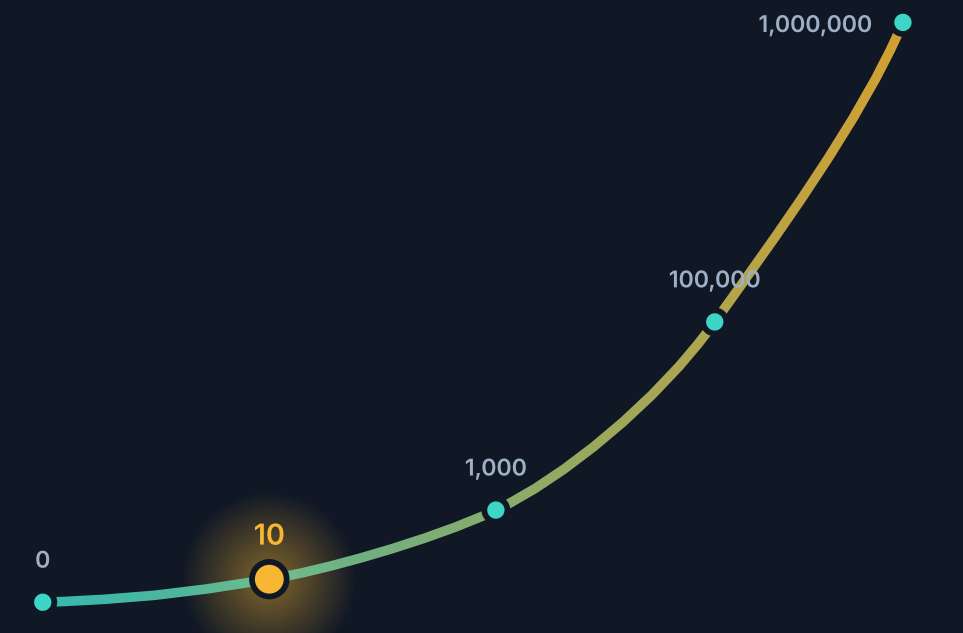


FREE CHAPTER

Ten people, by hand

Chapter 5: how to find your first users



From Zero to a Million Users

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Before you start

This is Chapter 5 of *From Zero to a Million Users*, a growth playbook for the age of AI agents. It's about the hardest and most important stage of all: your first ten users, found one at a time, by hand.

MEET MARIA

Throughout the book you follow Maria, a freelance translator in Valencia who builds Kobro, an invoicing tool that chases late payers. She's invented, but every problem she hits is real.

By Chapter 5 she has had 400 signups that didn't stick, picked her wedge (freelance translators in Europe who work for agencies) and written a positioning statement she's very proud of. It's about to meet a translator called Jonas.

The full book has five parts:

Part I, The New Ground: what AI changed, the friendly maths of a million, picking the right problem, your AI teammates.

Part II, Zero to 1,000: first users by hand, launching, the first five minutes, product-market fit.

Part III, 1,000 to 100,000: growth loops, AI answer engines, social, product-led growth, ads, agents, retention, pricing.

Part IV, 100,000 to 1,000,000: experiments, going global, scaling safely, moats, team.

Part V, Playbooks: consumer apps, B2B software, marketplaces, developer tools, AI agent products.

CHAPTER 5

Ten people, by hand

5

Here's the strangest advice in a book about getting a million users: for your first ten, forget about growth.

No ads. No viral tricks. No clever automation. Your first ten users will come from you, one at a time, by hand. And I promise that's not a problem to solve. It's the most valuable stage of the whole journey.

Right now you're not trying to grow. You're trying to learn one thing: will a real person, who owes you nothing, use what you built and come back? Ten people like that will teach you more than ten thousand visitors.

Why by hand?

In 2013, Paul Graham wrote an essay called "Do Things That Don't Scale". It's still the best advice for this stage, and two of its stories stuck with me.

The founders of Stripe didn't wait for developers to find them. When someone said they'd try it, the founders would say, "Great, give me your laptop," and set it up right there. The founders of Airbnb flew to New York to meet their first hosts, and took better photos of their homes themselves.

Neither trick could ever scale. Both taught the founders things no dashboard could. They saw exactly where setup confused people. They heard the fears hosts had about strangers sleeping in their homes. And they turned early users into fans.

These days it's very tempting to skip this. You could have an agent send 5,000 personalised messages tomorrow morning. Please don't. Nothing says "I care about you personally" quite like being one of five thousand. Right now you need learning, not reach. And learning only happens when you're in the room.

Not your mum

Your first users should be the people who feel the problem most sharply. Not your friends. Not your family. Not people being kind to you.

Look for people who have the problem right now, this week. People who've already tried to fix it, with a workaround or a competitor they dislike. People who care more about the problem being solved than about polish. And people who'll actually reply to your messages and tell you what's broken.

Friends and family are fine for checking whether the thing works at all. But they're a terrible signal for demand. They use it to be nice, and they stop the moment you stop asking. Your mum also said your school play was wonderful.

Where they hang out

The people you need are already gathering somewhere and talking about their problem. Your job is to find those places.

Start with friends of friends: ask ten people, "Who do you know who struggles with this?" Then look online. Reddit, Discord servers, Slack groups, forums and LinkedIn groups where your users ask each other for help. App store reviews and review sites where people complain about current tools. Social posts that start with "Is there a tool that..." Meetups and conferences where your users go to learn. And if you sell to businesses, job ads for roles your product could help. A company hiring three people to do data entry has a problem.

This is where AI shines. Ask an agent to find recent public posts where people describe your problem, summarise each person's situation and rank them by how badly they seem to need help. In one afternoon you can have a list of fifty people who said, out loud, in public, that they need what you made.

Two quick cautions. Respect each community's rules, because many ban self-promotion and a reputation as a spammer is very hard to shake. And respect privacy: use what people chose to say in public, and don't collect personal data you have no right to keep. In the EU, even public posts count as personal data under the GDPR: you need a lawful basis to use them, and when you contact someone, you should tell them where you found their details. Emailing them can also need their consent under the EU's separate ePrivacy rules.

The message

Once you've found someone, write to them like a human. Let the agent research and draft if you like, but you edit and you hit send. Something like this:

Hi Jonas, I saw your post in the freelance translators group about losing your Sunday nights to invoices. I'm building a tool that creates invoices from your time tracker and chases late payers for you. It's early and rough. Would you try it for two weeks and tell me what's wrong with it? I'll set it up with you on a 20-minute call.
Maria

Short. Specific. Honest that it's early. Asking for feedback, not money. Offering to do the boring setup yourself.

Most messages will get no reply. That's normal, so don't take it personally. They're not ignoring you. They're ignoring everyone. But if thirty or forty go unanswered, something's off: the message, the audience or the problem itself. Change one thing at a time and try again.

The first session

When someone says yes, treat your first call as half research and half setup.

Start with their world. Ask them to show you how they handle the problem today, and just watch. Then set the product up with them, noticing every moment they hesitate. Don't hang up until they've seen it do something useful with their own real data. And before you go, agree on a check-in: "Can I message you Friday to see how it went?"

Record the call if they're happy with that. An AI assistant can turn it into a summary, a list of sticking points and quotes you can use later. But also jot down, in your own words, the one thing that surprised you most. That note is often the most valuable thing you'll get all week.

Fake it (honestly) before you make it

You don't have to automate everything before you have users. Two old tricks let you deliver value before the product is finished.

The **concierge** approach: you do the service by hand, openly. You make the report or the plan yourself and send it over.

The **Wizard of Oz** approach: users see a product, but behind the curtain a human, maybe helped by AI tools, does part of the work.

Both let you learn what people value before you spend time building it. Today they're even more useful, because a person with AI tools can deliver something very close to the real product. Just be honest if anyone asks what's manual, and never fake anything that puts people's data or money at risk.

If you sell to businesses

For B2B products, your first ten users might really be three to five **design partners**: companies that agree to use your product early, meet you regularly and help shape it. In return they get influence, attention and usually a discount.

The best design partners have the problem badly, have one person inside who'll champion you, and look like lots of other companies you could sell to later. Avoid partners whose needs are totally unique. Building for them is consulting, not making a product. Consulting is a perfectly fine business. It's just not this one.

Write down what you've agreed: how often you'll meet, what they get, when they start paying, and whether you can use their name. A simple one-page agreement saves awkward conversations six months later.

Keep a little notebook

Keep a simple log of every early user. How you found them and what they said about the problem. When they started. How often they use it. What they love, what confuses them, what they asked for. And whether they'd be truly upset if it disappeared.

An agent can update it from your call notes and product data. But read it yourself every week. The patterns that will shape your next year are hiding in there.

How you know you're done

You've finished this stage when you have around ten people who use the product regularly without being reminded, who'd be genuinely upset if it vanished, and who've told someone else about it, or would if you asked.

On the way, watch for the usual traps. Counting friends as users. Talking more than listening. Giving up after twenty unanswered messages, when it might take two hundred. Building every feature anyone asks for, instead of the need behind the request. And automating outreach before you've learned anything, which just spreads a weak message further.

If you can't get there after a few months of honest effort, the problem probably isn't your marketing. Go back to Chapter 3 and question the problem, the audience or the product.

MARIA'S STORY

Maria sends 40 personal messages to translators who've complained in public about late payments. Eleven reply. Six agree to a call.

The first call is with Jonas, a German-to-English translator in Leipzig. She asks him to share his screen and show her how he invoices today. He opens his translation software, copies a word count, multiplies it by his rate per word and types the total into a spreadsheet.

"Where's your time tracker?" Maria asks.

Jonas laughs. "I don't track hours. Nobody does. Agencies pay per word."

Maria feels her face go hot. She bills per word too. She'd built Kobro around hours because that's what every other invoicing app does, and she'd never questioned it.

That night she rebuilds the import. Kobro now reads word counts straight from the files translators already have. On her next five calls, people set Kobro up in minutes, and three of them send a real invoice before the call ends.

Three weeks later, Maria has ten users who send their invoices through Kobro every month without being reminded. Jonas is one of them, and he's already told two friends. She rewrites the homepage: "turns your word counts into invoices". One conversation fixed what a month of building got wrong.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Your first ten users come from you, personally. That's the point.
- Find people who feel the problem sharply, where they already gather.
- Set them up yourself, watch closely, and write down what surprises you.

TRY THIS WEEK

- ☐ List ten places where your ideal users talk about the problem.
- ☐ Send twenty personal messages. Edit every single one.
- ☐ Run your first setup call and note the biggest surprise.

Ten happy people is a wonderful start. But how do you go from them to hundreds, and then thousands? It starts with something most teams get wrong: the launch.

WANT THE REST?

That was one chapter. There are twenty-five more.

The full book follows Maria from her first user to her millionth, across 26 chapters, with a recap and three small actions at the end of every one.

From Zero to a Million Users

Available on Amazon in Kindle and paperback from 19 January 2027. Search for "From Zero to a Million Users".

By Rudolf Cicko