought process faster and clearer.

If you use AI to write more generic messages, you will blend into the noise. If you use AI to understand the person, organize your research, pressure-test your angle, simplify your language, and make a smaller ask, you will write messages that feel more useful.

The best outreach does not feel like automation. It feels like someone noticed something real and had a practical reason to reach out.

That is the standard.