
The 2026 Outbound Playbook.

Signals, sequences and scripts that book
real demos in 2026.

Cold outbound isn't dead. Lazy outbound is.

A field guide for people who are their own sales team,
running outbound in 2026.

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THREE TENETS

- 1 Signal before persona.*
- 2 Short before clever.*
- 3 Specific before scaled.*

The state of outbound in 2026

Cold outbound isn't dead. Lazy outbound is. Here's what shifted, and what still works.

OLD OUTBOUND

Spray and pray

- × 10,000 generic emails
- × Templated personas
- × Single channel
- × Optimize for opens
- × 'Just circling back...'
- × Pipeline by hope

SIGNAL-FIRST OUTBOUND

Earn the click with a real trigger

200 hand-picked accounts

Real, public triggers

Email + LinkedIn + voice

Optimize for booked demos

'Worth 15 mins?'

Booked meetings, not hope

WHAT CHANGED

- AI-generated spam tripled inbox volume. Buyers default to deleting unless something earns the click.
- LinkedIn down-ranks templated connection notes, and one channel gives you one chance to be seen.
- Intent data is cheaper and more accurate than ever. No excuse for spraying generic lists.
- The "send 10,000 emails and pray" era is over. The "send 200 hand-picked messages and book 8 demos" era is here.

WHAT STILL WORKS

- Personalization rooted in a public, verifiable trigger (a hire, a raise, a product launch, a job posting).
- Short messages, under 75 words, that lead with the prospect, not your product.
- Multi-touch, multi-channel sequences (email + LinkedIn + occasional voice).
- A clear, low-friction ask: "Worth 15 minutes?" beats "Book a 30-min discovery call."

The signal-first framework

Every great campaign starts with one question: what just happened in this account that makes now the right time to reach out?

That "what just happened" is a signal. Signals beat personas because they're time-bound. The prospect is actively in motion, which means they're more likely to take a meeting.

THE FOUR SIGNAL CATEGORIES

GROWTH

Examples

Funding round, hiring spree, new market

Why it works

Budget unlocked, pressure to deliver.

PAIN

Examples

Tool churn, layoffs, bad reviews

Why it works

Status quo broken, openness to change.

PEOPLE

Examples

New VP/Director hire, exec departure

Why it works

New leader = 90 days to make a mark.

PRODUCT

Examples

Launch, pricing change, integration

Why it works

Public commitment to a direction.

Rule of thumb: If you can't name the signal in one sentence, the campaign isn't ready to send.

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE: SIGNAL TO MESSAGE IN 60 SECONDS

Signal:	Acme Corp just raised a \$12M Series A (Growth signal)
Why now:	Board expects pipeline metrics in 90 days. Budget unlocked, pressure to deliver fast.
Message:	<i>"Congrats on the round. Most A-stage teams we work with feel pressure to triple pipeline by the next board meeting. We helped [similar company] go from 0 to 14 demos/month in 6 weeks. Worth a 15-min look?"</i>
Why it works:	Specific trigger, time-bound pain, proof from a comparable company, low-friction ask.

Signal before persona. Tenet 1.

Where to find buying signals

You don't need expensive intent platforms to start. Most of the best signals are public. You just need to know where to look.

FREE, HIGH-SIGNAL

LinkedIn job posts, search by title and posted-in-last-7-days

Company news via Google Alerts (funding, hires, launches)

G2 / Capterra reviews, filter 1-3 stars to find churn signals

Crunchbase weekly funding digest

GitHub releases and changelogs for technical buyers

PAID, SCALABLE

Apollo / Clay for enriched company + people data

Ocean.io or Keyplay for finding more accounts like your best ones

UNDERRATED

Podcast guest appearances, name-drop the episode

Conference speaker lists 30 days before the event

Glassdoor reviews mentioning your category

Substack/LinkedIn posts with 50+ comments in your niche

Pro tip: Don't start with paid tools. Set up three Google Alerts (competitor name, "[your category] funding round," "[ICP title] hiring") and check LinkedIn job posts weekly. You'll have more signals than you can act on within a week. Paid tools are for scaling, not starting.

SIGNAL STACKING: THE MULTIPLIER

One signal is good. Two signals on the same account is a campaign. Example: company just raised funding (Growth) AND hired a VP of Sales (People). That's two reasons to reach out and two angles to reference. Stack signals when you find them.

Building the target list

A great list is small, sharp and refreshable. Aim for 200–500 accounts at a time, refreshed every two weeks.

THE ICP FILTER STACK

- **Firmographic:** industry, employee count, revenue band, geography.
- **Technographic:** the tools they already run, when one of them tells you they are the kind of buyer you serve.
- **Behavioral:** visited pricing page, downloaded competitor whitepaper, hired the buyer persona.
- **Exclusion:** existing customers, last-90-day no-replies, companies under 10 FTE if your ACV is >\$30k.

THE 3-TIER MODEL

TIER 1 • BULLSEYE

50 accounts

Hand-built, deeply researched, multi-threaded outreach with custom video (see Section 05 for format).

TIER 2 • STRONG FIT

200 accounts

Signal-triggered sequences with light personalization in the first line.

TIER 3 • LOOKALIKE

1,000 accounts

Templated but segmented. Used to discover new pockets of demand.

LIST HYGIENE CHECKLIST

- Verify emails before loading into your sending tool. Bounce rate above 3% kills sender reputation.
- Deduplicate across campaigns. Nobody wants two versions of the same pitch from different senders.
- Remove anyone who replied "not interested" in the last 90 days. Respect the no.
- Exclude current customers. Obvious, but people forget when lists come from different sources.
- Refresh every two weeks. Stale lists decay at 2–3% per month. Roles change, companies close, people move.

Specific before scaled. Tenet 3.

Messaging that gets replies

Every message follows the same five-beat structure. Memorize it.

BEAT 1 <i>Trigger</i> Reference the specific public signal. Prove you did the homework in one line.	BEAT 2 <i>Bridge</i> Connect the signal to a problem the prospect likely cares about right now.	BEAT 3 <i>Proof</i> One concrete, quantified result from a comparable customer. No hype words.	BEAT 4 <i>Ask</i> Small, specific, and time-boxed. "Worth 15 mins next Tuesday?" beats "Book a demo."	BEAT 5 <i>Release</i> Permission to ignore. Lowers defenses, raises reply rate. "Happy to back off if not now."
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Proof beat example (no hype):

"We helped a fintech SDR team go from 200 cold emails a day to 12 booked demos a month in 8 weeks."

NOT: "We helped them achieve unprecedented growth."

EMAIL TEMPLATE · THE SIGNAL OPENER

Subject: quick one re: {{signal}}

Hey {{firstName}}, saw {{company}} just {{specific signal}}. Usually when teams hit that point, {{related problem}} becomes the next bottleneck.

We helped {{comparable customer}} {{quantified outcome}} in {{timeframe}}.

Worth a 15-min look next week? Happy to send a 2-min Loom first if easier.

/ {{senderFirstName}}

Short before clever. Tenet 2.

More channels, fewer wasted words.

LINKEDIN · THE CONNECT NOTE

Hey {{firstName}}, saw your post on {{topic}}, the bit about {{detail}} resonated. Working with a few {{role}}s on the same problem at the moment. No pitch, just figured worth being in each other's network.

LINKEDIN · THE FOLLOW-UP DM (3 DAYS AFTER CONNECT)

Thanks for connecting {{firstName}}. Quick one: we recently helped {{comparable}} go from {{before}} to {{after}}. If {{problem}} is on your radar, happy to share a 5-min teardown of how. If not, ignore me.

VOICE NOTE / VIDEO

Used sparingly on Tier 1 only. Keep under 45 seconds. Show their website on screen, name the signal, ask the question. Loom or Vidyard work fine.

WORDS TO DELETE FROM EVERY MESSAGE

- × "I hope this email finds you well" *instant delete trigger*
- × "Just circling back" *pressure without value*
- × "Synergies, leverage, robust, best-in-class" *pure noise*
- × "Quick call" without a duration *sounds like a trap*

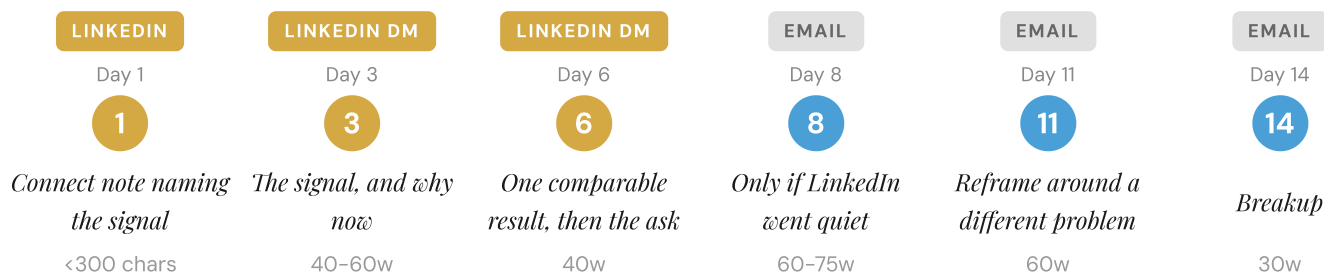
MESSAGE LENGTH CHEAT SHEET

Cold email (first touch)	60–75 words	3–4 sentences max. If it needs scrolling on mobile, it's too long.
Follow-up email	15–40 words	One thought. One ask. That's it.
LinkedIn connect note	Under 300 chars	LinkedIn truncates at 300. Every character counts.
LinkedIn DM	40–60 words	Shorter than email. DMs feel more personal, respect the format.
Video/voice note	Under 45 seconds	Show their website, name the signal, ask the question. Done.

The 14-day sequence

LinkedIn leads, email follows. The first six days happen where the signal did, and email only starts once LinkedIn has gone quiet.

Almost every signal in Section 03 is something that happened on LinkedIn: a hire, a post, a role change, a raise announced there first. Opening on email throws that away and makes you a stranger in an inbox. Email still earns its place later, and it needs a warmed sending domain before it is worth anything at all.



THE BREAKUP EMAIL · HIGHEST-REPLY TOUCH IN THE SEQUENCE

Subject: closing the loop

Hey {{firstName}}, haven't heard back, which usually means one of three things:

1. Not a priority right now. Totally fair, want me to circle back in Q3?
2. Wrong person. Happy to be pointed at the right one.
3. Not interested. A quick "no thanks" and I'll stop.

Either way, appreciate you reading.

/ {{senderFirstName}}

Booking the meeting

Replies are not bookings. The handoff between "interested reply" and "calendar invite" is where most teams leak pipeline.

REPLY-TO-MEETING PLAYBOOK

- Reply within 30 minutes during business hours. Speed signals seriousness.
- Never send a Calendly link in the first reply. Suggest two specific times.
- Ask one qualifying question: "are you the one running this evaluation, or should I loop someone in?"
- Confirm the meeting agenda in the calendar invite (3 bullets, not a wall of text).
- Send a 1-line reminder 24 hours before. It is the cheapest thing you can do for your show rate.

HANDLING OBJECTIONS

OBJECTION

"Send me more info."

RESPONSE

Happy to. Quickest version is 10 minutes on a call so I send you something relevant. Tues 2pm or Wed 11am?

OBJECTION

"Not the right time."

RESPONSE

Got it. When's a better month to revisit? I'll set a reminder and stay out of your inbox until then.

OBJECTION

"We already use {{competitor}}."

RESPONSE

Makes sense. Most of our customers came from {{competitor}}, usually because of {{specific gap}}. Worth 15 mins to compare notes?

OBJECTION

"What's the pricing?"

RESPONSE

Depends on a few things (team size, volume, channels). Quickest way to get a number that's actually relevant is 15 minutes together. I can also send a one-pager after if you'd rather read first.

OBJECTION

"I need to check with my team."

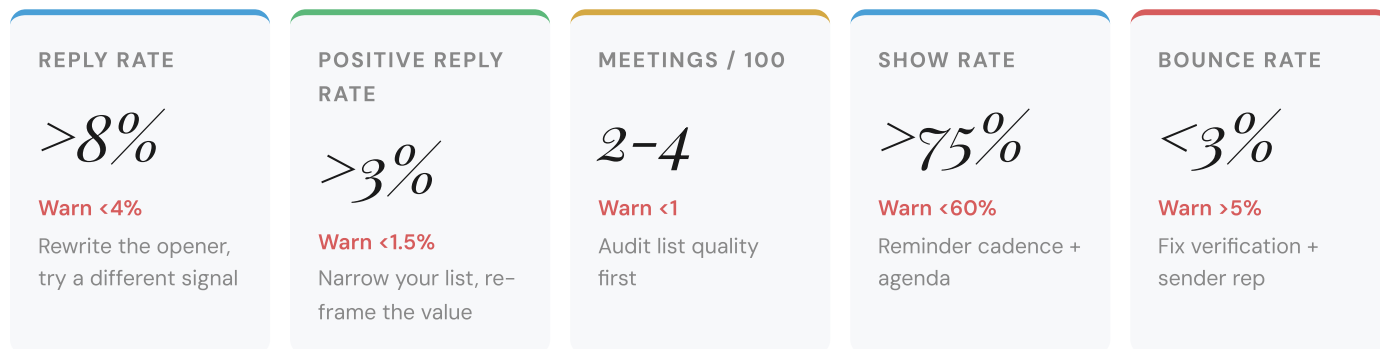
RESPONSE

Totally get it. Would it help if I sent a 2-minute summary you can forward? Usually makes the internal conversation faster than explaining from scratch.

Metrics that matter

Don't optimize for opens. Optimize for booked meetings per 100 contacted.

Note: benchmarks below are for LinkedIn DM-led sequences. Cold email runs lower (warn at <2% reply rate, target >4%). Adjust expectations by channel.



WEEKLY REVIEW CHECKLIST

- ☐ Top 3 best-performing subject lines. Double down next week.
- ☐ Bottom 3. Kill or rewrite.
- ☐ Replies that didn't book. Listen for the real objection, update the playbook.
- ☐ Bounce + spam complaints. Pause sender if >0.1% complaint rate.

YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS: WHAT TO EXPECT

Week 1	List built, first sequences sent. Expect connection accepts and a few early replies. Most will be neutral or "who are you" type responses. That's normal.
Week 2	Follow-ups land. This is where positive replies start. You'll see which signals and openers are working. First meetings may book here.
Week 3	Multi-channel kicks in. LinkedIn connects from week 1 are now warm enough for DMs. Email follow-ups compound. Reply rate climbs.
Week 4	Breakup emails go out. Ironically, these often get the highest reply rate. You have enough data to kill bad sequences and double down on what works.

ONE LAST THING

Want this run on your market?

Reading this is the easy half. Running it every week is the part that decides whether it works. Wingmen runs your sources, writes the openers, and you approve every message before it sends.

Drop your website and see the targeting first. No signup.

flywingmen.com

\$69 per LinkedIn account, per month. 7-day free trial, cancel anytime.

Run it by hand, or let it run

The framework is the easy part to agree with. The honest question is whether you have the hours, every week, to run it consistently. Most people reading this are their own sales team, which is the whole problem.

RUN IT BY HAND IF...

You have someone with 15+ hours a week to spend on the searching and the writing.
You already have the enrichment and sending tools in your stack.
You enjoy writing the copy and iterating on it every week.

LET IT RUN IF...

Prospecting is the thing that keeps losing to delivery, every week.
You want the searching done daily rather than whenever there is time.
You still want to read every message before it sends.

WHAT WINGMEN ACTUALLY DOES

It works your LinkedIn every day: finds the people showing the signals in Section 03, writes the opener in your voice, and waits for your approval. Every lead comes with the reason it surfaced, and you can read every message before it sends.

Your next 60 days.

Pick one signal from Section 03 that fits who you sell to. Run its search. Send the connect note on day one and work the sequence in Section 06 for a fortnight. That is the whole of it, and you can start this afternoon.

A list you build, not buy.

A reason to write that they can verify.

Messages short enough to be read.

One channel first, then the other.

If the searching is the part that keeps losing to the rest of your week, that is the part Wingmen does: it works your LinkedIn daily, writes the opener in your voice, and waits for you to approve it.

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You read every message first.

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this guide on the web · always the current version

ALL OF THIS IS FREE AT FLYWINGMEN.COM:

PLAYBOOK

/outbound-playbook · this guide on the web, kept current

VAULT

/signal-vault · 55 buying signals, with the search for each

TARGETING

drop your website, get your targeting back in under a minute