Sales Funnel & Lead Qualification in 8 Steps

Founders Hive



Step 1: Introduction & Goal

Turn early interest into paying customers through a sales process you can repeat and measure.

Why Design a Funnel Now?

- Your business model says who pays; the funnel shows how they buy
- Deep-tech sales cycles are long, so you need to see where deals stall
- Clear stages tell you the next action for every contact

Who Sells First?

Founders: Run the first deals and learn the customer's language

Team: In a small startup, everyone owns a set of leads

Sales hires: Bring them in once your pitch closes deals repeatedly

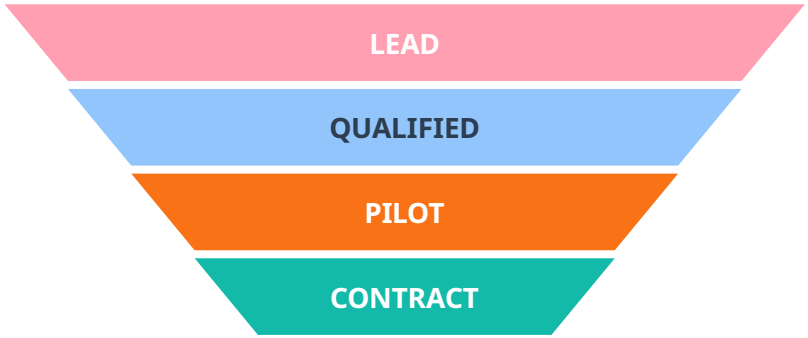
Who in your team follows up with each contact today?

Founder Insight

"The sales funnel is currently a B2B sales funnel. You meet those leads at events and conferences. When it comes to direct sales approaches, we are still very small. Therefore everybody in the team has to contribute to sales. So everybody has a set of leads which you need to take care of."

Myriam Lingg, macu4

FROM LEAD TO CONTRACT



Pro Tip

Sell in person first. Stellos AG found that email outreach did not work; it met decision makers at small industry evening events and through an industry association.

Funnel Snapshot

Stage	Companies Today	Who Follows Up	Biggest Blocker
Lead			
Qualified			
Pilot			
Contract			

Step 2: Map Your Funnel Stages

Define the stages a customer passes through and the evidence that moves them to the next one.

Four Stages for Deep-Tech B2B

Lead: Showed interest, for example at a fair or webinar
Qualified: Fits your criteria and confirmed a need (Step 3)
Pilot: A paid test with agreed success criteria (Steps 4 to 6)
Contract: Signed order, license or framework agreement

Make Transitions Explicit

- Write one exit criterion per stage, based on a customer action
- Name one owner for every stage
- Review stage definitions against your data every quarter

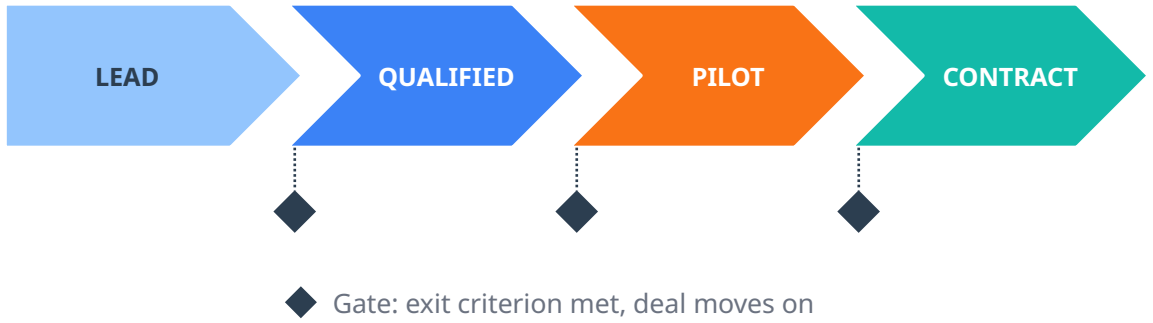
Which customer action proves that a deal has moved forward?

Founder Insight

"The way we set it up is very standard. You start with marketing qualified leads, people interested to talk to us. Once we talk to them, we want to qualify them. [...] We did not reinvent this, but the secret sauce is in how you define the transitions across these stages."

Dr. Petar Tsankov, LatticeFlow AI

STAGES AND EXIT CRITERIA



Pro Tip

Check your stage definitions against real deal data every quarter. LatticeFlow AI does this explicitly and has rebuilt its plan from scratch several times when it did not work.

Funnel Map

Stage	Exit Criterion	Owner
Lead		
Qualified	*e.g. budget owner named*	
Pilot		
Contract		

Step 3: Qualify Before You Invest Time

Decide early which leads deserve your demos and pilots.

Qualification Basics

BANT: Budget, Authority, Need, Timing; a quick first filter

Economic buyer: The person who owns the budget

Champion: An internal supporter who pushes your deal

Add Your Own Criteria

- Define the signals that predict fit in your market
- Find out who holds the budget; often it is not the user
- Park leads that are not ready and set a date to check again

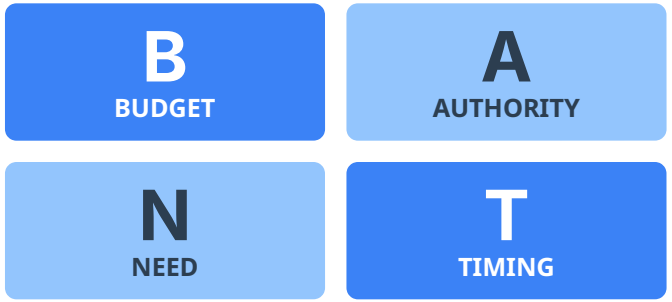
Who owns the budget, and have you spoken to them?

Founder Insight

"There are two indicators from my customer. First, it should have a large portfolio and be growing fast. If it is installing a lot of solar plants, that's a good customer for me that needs more automation. The second is that it is lacking people in operations. Everyone says: I don't have enough people to maintain my solar plants."

Govinda Upadhyay, SmartHelio

BANT: A FIRST FILTER



For complex deals, extend to MEDDIC

Pro Tip

Name the budget owner before you demo. The daily user may like your tool and still have no budget. In that case, the sale has to go top down to senior management.

Qualification Checklist

Criterion	Question to Ask	Evidence	Pass?
Budget	*e.g. budget planned?*		
Authority			
Need			
Timing			

Step 4: Build the Business Case Together

Calculate the value of your solution with the customer's own numbers before any pilot starts.

Why Calculate It Together?

- Customers trust numbers they helped to build
- Your champion needs the calculation to convince the budget owner
- Data gaps show up before the pilot, not after it

Two Simple Formulas

Return on investment: (Benefit minus cost) divided by cost

Payback: Your price divided by the annual benefit

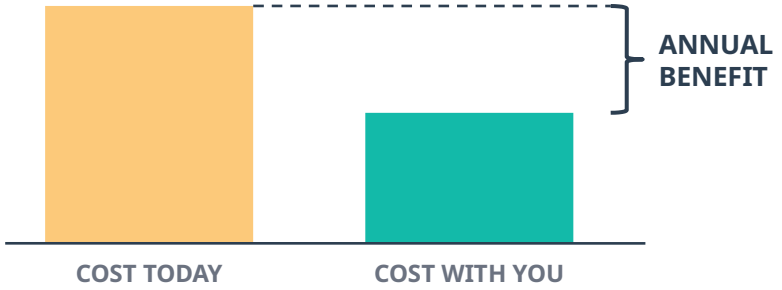
Which number would convince your customer's budget owner?

Founder Insight

"Luckily, we started with co-creation from the beginning, so we asked the hospitals: what would you be most interested in? We still do workshops together with customers where we go to a white wall and put all these ideas and use cases together. And with the first customer, we did not start before we had calculated a use case together."

Founders, heyPatient

THE JOINT BUSINESS CASE



Pro Tip

Collect use cases with the customer in a workshop, then calculate one of them together. heyPatient did not start with its first customer before this calculation was done.

Use Case Calculator

Use Case	Cost Today	Cost with You	Payback
e.g. inspection	*per year*	*per year, incl. price*	*in months*

Step 5: Define Success Upfront

Agree on measurable success criteria with the customer before the pilot starts.

What Your Pilot Should Prove

Proof of concept: Your technology works

Proof of value: It creates business value for this customer

Your goal: A paid pilot that proves value (Step 6)

Good Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Linked to the customer's business goal, not your feature list
- Measured against a baseline taken before the pilot
- Signed off by the person who decides on the rollout

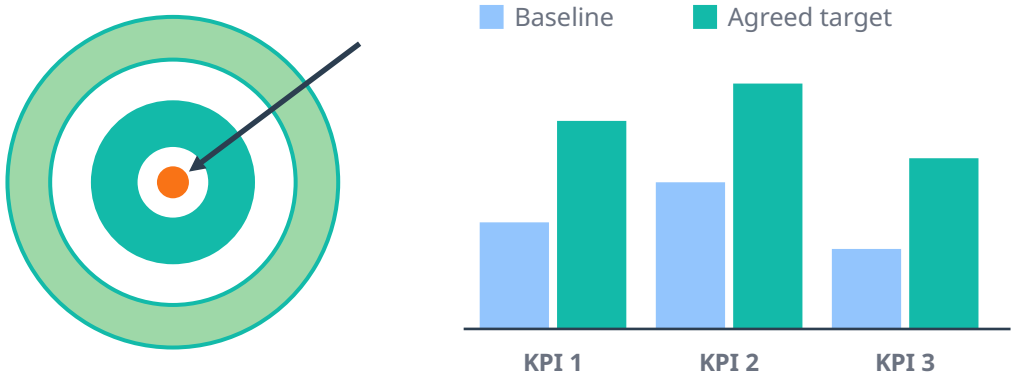
What result would make your customer roll out your solution?

Founder Insight

"We did a lot of pilots, and during the pilot with the customer, we would set and define KPIs: if the pilots are successful, will you scale with me? With certain customers we couldn't do it, because those KPIs could not meet their business needs, and with certain customers we did. This is how we kept narrowing our customer segment."

Govinda Upadhyay, SmartHelio

SUCCESS DEFINED BEFORE THE START



Pro Tip

Before the pilot, ask: "If we hit these KPIs, will you scale with us?" If the answer is no, the KPIs or the customer segment are not the right ones.

KPI Sheet

KPI & How Measured	Baseline	Target	Signed Off By
e.g. downtime	*before pilot*	*agreed value*	*name, role*

Step 6: Never Run Free Pilots

Charge for pilots so that both sides commit real resources.

Why Paid Pilots Work

Commitment: A price shows that the pain is real and budget exists
Priority: Paid projects get internal attention and staff
No budget? If a customer will not pay anything, recheck Step 3

What the Agreement Defines

Scope: What you deliver and what the customer provides
Price: At least your direct costs, for a fixed period
Follow-up: The contract or letter of intent (LOI) after success

What happens on the day after a successful pilot?

Founder Insight

"Another very important step, especially for robotics founders: we don't do pilots for free. You need to be at least able to cover your costs. Especially if you need to develop something and figure out with the customers what you need to do, it's even more important."

Jonas Wüst, Tethys Robotics

NO PILOT WITHOUT A PRICE



Pro Tip

Price every pilot to at least cover your costs. Agree before the start what follows a successful pilot: a contract, an LOI or a rollout.

Pilot Agreement Canvas

Scope (you / customer): _____

Price and duration: _____

Success KPIs (Step 5): _____

Follow-up if successful: _____

Reference rights (Step 8): _____

Step 7: Track Your Pipeline

Record every contact and deal in one place, so you know the next action and where deals stall.

Key Pipeline Metrics

Conversion rate: Share of deals that reach the next stage

Win rate: Deals won divided by pilots started

Sales cycle: Average days from first contact to signature

Keep It Simple

- Log the next step and its date for every deal
- With few deals, record reasons; rates come later
- Move to a CRM (customer relationship tool) when sheets get messy

What is the next step, with a date, for each open deal?

Founder Insight

"Definitely you need a CRM from day one, even if you don't have a product. The reason is, even when you don't have a product, you are talking to a lot of people, and you need to capture all your contacts in an organized way, because at one point in time you will use them."

Dr. Poorya Amini, Risklick

YOUR PIPELINE AT A GLANCE



Pro Tip

Start simple. Tethys Robotics found that for a team of seven to ten people, a spreadsheet works fine, as long as you write down honestly why each deal moves or stalls.

Pipeline Tracker

Company	Stage & Owner	Next Step & Date	Why Moved or Stalled

Step 8: Turn Pilots into References

Use every successful pilot to convince the next customer in the same industry.

Why References Matter

- Decision makers want to see that peers already use you
- A measured use case is your strongest sales material
- Network referrals help you reach the right person in large firms

Types of References

Case study: Results in the customer's own words

Reference call: A short call between customer and prospect

Logo use: Customer name on your website and deck

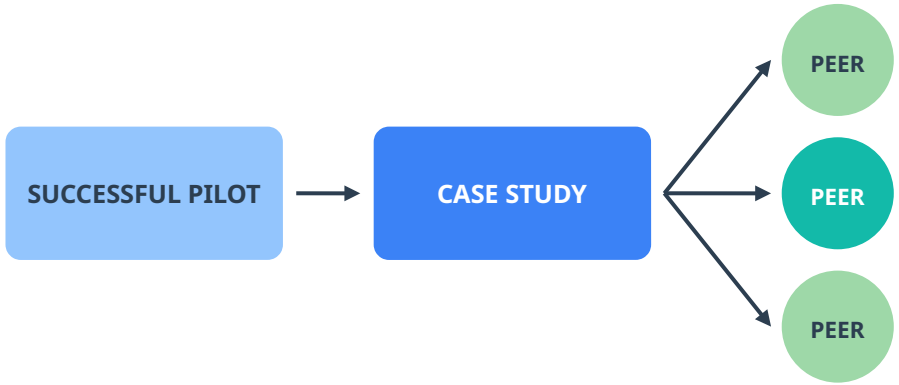
Which peer company would your first customer recommend you to?

Founder Insight

"The decision maker came up and said: I want to see if it really works. Are our peer companies, our competitors using it? If not, wait. We had to wait three years to find out who has the biggest problem right now. Once they had it, we could tell everyone else that they are using it too."

Mateusz Wojdyło, Stellos AG

FROM PILOT TO REFERENCE



Pro Tip

Secure reference rights in the pilot agreement (Step 6). Measure the impact in a real use case with the customer, as Risklick did, so that your case study has real numbers.

Reference Plan

Customer	Reference Type	Target Peer Companies	Ask By (Date)

Next Steps



Build Your Funnel

Work through Steps 1 to 3 now. Use Steps 4 to 6 before your next pilot, and Steps 7 and 8 as a routine.



Measure & Refine

Update your pipeline tracker every week. Every quarter, check whether your stages and criteria still match what customers do.



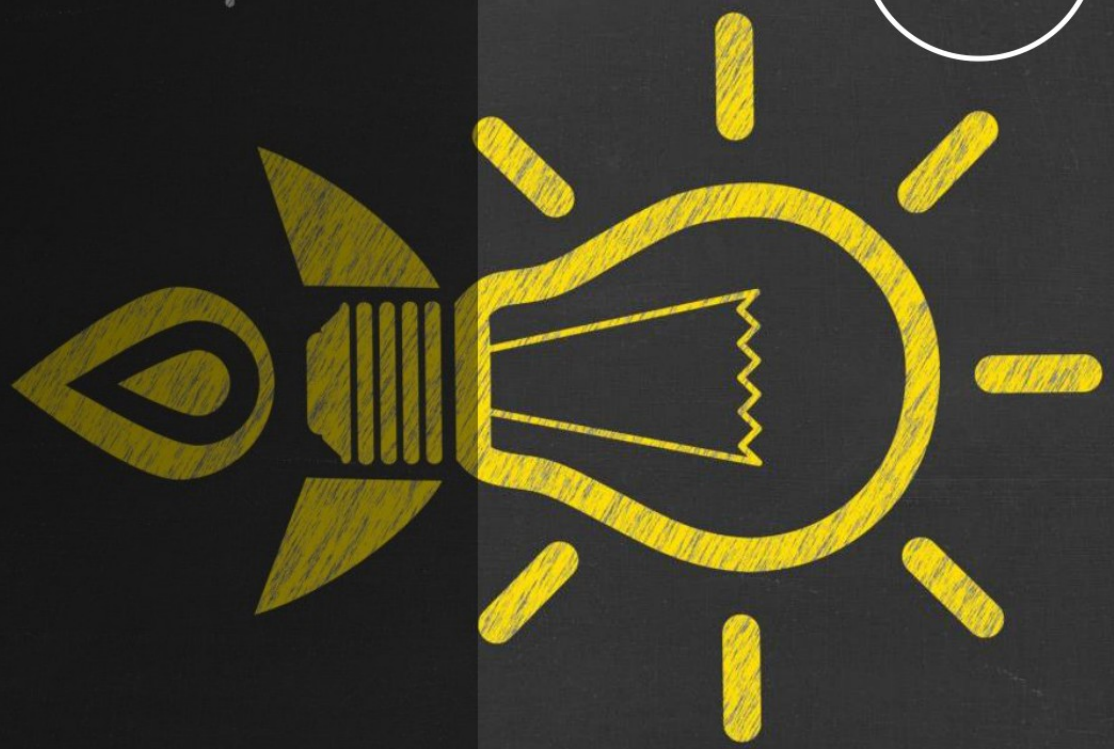
Seek Feedback

Bring your completed worksheets to your coach. Ask early customers where deals got stuck and what convinced them in the end.

Additional Resources

Business Model Design · Go-to-Market Strategy · Market & Customer Definition · Growth Hacking & Experiments · Innosuisse Training

Let's Bring Your Idea to Life



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