IDEA TO INVOICE · 08

Is This Worth Doing?

A field guide for solopreneurs at the start. How to decide whether your idea is worth the next six months of your life — and how to stop gracefully if it isn't.

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EDITION

08 of 12

FORMAT

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12 pages

READ ME FIRST

Before you start

This guide assumes you have an idea. It also assumes the idea is probably wrong, in interesting ways, and that is fine.

Most solopreneurs skip validation and build first. The ones who succeed usually validate without noticing. The ones who fail almost always knew, deep down, that the numbers did not work — and built anyway. This guide is for the second group. It gives you five checks, ten conversations, and a decision framework. None of it costs money. Most of it costs an afternoon.

This is for you if

You have an idea, a side project, or a half-built thing that has not shipped.

You are still early enough that pivoting would not hurt much.

You have a few hours a week to spend on validation, not full-time availability.

You can read a spreadsheet and write a polite email to a stranger.

You are willing to be told the answer is “stop”.

This is not for you if

You have already launched and have paying customers. Edition 09 or 10 are for you.

You want permission to build. Permission to build is free. This guide is about whether to.

You are not willing to talk to strangers. Validation requires conversations, not vibes.

You have a signed contract, a co-founder, or outside money already committed. That is a different stage.

You want a five-minute AI hack that proves your idea is brilliant. There isn't one.

> The honest summary: the goal of validation is to find a reason to stop before you spend the money, not to find a reason to keep going. A failed validation is the cheapest education you will ever buy.

WHAT IS IN HERE

Contents

Five chapters, two worksheets, one worked example that ends in “stop”. Read in order, fill in the worksheets as you go.

How to use this guide

Read chapter 1 in one sitting. It reframes what validation is for. Chapters 2 to 5 are the four checks, in the order most solopreneurs benefit from running them. Chapter 6 is the decision framework that ties them together. Chapter 7 walks through a real example that ends in “stop” — read this even if you are convinced your idea is good. The worksheets on page 11 are meant to be filled in by hand.

Tools used in this guide

ChatGPT free, Claude free, Perplexity free. Total monthly cost: £0. A spreadsheet is helpful for the worksheet pages. A paper notebook is better. None of this requires software.

CHAPTER 1

Your idea is probably wrong (and that's fine)

Enthusiasm is not evidence. Most first ideas do not survive contact with the market. The point is to find out before you build.

When a solopreneur describes their idea, the idea is almost always framed as if it were already working. “A platform that connects dog owners with vetted walkers.” The future tense hides the question. The question is: would anyone pay for it, and is there a route to charging more than it costs you to deliver? Those two questions are usually answered by the market before the founder, and usually in the negative the first time round.

Why first ideas are usually wrong

An idea you have not tested is a hypothesis. It is not a plan. Treating it as a plan is the most common mistake solopreneurs make, because the alternative — admitting the plan is a guess — feels like defeat. It is not defeat. It is the start of useful work. A guess that has been tested against ten conversations and three months of research is still a guess, but it is a guess with information attached.

The reason first ideas are usually wrong is structural. You picked the idea based on what you know, what you enjoy, and what feels plausible from your own life. None of those is evidence that other people will pay for it. The market does not care what you enjoy. The market pays for the relief of a specific, repeated problem it currently has. Your first guess at which problem is theirs is, on average, off-target.

The “kill your idea” mindset

The aim of the next four chapters is not to find reasons to keep going. It is to find reasons to stop. If a reason to stop exists, finding it now saves you six months. If no reason to stop exists — if the idea survives the four checks, the ten conversations, and the score band — then continuing is no longer a guess, it is a decision.

This sounds bleak. It is not. Most successful solopreneurs describe their first idea as “the one I gave up on so I could build the real one.” The giving up was the work. The second idea was informed by everything the first one taught them, including which customers did not exist, which competitors had already won, and which problems were not actually painful enough to pay to solve.

What you are not testing

You are not testing whether AI can build the thing. AI is a tool, not a market. You are not testing whether the idea is technically possible. Almost all ideas are technically possible; the cost of building them is what separates winners from hobbyists. You are not testing whether you personally would use it. You are the least useful person to ask. You are testing whether anyone else would pay for it, and whether the unit economics allow a profit.

> Stopping is a valid outcome. A failed validation is the cheapest education you will ever buy. If the four checks below give you a reason to stop, take it. The next idea is closer to the real one.

CHAPTER 2

Market research without paying for it

Free AI tools can give you a credible first pass at a market in under an hour. The trick is knowing which questions to ask and which answers to ignore.

A market research report from a consultancy costs £5,000 and tells you almost nothing you could not have found for free. The free version takes an afternoon, three AI tools, and the discipline to ignore the parts that flatter your idea. The output is a five-bullet brief that answers: who has this problem, how often, what they currently do about it, and what they would pay to make it go away.

Three tools, one prompt each

Use ChatGPT, Claude, or Perplexity in this order. They overlap; you do not need all three, but using two gives you a sanity check on hallucinations.

1. **Map the problem space.** In ChatGPT or Claude, paste: “I am considering building [YOUR IDEA]. The target customer is [WHO]. List (a) the five most common ways this customer currently solves the problem, (b) the three sub-problems that are most painful, and (c) the questions this customer would Google in the last month before deciding to buy. Cite your reasoning.” Read the answer. If the five existing solutions sound invented, ask for sources. If they sound real, you have a market map.

2. **Quantify the market honestly.** In Perplexity, paste: “How many [CUSTOMER TYPE] in the UK currently use a paid service for [PROBLEM]? Cite three sources. If the data does not exist, say so.” Perplexity cites sources. Read the sources. If only one of the three sources supports a useful number, the number is weak. If all three disagree wildly, the market is immature and you are early.

3. **Find the objection.** In any of the three, paste: “List the five most common reasons a [CUSTOMER] would NOT pay for [YOUR IDEA], even if it solved their problem. Be specific. Include the rational reason, the emotional reason, and the inertia reason.” The emotional reason is usually the one that stops the sale. If the objection list is short, the market is not paying for this and you are solving a non-problem.

What to ignore

Ignore any AI output that says “the market is growing rapidly” without a source. Ignore any sentence that starts with “in today's fast-paced world”. Ignore any number that ends in “0 billion”. Ignore any answer that confirms what you already wanted to hear — if the AI is being a yes-man, prompt it harder. AI models are trained to be helpful, not honest. Helpfulness looks like agreement. The market does not care about your feelings.

What to write down

Five bullet points: the customer, their problem, the current workaround, the workaround's cost (time or money), and the gap your idea would fill. If you cannot fill those five in after an hour, the idea is not yet articulated clearly enough to test. Go back and sharpen it.

> If any AI in this chapter tells you the idea is brilliant with no caveats, treat that as a red flag. The model is being polite. The polite answer is the one most likely to be wrong.

CHAPTER 3

Competitor analysis in an afternoon

Three competitors with a homepage, a price page, and ten reviews each tells you more than a market research report. AI makes this a two-hour job.

Most solopreneurs skip competitor analysis because they assume they have no competitors. They are nearly always wrong. If there is a customer with a problem and money to spend, someone is already taking it — possibly badly, possibly expensively, but taking it. Your job in this chapter is to find them, study them, and decide whether there is a gap their existence creates for you.

Finding the competitors you missed

Ask Perplexity: "List the five companies in the UK that currently serve [CUSTOMER] for [PROBLEM]. Include both direct competitors (doing what I plan to do) and indirect competitors (solving the same problem differently). Cite sources." Read the sources. You will likely find two names you have not heard of. Add them to the list.

For each competitor, capture: their homepage headline, their price (or how to find it), the one thing they do that the customer reviews complain about, and the one thing the customer reviews praise. The pattern across five competitors is your market.

The competitor brief

Use the following prompt in Claude or ChatGPT, with the five competitor names and their websites:

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For each of these five competitors, give me: (1) the customer they target, (2) their
pricing model, (3) the gap in the market their existence suggests, (4) the one
feature customers complain about in reviews, (5) the one feature customers praise.
Then list the three gaps that appear in two or more of the five. Those three gaps are
my entry points.
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Read the response. The "gaps that appear in two or more" are the parts of the market the existing players have not solved. A gap is not an opportunity by itself — it is an opportunity if the gap is profitable to serve and the competitors have avoided it for a reason other than "they did not think of it".

The "they exist, why?" check

For each competitor, ask: if they have been around for more than two years, why? Either they are profitable, or they are subsidised by something else (a larger product, a founder with deep pockets, a hobby for someone who does not need the income). If they are profitable, your version needs a different angle. If they are subsidised, your version needs to be profitable on its own.

Pricing reality check

If every competitor charges £50/month and your idea only makes sense at £15/month, the gap is not a gap. It is a market that will not support your economics. Either your costs are wrong, your value is wrong, or your customer is wrong. Pick one to fix.

> If after this exercise you have five direct competitors and no obvious gap, the market is mature. Mature markets are not necessarily bad, but they are not where a solo founder should start. Look for an adjacent problem the same customer has, where the competitor list is thinner.

CHAPTER 4

Talk to 10 people before you build anything

Ten conversations is the cheapest research you will ever do. AI helps you ask better questions. The answers are still the work.

Every founder eventually learns this the hard way. The version of the customer that lives in your head is not the version that exists. The only way to find the real one is to talk to ten of them and listen. Not pitch. Not "validate". Listen. AI is useful here for two specific things: finding people to talk to, and asking questions that get honest answers instead of polite ones.

Who to talk to

The ten people are not your friends, your family, or your colleagues. They are people who match the customer profile you wrote down in chapter 2, who do not yet know you, and who will give you fifteen minutes. The cheapest sources are LinkedIn searches, niche subreddit comment histories, and the customer lists of your competitors (often visible on review sites or in public case studies). Ask politely. Explain it is research, not a pitch. Most people will say yes if you ask well.

Questions that get honest answers

AI is bad at questions and good at lists. Use it to draft the question list, then edit. The questions that work are not the ones you would expect.

- ✓ "Walk me through the last time you tried to solve this problem. What did you do, and where did it go wrong?" (Past behaviour, not future intention.)
- ✓ "What did that cost you in time, money, or stress?" (Quantify the pain.)
- ✓ "If a perfect solution existed and cost £X a month, would you actually use it? Why or why not?" (X is your target price. Watch for hesitation.)
- ✓ "What would have to be true for you to switch from your current workaround?" (The real switch cost.)
- ✓ "If you have tried something like this before, what made you stop?" (The graveyard of competitors.)

What to listen for

The most useful signal is also the most uncomfortable. When the customer describes their current workaround with resignation rather than frustration, the problem is real but not painful enough to switch. When they describe it with energy, anger, or specific examples, the problem is real and worth paying to solve. When they say "sounds interesting" and then describe a different problem in detail, the problem you thought you were solving is not the one they have.

The AI-assisted debrief

After each call, paste your notes into Claude with: "Here are my notes from a customer interview. The idea I am testing is [IDEA]. Extract (1) the words the customer used about the problem, (2) any feature they mentioned without being asked, (3) the one thing that surprised me about what they said, (4) any sign that the problem is not actually painful enough. Do not write the analysis. Extract from the notes." This produces a structured debrief in a tenth of the time.

> If fewer than three of the ten people describe the problem in roughly the same words, the market is not yet coherent enough to build for. Either wait, or reposition. Do not invent clarity.

CHAPTER 5

The go / no-go checklist

Eight questions, three answers: go, pivot, stop. The score band on this page is the one number that decides whether you keep going.

The previous four chapters gave you information. This one gives you a verdict. Score your idea against the eight questions below on a scale of 0 to 3, where 0 means "no evidence" and 3 means "evidence from three or more conversations, competitors, or sources". Add the scores. The total sits in one of three bands. The band tells you what to do next.

The eight questions

- ✓ Can you name the specific customer in one sentence without using "anyone who" or "people who might"?
- ✓ Have at least five of your ten conversations confirmed the problem is real and current?
- ✓ Have at least three people said they would pay the price you plan to charge?
- ✓ Are there fewer than three direct competitors, or a clear gap they are not serving?
- ✓ Can you describe your pricing model in one sentence, and does the unit maths work at scale?
- ✓ Can you reach the customer without paying for ads in the first six months?
- ✓ Is the worst-case cost of building — in money and time — an amount you could lose without it hurting?
- ✓ If this fails in twelve months, will you have learned something specific and useful?

Score 3 for "yes, evidenced", 2 for "probably", 1 for "unclear", 0 for "no or contradicted by evidence". A score of 2 or 3 on at least seven of the eight is a go. A score of 2 or 3 on five or six is a pivot — go back and change one of the inputs. A score of 2 or 3 on fewer than five is a stop.

The decision bands

0–10	11–17	18–24
Stop. The idea does not survive the four checks. Do not invest another month. Note what you learned and consider the adjacent problem instead.	**Pivot.** One or two inputs are wrong. The most common culprits are the customer definition and the pricing model. Fix one and re-score before doing anything else.	**Go.** The idea has evidence. Build the smallest thing that lets a real customer pay you a real price. That is the topic of Edition 09.

What the score does not measure

The score measures evidence. It does not measure your motivation, your skill, or your luck. Those matter, but they are not in the score. If you score a 20 on a problem you find boring, you will not finish. If you score a 14 on a problem you find fascinating, the four-point gap matters less than the next six months of your attention. The score is a filter for evidence, not a substitute for judgement.

> A score of 11 is not a near-miss worth pushing through. An 11 means one of the inputs is genuinely wrong. Pushing through an 11 produces a year-long detour. Fix the input.

CHAPTER 5 · CONTINUED

The honest scoring rules

Common scoring traps, the difference between evidence and enthusiasm, and what to do if the band says "pivot".

The score is only as honest as the rules. Most solopreneurs score themselves higher than the evidence warrants, because the alternative — admitting the band says "stop" — hurts. The rules below are the corrections. Read them before you score.

Scoring traps

Trap 1: "My friends said they'd buy it." Your friends are not your customer. A friend will say yes because they like you, not because they need what you are building. Discount any evidence from people who know you personally. Score those as 1 at most.

Trap 2: "I personally would pay that." You are the least useful person to ask. Your biases are why you are building the thing in the first place. Score yourself at 1 unless you have evidence from someone else.

Trap 3: "Three competitors is fine — that means the market is validated." Three competitors means the market exists. It does not mean you can win. The relevant question is not whether there are competitors. It is whether there is a gap they are not serving, and whether you can serve it. A market with ten competitors and a clear gap is better than a market with two competitors and no gap.

Trap 4: "I'll figure out the unit maths as I go." You will not. If you cannot estimate your cost of delivery per customer in one sentence now, you will not magically know it later. If the maths is unclear, the score on question 5 is 0, not 2.

If the band says "pivot"

A pivot is not a failure. It is the point of the exercise. The most common pivots are: tighter customer definition (e.g. "freelance designers in the UK" instead of "creative professionals"), different price point (lower, usually), different distribution (niche community instead of broad marketing), or a different adjacent problem the same customer would pay more to solve. Pick one pivot. Re-score. If the new score lands in the same band, pick a different pivot. After two pivots that do not move the score, the answer is stop.

If the band says "stop"

Stop gracefully. The work you did was not wasted. You now know the gap that is not there, the customer that is not buying, and the competitors that already won. The next idea will use all three. The most successful solopreneurs describe their first three attempts as "the ones that taught me what to build fourth".

> The score is a verdict on evidence, not on you. A stop is information. Acting on it is what separates a solopreneur who learns from one who doesn't.

A REAL EXAMPLE, END TO END

A dog-walking app that doesn't get built

Sam has a good idea, runs the four checks, scores 11, and stops. Here is what the conversation looked like and what was learned.

Sam is a former veterinary nurse in Bristol with an idea: an app that connects dog owners with vetted, insured local dog walkers, with live GPS tracking and a per-walk photo. He estimates the market at 1.2 million UK dog owners who walk their dogs less than they would like. He runs the four checks. The result is a band of 11 — pivot. He tries two pivots. Both fail. He stops. Below is what each check found.

Chapter 2: market research findings

The AI tools identified five existing solutions: Rover, Tailster, BorrowMyDoggy, local Facebook groups, and the local pet-shop notice board. Two of these — Rover and Tailster — already offer the live GPS tracking Sam planned to build. None of them include the photo. None of them vet the walkers more rigorously than a DBS check. The AI's gap list included “better walker vetting” and “subscription rather than per-walk pricing”.

Chapter 3: competitor analysis findings

The five competitors split into two camps. Rover and Tailster charge per walk, take 15–20% commission, and operate nationally. BorrowMyDoggy is free to list, takes a small percentage, and operates on a borrowing model. Local Facebook groups are free for everyone and dominate regional trade. The gap Sam identified — subscription-based unlimited walks — exists in the market. None of the competitors do it. Sam asks why, and gets an important answer in chapter 4.

Chapter 4: ten conversations

Sam talks to ten dog owners. Six describe their current walker arrangement without frustration. Two describe Rover specifically with mild dissatisfaction about reliability. One describes using BorrowMyDoggy and loves it. One says she would love a subscription model, “but only if the walker is the same person every time”. The painful answer: the problem is not the price or the app. The problem is the trust between one specific dog and one specific walker. Sam's idea solves an app-shaped problem in a trust-shaped market.

Chapter 5: the score

Customer definition: 3 (specific, real). Problem real and current: 2 (most confirmed, none urgently). Would pay the price: 1 (only one of ten said yes to a subscription). Competitors and gap: 2 (clear gap exists). Pricing model and unit maths: 1 (subscription maths did not work at any realistic retention figure). Reach without paid ads: 1 (cold-acquiring dog owners is hard). Worst-case cost is survivable: 3 (six months of part-time work). Will learn something useful: 3 (always). Total: 16. Pivot.

SAM'S PIVOT ATTEMPTS

Pivot 1: tighter customer to “professional dog walkers who want software”. Re-scored 14. Stop.

Pivot 2: tighter problem to “vet practices that want to offer a walking service”. Re-scored 13. Stop.

Outcome: Sam stops building the app. He keeps the ten-conversation notes, joins a Bristol dog-walking cooperative as a part-time walker, and within four months is running the cooperative's booking system. Edition 09 territory.

> A score of 16 is not a near-miss. It is a verdict. Sam's idea was real, his work was solid, and the answer was no. That is a successful validation. The validation succeeded at its actual job.

YOUR TURN

Your decision, on paper

Fill this in by hand. The act of writing forces the honesty the score depends on.

Two short worksheets. The first captures what the four checks found. The second is the score itself. Both fit on one page for a reason: the value is in the writing, not in re-reading the chapters.

What the four checks found

My idea, in one sentence ______________________________

The specific customer is ______________________________

Their current workaround is ______________________________

The five competitors are ______________________________

The gap they leave is ______________________________

Of ten conversations, # who confirmed the problem: ______________________________

Of those, # who said they would pay: ______________________________

The score

Q1 — Specific customer (0–3)

Q2 — Problem confirmed (0–3)

Q3 — Would pay the price (0–3)

Q4 — Competitor gap (0–3)

Q5 — Unit maths work (0–3)

Q6 — Reach without paid ads (0–3)

Q7 — Worst-case cost survivable (0–3)

Q8 — Will learn something useful (0–3)

Total (0–24)

Band (0–10 stop / 11–17 pivot / 18–24 go)

Decision

Date I scored this

If the band is 11–17, set a re-score date four weeks out. If the band is 0–10, set a date to revisit the adjacent problem. If 18–24, edition 09 is the next thing to read.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Colophon

Everything you might want to know about where this came from and what to read next.

AUTHOR

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An independent practitioner in Bristol writing field guides for one-person businesses that would rather be doing the work than writing a business plan about it.

TOOLS USED

ChatGPT free for market scans, Claude free for the structured debrief, Perplexity free for cited sources. A spreadsheet and a notebook. Total monthly cost: £0.

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The Idea to Invoice series

01 — Where AI Actually Helps

02 — The 30-Day AI Pilot

03 — Your Data Your Rules

04 — Writing AI Instructions That Actually Work

05 — The AI Vendor Interrogation Kit

06 — Your First AI Employee

07 — Set Up Your Own AI Agent

08 — Is This Worth Doing? (this guide)

09 — Build the Thing

10 — Get Found

11 — Get the Conversation

12 — Close the Deal

> If the band said “go”, the next guide is Edition 09 — Build the Thing. It picks up where this one stops, with the smallest product, the simplest offer, and the build-or-buy decisions you are about to face. If the band said “stop”, you have just done the cheapest education available. Use it.