

HOW TO BUILD SOMETHING PEOPLE PAY FOR · PART 1 OF 8

FIND YOUR PAINKILLER.

The AI prompt pack. 12 prompts to find a problem worth building for, plus research hacks and every tool I keep bookmarked.

WHAT'S INSIDE

12 AI prompts · 12 research hacks

9 tools · 9 books + podcasts

by Carley

Part 1: Find the problem. Part 2: Test the idea.

Vitamin or Painkiller?

A vitamin is a nice-to-have people forget by lunch. A painkiller is the thing someone's annoyed by *right now* and would pay to make stop.

CB Insights analyzed 150+ startup post-mortems and found the #1 reason they fail: **42% built something nobody needed**. Not bad code. Not bad timing. They solved a problem that wasn't painful enough.

Harvard Business School estimates **95% of new products fail**. VCs sort every pitch into three buckets: candy, vitamins, and painkillers. **"Nobody negotiates with their own headache."**

Y Combinator calls it the "hair on fire" test. The best problems are ones where people's hair is literally on fire, and they'd grab any solution you hand them.

How you know it's a painkiller.

People are already paying (money, time, or sanity) to deal with it. You find DIY workarounds everywhere: spreadsheets, browser tabs, Zapier duct tape. Strangers vent about it unprompted in forums. Existing solutions exist but everyone complains about all of them. When you describe it, people finish your sentence. Someone has already typed "I'd pay for that" in a thread somewhere.

The test: if you stopped building it tomorrow, would anyone notice? "Meh" = vitamin. "Wait, no, I need that" = keep going.

The pain is the tell.

Remember waiting on hold to get a cab before Uber? People tolerated that for decades because they thought they had to. When someone puts up with something annoying because they believe there's no alternative, that's your signal. The best problems hide in the things people stopped complaining about.

Start with what you care about.

Paul Graham: *"The very best startup ideas tend to have three things in common: they're something the founders themselves want, that they themselves can build, and that few others realize are worth doing."*

Don't hunt for problems in the abstract. Start with a niche you love or a problem you keep hitting yourself. My bridal directory sites started because I was drowning in vendor spam while planning my own wedding. You'll spot what others miss because you live in that world.

Three founders who nailed it.

“The best startup ideas seem like bad ideas initially.” – Paul Graham. None of these founders started with a business plan. They noticed a problem nobody was solving well.

01

Sara Blakely · Spanx

A fax-machine saleswoman with no business degree and \$5K. She cut the feet off her pantyhose because nothing worked under white pants. The product was her own workaround.

02

Melanie Perkins · Canva

Students wasted a semester learning where buttons were in design software. Started narrow (yearbooks), went wide. Heard “no” 100+ times. Now worth \$26B.

03

The McDonald’s Milkshake

Half sold before 9 a.m. to commuters who needed something thick enough to last a boring drive. Not a treat. A tool. People hire products for a job.

WHICH AI TOOL FOR WHAT

Perplexity

Sourced research with citations. Market sizing. Finding real data and reports.

Claude (app or web)

Analyzing long threads. Synthesizing patterns. Arguing against your idea. Deep reasoning.

Claude in Chrome

Reading live web pages. Reddit threads, reviews, forums.

ChatGPT

Quick brainstorming. Generating idea variations.

Gemini

Live Google search. Finding the most recent data.

the workaround is the signal.

Find It With AI.

Fill in the brackets. Run in order. Never trust the first answer.

01 · PERPLEXITY

Map where people hurt

“I’m exploring problems faced by [audience] in [industry/niche]. What are the most common complaints, frustrations, and unmet needs? Focus on problems people post about in forums, reviews, and social media. Give me specific examples with sources.”

02 · FOLLOW-UP

Narrow to the real pain

“For each problem above, help me sort: which ones are vitamins (nice-to-have, people forget) vs. painkillers (urgent, people already pay in money/time/workarounds to solve)? Show evidence for each.”

03 · CLAUDE IN CHROME

Read threads like a detective

“Analyze this thread. What is the core frustration? What workarounds are people using? What language do they use to describe the pain? Pull exact quotes. Which comments have the most agreement?”

04 · CLAUDE IN CHROME

Follow the workarounds

“Based on these threads, what DIY solutions, hacks, or duct-taped fixes are people building for themselves? Which workarounds show the most effort or frequency? That effort is a proxy for willingness to pay.”

Tip: If you can’t find at least 3 Reddit threads where people complain about this, the pain might not be loud enough.

prompt 04 is the gold.

Why this order matters

Prompt 01 casts a wide net. Prompt 02 filters it. Prompts 03-04 go deep on the winners. Most people skip straight to building. This process makes sure you’re building for a real problem, not one you invented in the shower. Run all four before you get excited about solutions.

Perplexity is best for 01-02 because it cites sources (you can click through to the original Reddit posts and articles). **Claude in Chrome** is best for 03-04 because it reads live web pages with you, so you can paste a Reddit thread URL and have it pull patterns you’d miss skimming.

Read It Yourself, Really.

After running those first four prompts, you'll have a pile of AI-generated summaries. Those are useful. But **don't stop at the summary.**

Go read the messy posts yourself. The 1 AM venting, the typos, the run-on sentences, the all-caps frustration. AI is great at synthesizing patterns, but it smooths out the emotion, and the emotion is what tells you whether this is a real pain or an interesting observation.

"I literally spent my entire Saturday trying to figure this out and I want to scream" hits different than "users report frustration with the onboarding process."

People's exact words are your proof, your landing page copy, your pitch. Read the threads yourself.

The Real Gut Check.

Friends will tell you your idea is great because they love you. Ignore them (lovingly).

The real test is what *strangers* are doing right now: paying for a bad version of what you want to make, or duct-taping a workaround to survive without it. That's a painkiller. If strangers aren't doing either of those things, it might just be a vitamin you've convinced yourself is urgent because you're excited.

THE TEST

Strangers paying for a bad version = painkiller, keep going.

Strangers duct-taping workarounds = painkiller, keep going.

Neither = probably a vitamin. Go back to prompts 01-04.

This is where the next set of prompts comes in. They pressure-test the thing: the competition, the market size, and whether AI can punch holes in your reasoning. If your idea survives all of that, you've got something worth building.

excitement is not evidence. stranger behavior is.

Pressure-Test It.

05 · CLAUDE

Steal their exact words

“Extract the most vivid, emotional phrases people use to describe this problem. Raw language, not polished summaries. Group by theme and rank by intensity.”

06 · PERPLEXITY

Size up the bad alternatives

“What are the current solutions for [problem] in [niche]? For each, what do users complain about most? Where are the gaps, overpricing, or frustrations?”

07 · PERPLEXITY

Check it’s big enough

“How many people experience [problem]? Is the audience growing or shrinking? What do people currently spend to deal with it? Cite sources.”

08 · CLAUDE

Make the AI argue against you

“I think [problem] for [audience] is a strong startup idea. Tell me why I’m wrong. What are the biggest risks? Why might this fail? Be brutally honest.”

THREE RULES FOR USING THESE

The first answer is the warm-up. Push back, ask “why,” run it again with what you learned.

Demand quotes and sources. Real pain has typos and frustration. Polished summaries = made up.

Then close the laptop. AI gets you to the start line. Now go talk to a real human.

Don’t validate with friends. Friends lie because they love you. Validate with strangers who have no reason to be nice.

What “good” looks like at this stage

After running prompts 01-08, you should have: a specific audience (not “everyone”), a specific pain point (not “it’s kind of annoying”), evidence that people are already paying or hacking together workarounds, and at least one reason why existing solutions fall short. If you have all four, you’ve got something worth exploring further. That’s what Part 2 covers: validation.

Go Deeper.

“Fall in love with the problem, not the solution.” – Uri Levine (Waze)

09 · PERPLEXITY

Find the communities

“What are the most active online communities (Reddit, Facebook groups, Discord servers, forums) where [audience] discusses [topic]? Rank by size and engagement.”

10 · CLAUDE

Write the landing page test

“Based on everything we’ve found, write a one-paragraph description of a product that solves [problem] for [audience]. Use their exact language. Then write 3 headline variations I could test.”

11 · PERPLEXITY

Find who’s already trying

“Are there any startups, indie hackers, or small businesses already trying to solve [problem] for [audience]? What’s their approach? Where are they falling short based on user feedback?”

12 · PERPLEXITY

Map the money flow

“How much money do [audience] currently spend dealing with [problem]? Include paid tools, services, courses, freelancers, and time costs. Show me the existing revenue in this space.”

Pro move

Copy-paste the BEST responses from prompts 1-4 into a new chat with Claude and say: “Based on all this research, what’s the single strongest painkiller problem here? Rank them.”

The best niche to start in is one where you’re already the customer. Slack started as a gaming company’s internal tool. Airbnb’s founders sold cereal boxes to fund the company before it worked.

You just finished the entire prompt pack. If you ran all 12 and have a problem that passed prompts 07 and 08, you’re ahead of most people who try to start something. The next step is talking to real humans about it. That’s what Part 2 covers: validation.

Hacks & Shortcuts.

01

Sort Reddit by “Top → All time.” The top 20 posts in a niche subreddit are a free focus group. Start there every single time.

02

Search the magic phrases. Type these into Google exactly as written:

site:reddit.com [topic] “I gave up” • “why is there no” • “is there an app for” • “someone should build” • “I wish there was”

03

Read the 3-star reviews, not the 1-stars. One-star reviewers are just mad. Three-star reviewers wanted to love it and couldn't. That gap is your product.

04

Follow the money talk. When someone types “I'd pay for this” or “take my money,” their wallet is already open. Screenshot these every time.

05

Count the workarounds. Spreadsheets, browser tabs, Zapier chains, Notion databases held together with prayer. More effort = more willingness to pay.

06

Steal their exact words. The phrasing real people use to describe their pain is your headline, your landing page, your ad copy. Write it down verbatim.

keep a running doc. after a week the patterns jump off the page.

Keep Digging.

07

Google “People Also Ask.” Type your niche problem into Google. Each expandable question is a real question a real person typed. Click them and more appear.

08

Search Twitter/X for “[product] sucks.” Also try “[product] alternative” and “switched from [product].” The replies are often better than the original tweet.

09

Browse Upwork and Fiverr. If people pay freelancers the same task repeatedly, that task wants to be software.

10

Lurk in 3 Facebook groups for 2 weeks. Don’t post. Just read. The same complaints surface again and again.

11

Check Product Hunt launches. Products that got buzz but lukewarm reviews. The market is real, the execution is off. That gap is yours.

12

Read competitors’ About pages. Small companies describe the problem better than you will because they lived it. Steal the framing, not the product.

YOUR TOOLKIT

Bookmark these. Pick 2-3 and go deep.

FIND THE PAIN

GummySearch - Reddit communities by theme

Perplexity - AI research with citations

AnswerThePublic - questions people Google

SparkToro - where your audience hangs out

SIZE + SCOPE

Google Trends + **Glimpse** - rising or falling?

Exploding Topics - trends before they peak

Product Hunt - what’s launching

AlternativeTo - what people switch from

GummySearch’s “pain & anger” filter is exactly what you want.

AlternativeTo’s “why I left” comments are pure research gold.

Steal My Shelf.

Everything I read, watched, or bookmarked while figuring this out.

CB Insights: Top Reasons Startups Fail The 42% stat lives here. Read the full post-mortem breakdown.
Fall in Love with the Problem, Not the Solution Uri Levine (Waze co-founder). The title is the whole thesis.
The Mom Test Rob Fitzpatrick. How to talk to customers without them lying to your face.
Talking to Humans Giff Constable. A practical primer on customer discovery interviews.
“Get Out of the Building” Steve Blank. The essay that started the lean startup movement.
Deploy Empathy Michele Hansen. A practical guide to interviewing customers.
Competing Against Luck Clayton Christensen. The milkshake story. People hire products for a job.
How to Get and Test Startup Ideas Michael Seibel (YC). 20-minute talk, worth watching twice.
How to Get Startup Ideas Paul Graham. “Look for problems, preferably problems you have yourself.”

FREE LEARNING, PODCASTS & COMMUNITIES

YC Startup School - free and structured

Lenny’s Newsletter - product, growth, building

Indie Hackers - solo founders, real revenue

Lenny’s Podcast - interviews with the best in product

Stacking the Bricks - Amy Hoy on bootstrapping

Also: **Starter Story**, **How I Built This**, **My First Million**

“Be a noticer. Pay attention to the things that bug you, the workarounds you build for yourself, the complaints you hear over and over. That’s not noise. That’s signal.”

Now go find yours.

You have the prompts, the hacks, and the tools. Part 2 covers testing your idea with real people.

COMING NEXT

- Part 2: Test the idea (5 conversations, zero budget)
- Part 3: Scope your MVP (what to build first, what to skip)
- Part 4: Build it (vibe coding, no-code, AI-assisted dev)
- Part 5: Name it, brand it, position it
- Part 6: Launch it (the first 100 users playbook)
- Part 7: Grow it (content, community, word of mouth)
- Part 8: Sustain it (revenue, systems, not burning out)

Follow along so you don’t miss the next one.

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by Carley