

How to land your start up's first customer.



Anna Talerico [Follow](#)

Mar 1, 2018 · 7 min read



You have a company. You have a product. Maybe it's been released, maybe it hasn't (but will be soon).

Now what?

Now it's time to sell. Now it's time to get a customer. Or two. Or 100. Or 1,000. It's go time.

When my boutique, custom web development company launched a SaaS landing page tool, here's what we had:

1. A small list of very large enterprise customers, for which we were doing complex, custom web development. None of whom were going to use our SaaS tool, because this was back in 2007 when SaaS was hardly a thing, and we were doing hands-on services for these customers.
2. An MVP of a landing page platform (we called it a post-click marketing platform). Actually, scratch that. It wasn't even an MVP yet. We had a version we could use ourselves, to rapidly build and test landing pages, but there was not yet an interface that a customer could use. That's not an MVP. That's just an advanced prototype really.
3. A vague idea of how much we should charge for the product.
4. A staff of about 10 people who were all working on servicing the web development customers.

Notice anything missing from the list above? Hmm...Here's what we didn't have when we "launched":

1. An actual product that could be used by customers.
 2. A staff that had time to devote to the new product (right, that means...no sales, no marketing, no customer success).
 3. Any marketing materials, content...eh, the list goes on.
 4. A sales deck, proposal template or contract.
-

Here's how we landed our first customer.

I hate to oversimplify it, but I have to because so many people overcomplicate it.

How do you start selling? Where do you start?

1. **Don't hire anyone to do sales yet.** Founders, make the first sale(s) yourself. If you think you need to hire someone to sell, you do, but I implore you to wait. I think founders should make the first sales, before they bring in someone to do it (unless you have the good fortune of having a co-founder who has a background in sales, in which case — that's awesome!). You don't have to be experienced in sales to get the ball rolling on your company's first few sales.
 2. **Don't distract yourself with shiny objects.** This isn't about your CRM, or your marketing automation platform, or your auto-dialer, or your...anything. You may have those things, or you may not. Don't worry about that stuff. It will all work itself out later. If you put tools and processes before selling, you will distract yourself from what is most important: landing your first customers.
 3. **Know who you are selling to, and what problems your product solves.** Hopefully this goes without saying, but make sure you have a clear picture of who will buy it, why they will buy, what problems it solves, how much it costs, etc. These things can change as you start to gain traction, but you can't start selling if you don't have a particular kind of prospect in mind, and how it will help them. Again, hopefully this goes without saying.
 4. **Ask for referrals.** Tell your friends, family, associates, colleagues. Tell everyone you know, professionally and otherwise, about your product. You can ask them to buy if you want to, but it may be better to just ask for referrals. Tell people about your product, what problems it solves, who it is for, and ask if they know anyone that it might be a fit for. Why? Because, you might get a referral or two. But you will also get practice telling people about what it is you sell — easy, no risk practice. This helps you develop your 'talk track', and anticipate the types of questions real prospects will ask you.
 5. **Build a list of ideal customers.** Who are your dream customers? Who is the perfect customer who can get tons of value from your product and needs it? Create a list.
-

Don't get bogged down in where you build that list — build it in a spreadsheet, build it in a CRM, write it on a legal pad, it doesn't matter, just get the list of target customers together.

6. **Reach out to the list of ideal customers, following a set cadence.** Decide how you will reach out, and with what frequency, and then do it. Perhaps it starts with a personalized LinkedIn invite, then a call (leave a voicemail if you don't reach them), then a “why you, why now” email, then another call, then something special in the mail to get their attention. Decide on a 10-touch cadence you can execute over a 4–6 week period, and just start. And keep doing this until you get people who are willing to hear you out.
7. **Figure it out once you get them on the hook.** Sometimes people are afraid to sell, so they distract themselves with other stuff. Like tools, and processes, and hiring and endless discussions about price, and service levels, and the perfect slide deck, and a sales template and on and on. That's fine. Do those things if you must, but also, know that it's OK to figure it out as you go along. You could have the most perfect sales contract or proposal template, and I guarantee you will need to modify it the first time you need to send it to a prospect. You can have the most perfectly designed pricing structure, and I guarantee the first customer you close will need or ask for something different. So don't lose yourself in those things, because they are going to change. But there is no way to know how they will change until you start having conversations and drum up real interest from some of your prospects.
8. **Do whatever it takes to win your first customer(s).** Everything starts with a sale. You need the revenue. You need the product validation. You need the case study. You need it all. So, be flexible with your first customers and do what it takes to win the deal. You aren't in the position of leverage, they are — you need them more than they need you. Plus, they are going out on a limb to try something new. Speaking of which, it's a tremendous risk for a buyer to try something new, so minimize their risks wherever you need to in order to give them peace of mind about the purchase.

Don't distract yourself with complications. Just pick up the phone, find your first customers, and sell them your product.

I know this works because that is how I did it. I didn't have a staff to help, so I grabbed an account manager who was already busy working with our existing web dev clients, and asked for her help. She had never really been in sales, but I thought she could talk to our prospects and I knew she wouldn't be afraid to dig in with me. She and I took the above steps to get the ball rolling. And we did it in about a day, not weeks. We didn't have a CRM, or any marketing materials yet. We walked to a coffee shop and outlined how we would reach out and how frequently we would do the reach out (call/voicemail, email, wait 4 days, call/voicemail, email, wait 5 days, etc.). Then we walked back to the office and each came up with a list of about 40 companies we wanted to reach out to. We did a little LinkedIn stalking to find people we thought might be our buyer in those companies, and we started our reach out the next day.

When we finally got some of the prospects on the phone, let me tell you it was ugly. We didn't know what to say. We didn't really know how to talk about what we were selling. We didn't have anything to show them, except the end result of what our admin interface could produce. We didn't have any marketing materials. We didn't have a sales deck. We had nothing. It was uncomfortable. But the second call was better than the first. And the third was better than that. We got better with each call, and got a few pieces of content and a deck together along the way.

We landed our first customer about 12 weeks later. I will never forget that moment. I couldn't believe someone would actually buy this thing that we hadn't really brought to market yet. But they did, and then the ball started rolling.

I am not trying to oversimplify sales.

It's an art, it's a science, it requires tremendous skill. But you can sell if you put your mind to it, and without a sale your company and your product are dead in the water. So get going and don't let all the other stuff get in your way. Once you have some traction and some paying customers, you can find your sales tools, your sales people, your sales leader. You can't scale sales until you have a sale. So first, get a customer.

This story is published in The Startup, Medium's largest entrepreneurship publication followed by 302,074+ people.

Subscribe to receive our top stories here.

[Startup](#) [Sales](#)

[About](#) [Help](#) [Legal](#)