finsi growth

✦ The cold-start playbook ✦

5 Steps I'd Take to Launch a Brand in 2027

FROM ZERO SALES TO A DEMAND ENGINE

What we've learned from launching brands and brands in their first year, turned into the sequence we'd run if we were starting a consumer brand from scratch next year.

BY MISHA DRUZHININ · FINSI GROWTH

Google Meta Shopify Klaviyo ChatGPT

Read this first

Most launch advice is written for brands that already have sales. Plug in the pixel, go broad on Meta, let the algorithm find your buyers. That works when there's data for the algorithm to learn from. At zero orders there isn't any.

We spend a lot of our week on calls with founders in exactly that position. A great product, real conviction, a few months in, and an order count that still rounds to nothing. The pattern is so consistent that we can usually guess the story before they tell it: a confusing first impression, a thin Meta budget spread across too many ad sets, an email program that was never switched on, and an agency that billed a flat retainer whether anything sold or not.

None of that is a talent problem. It's a sequencing problem. The founders spent money in the order the internet told them to, not the order a cold start needs.

And 2027 changes the order further. Paid social keeps getting more expensive. A growing share of product discovery now happens inside AI assistants that answer before anyone clicks. And the brands winning their categories are small, focused ones that build demand across several channels instead of renting it from one.

+12%

YoY rise in Meta's average price per ad, Q2 2026: the second quarter in a row

META Q2 2026 RESULTS

+393%

YoY growth in AI-assistant traffic to US retail sites, Q1 2026, converting 42% better than other traffic

ADOBE DIGITAL INSIGHTS

$37B

US creator ad spend in 2025, up 26% YoY: about 4x faster than total media

IAB, NOV 2025

This guide is the sequence. Five steps, each one earning the right to spend on the next. Every example in it comes from real brands we've worked with or advised, anonymized.

Don't buy attention until you've proven the message.

Prove it where demand already exists. Then scale it where demand gets created.

The five steps at a glance

Each step produces a decision, not just activity. You move budget forward only when the step before it has told you where it should go.

1

Make the message land in five seconds

Turn the founder pitch that already sells into a page and an offer a stranger understands, and a first order that's worth placing.

INSTEAD OF
Launching ads to a page that only makes sense to you.

2

Build the retention plumbing before launch day

Working flows, a CAC ceiling from real margins, and a repurchase plan built on how fast people actually use the product.

INSTEAD OF
"We'll set up email once we have customers."

3

Harvest demand before you create it

Search, both Google and AI assistants, spends only when someone is already looking. It's the cheapest place to learn which angles sell.

INSTEAD OF
Paying Meta to teach strangers your category.

4

Make the founder and creators your media engine

Real faces, real footage, real stories, cut into short video and fed to every channel. AI behind the scenes, not on screen.

INSTEAD OF
A folder of polished statics and AI-made ads.

5

Turn on Meta when you can feed it

Narrow, time-boxed tests first; real budget once the angles are proven. Plan around the calendar, and build retail in parallel.

INSTEAD OF
$100/day split across three campaigns, forever.

Steps 1 and 2 cost mostly time. Steps 3 and 4 cost a modest, controllable budget. Only step 5 needs real money, and by the time you get there you'll know what to spend it on.

STEP 1

1 Make the message land in five seconds

Your pitch already sells. Your website just doesn't say it yet.

Here's a conversation we have almost every week. A founder explains their product on a call, and within five minutes we want to buy it. Then we open their website and can't work out what it is.

That gap is the most expensive problem a new brand has, because every dollar of traffic you buy lands on it. People don't read; they scan, decide in seconds, and leave if they're confused. When a product is new or creates its own category, that first impression has to do the work the founder does in person: **what it is, who it's for, and why it matters now.**

The fix is rarely a better copywriter. It's better source material. You already have it:

- **Your own pitch.** Record the next ten conversations where you sell the product to someone. Transcribe them. The phrases that make people lean in are your headlines.
- **Your customers' words.** Twenty to fifty good reviews, DMs and support emails are enough to start writing in the customer's voice instead of an expert's.
- **A comprehension test.** Write the page in plain language, show it to people outside your industry, and ask them to explain it back. If they can't, rewrite. Don't buy traffic yet.

Founders who know their category deeply tend to over-explain. The ingredient science, the clinical study, the six benefits. It's all true and it all belongs on the site, just not above the fold. Lead with the outcome a customer cares about and let the proof sit one scroll down.

Then make the first order worth placing

A clear message can still lose the sale at checkout. The offer is part of the message: a pack size that makes sense, shipping that doesn't feel like a penalty, and a buy button that looks like a buy button.

STEP 1 · FROM THE FIELD

What this looks like in practice

SUPPLEMENT BRAND · NEW CATEGORY

The founder sold almost everyone she spoke to on the phone. The website, on first visit, left us unsure what the product was. Same product, same founder, different results. The message existed; it just lived in her head, not on the page.

FROZEN FOOD BRAND · SHIPPING

Shipping on a one- or two-item order cost over $30, and it was cited as the reason behind roughly 90% of abandoned carts. The fix we proposed wasn't a discount. It was making the 4- and 6-packs the obvious choice and pushing toward a free-shipping threshold at five or more items.

WINE BRAND · BUNDLES

Moving from small orders to 4–6-pouch bundles added only $2–3 in shipping cost. Bigger baskets, nearly the same fulfilment bill, and a much higher ceiling on what you can afford to pay for a customer.

FOOD BRAND · PAGE DESIGN

The main "buy" button on the homepage looked decorative, and the bundles were hard to find. A separate brand learned the hard way that a full redesign *lowered* conversion. Test page changes on live traffic before you carry them into a rebuild.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU SPEND A DOLLAR

1. **Write the 5-second line.** One sentence: what it is, who it's for, why it matters. Put it at the top of the homepage and every product page.
2. **Run the stranger test.** Five people outside your industry, ten seconds on the page, then ask them to explain the product back.
3. **Mine your own words.** Transcribe your best sales conversations and your top reviews. Build an "angle map": every audience, pain and hook worth testing.
4. **Fix the first-order math.** Lead with the pack size that makes shipping worth it, and set a free-shipping threshold your margins can carry.
5. **Make buying obvious.** One clear primary button, visible pricing, reviews next to the call to action.

STEP 2

2 Build the retention plumbing before launch day

Your first customers are the cheapest ones you'll ever re-acquire.

Almost every early-stage founder we talk to has the same plan for email: "We'll set it up once we have customers." It sounds reasonable. It's backwards.

When you're buying every first order at full price, the second order is where the business starts to work. If nothing is there to ask for it, you're paying for one-and-done customers, and each one quietly lowers what you can afford to spend on the next.

41%
of email revenue comes from automated flows, which are only 5.3% of sends
KLAVIYO BENCHMARKS 2026

~48%
of flow revenue comes from new buyers: flows close first orders too, not just repeat ones
KLAVIYO BENCHMARKS 2026

33.8%
of supplement subscribers make it to their 3rd reorder; only 9.8% reach the 6th
RECHARGE, JUL 2026

Flows before campaigns. Welcome, browse abandonment, cart and checkout abandonment, post-purchase, replenishment and win-back. Build them once, test that they actually fire, and they earn around the clock.

Time it to how the product is used. A 30-day supply needs a nudge around day 25 to 35, not a generic "we miss you" at day 90. Add a day-7 "how to get the most out of it" message: early usage is what turns a first order into a habit. For subscriptions, offer a cadence that matches real consumption (some brands do better with six weeks than monthly), plus easy skip and pause.

Set your CAC ceiling from margin, not from a benchmark. Work out the contribution margin of a first order after product, shipping, fees and packaging. That's your break-even CAC on day one. Add a conservative estimate of repeat margin and you have the most you can pay for a customer. It's your number, not an industry average, and it decides when the ads are working.

STEP 2 · FROM THE FIELD

The leaks we find most often

WINE BRAND · THE BUTTON TO NOWHERE

Its abandoned-checkout emails had produced zero sales. When we opened one, the "Finish checkout" button didn't link anywhere. The flow existed; nobody had tested it end to end.

SUNSCREEN BRAND · NO WELCOME FLOW

Month-one repeat rate was 3.5%, and there was no working welcome series. Every first order was being bought at full price and then left alone.

SUNSCREEN BRAND · THE GIVEAWAY LIST

A giveaway collected a large list of cold contacts, and loading it into the email platform produced a $2,500 bill. Giveaway lists need verifying, segmenting, and warming up in batches (around 10K contacts at a time, separate from your main sending domain) before you treat them as customers.

PET SUPPLEMENT BRAND · THE INTRO DISCOUNT

A 33% first-order subscription discount brought in subscribers who cancelled right after the first box. A steep discount buys you a subscriber count, not customers.

WINE BRAND · KNOWING THE CEILING

The brand could break even at roughly $25–35 CAC on the first order, or about $45 once repeat purchases were included. Knowing that range turned "is Meta working?" into a simple yes or no.

DO THIS BEFORE LAUNCH DAY

1. **Build the six core flows** and place a real test order through each one. Click every button.
2. **Map the consumption cycle.** When does the product run out? Put a reminder before that day and a check-in at day 7.
3. **Write down your CAC ceiling:** first-order margin, then first-order plus a conservative 6-month repeat margin.
4. **Keep giveaway and event lists separate** until they've been verified and engaged.
5. **Offer subscription without a steep hook.** Small, honest savings plus skip and pause beat a big first-box discount.

STEP 3

3 Harvest demand before you create it

Buy signal cheaply before you buy attention expensively.

Meta will spend whatever budget you give it. Search only spends when someone types something that suggests they want what you sell. For a brand with no sales history, that difference matters a lot. On search, a slow day costs you nothing. On paid social, a slow day costs you the budget.

That's why, for most cold starts, we start on Google. Not because it scales further, but because it's the cheapest way to answer the question every new brand needs answered: **which words, angles and problems make strangers buy?**

- **Start narrow.** Bid on the problem, the ingredient, and the specific use case, not the crowded category head term. Look at what your first customers searched before they found you.
- **Test angles, not just keywords.** An ingredient people already take for a different reason (longevity, recovery, sleep) can open a whole adjacent market that's already searching.
- **Feed the content.** Plain-language articles that answer the questions buyers type, tested on real readers first. They rank, they convert, and they become source material for AI assistants.

> JUICE BRAND · SEARCH VS SPECTACLE
>
> Google conversions came in at about $17–18. In the same period, an influencer event generated 800K views and zero sales. A comparable brand grew to around $40K a month on Google and organic before it spent seriously on Meta.

One honest caveat. If your category is so new that nobody searches for it, check Google Keyword Planner and Trends first. Search can only capture demand that something else created. In that case, step 4 isn't optional; it's what fills the search box.

STEP 3 · THE NEW SEARCH BOX

Get recommended by AI assistants

In 2027, "search" doesn't just mean Google's blue links. Shoppers increasingly ask an assistant ("what's the best supplement for...") and get an answer before they click anything. The brand that's named in the answer wins the visit.

1B+

monthly users of Google's AI Mode after its global expansion

ALPHABET Q2 2026

8% vs 15%

click rate on Google when an AI summary appears vs when it doesn't

PEW RESEARCH, 2025

+35%

organic CTR (and +91% paid CTR) for brands cited inside an AI Overview vs those that aren't

SEER INTERACTIVE, SEP 2025

50%

ChatGPT's share of AI prompt volume by mid-2026, down from 70%, as Gemini rose to 30% and Claude to 11%

COMSCORE VIA DIGIDAY, SEP 2026

The plumbing is arriving fast. Shopify now makes merchants' products discoverable in ChatGPT, Copilot, Google AI Mode and Gemini by default through Agentic Storefronts. Google's Universal Commerce Protocol and OpenAI's Agentic Commerce Protocol let assistants read product feeds directly. The practical takeaway: **assistants recommend what they can read and what other people vouch for.**

- **Make product pages machine-readable:** structured data, complete attributes (ingredients, sizes, use cases), and a real Q&A section in plain language.
- **Keep your product feed rich** in Shopify and Google Merchant Center: the feed is what agents query.
- **Earn third-party mentions:** reviews, press, comparison articles and expert quotes. Assistants lean on sources that aren't you.
- **Check monthly** what ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude say when asked about your category. Fix what they get wrong at the source.

Our view: treat AI visibility as compounding infrastructure, not first-month paid acquisition. It rewards exactly the clarity you built in step 1.

STEP 4

4 Make the founder and creators your media engine

The most convincing person for your product is usually you.

Ask a founder where their best results came from and the answer is almost always a person, not an ad: a video where they told their story, a creator who genuinely loved the product, a call where they explained it face to face. Then they go and make polished statics instead.

Paid social in 2027 runs on creative. Meta's ad system now uses AI to pick which ad each person sees, and Meta says more, and more varied, creative gives it more to work with. In practice your creative *is* your targeting, and a cold-start brand needs a steady supply of it.

9.1%
lower CPA for Meta ad sets mixing images, video and 9:16 video with audio
META ADVANTAGE+

$10B
run-rate for Meta partnership (creator) ads, more than doubling YoY
META Q1 2026 CALL

$15.1B
US TikTok Shop GMV in 2025, +68% YoY. Over half of stores made no sales
MOMENTUM WORKS

Founder content first. Your origin story, your reason for caring, your answers to the questions customers actually ask. Film it raw. One easy source: record your sales calls (with permission) and cut the best answers into podcast-style Q&A ads, with the question as on-screen text and your answer as the video.

Real footage, short cuts. The format that keeps working for us is about fifteen seconds of real footage, product shots and a founder moment, stitched together. In health, wellness and beauty, AI-generated visuals tend to read as fake, and the product gets judged the same way. Use AI for the briefs, the research and the hook ideas. Keep it off the screen.

Reuse before you reshoot. Most brands are sitting on a library of UGC and photography they've used once. Re-cut it, re-hook it, test it.

STEP 4 · FROM THE FIELD

Creators are a numbers game. Plan for it.

SUPPLEMENT BRAND · THE FOUNDER VIDEO

The founder's best-ever organic post was a personal story video that reached about 200K views, far ahead of any ad. Her customers kept telling her: "Just say what you told me on the call, in a video."

SUNSCREEN BRAND · THE 1% HOLD RATE

A founder video had a strong hook but only a 1% 30-second hold rate. The re-cut we proposed was 15 seconds: why I started it, what you get, buy here. Test two or three versions at about $50/day each before deciding.

SUNSCREEN BRAND · REVENUE-SHARE CREATORS

Revenue-share creators at a 25–30% commission were the brand's most profitable channel to date. Expect about one in twenty creators to perform well; for TikTok Shop, estimates run closer to one in a hundred.

PET SUPPLEMENT BRAND · SAMPLE VOLUME

Fifteen creator samples were too few to judge the channel. The plan we discussed was closer to 300 a month. Volume is the point.

LOOK OUTSIDE YOUR NICHE

The obvious creators (skincare for skincare, fitness for supplements) are crowded and expensive. Try athletes, travel creators, parents, longevity voices, even comedians. At a fragrance subscription brand where one of our team used to work, stand-up comics turned out to make some of the best-performing videos.

DO THIS EVERY WEEK

1. **Film one founder piece:** a story, an answer to a real customer question, or a cut from a recorded call.
2. **Ship 2–3 new edits** from existing footage and UGC, each with a different hook from your angle map.
3. **Send samples in volume** to creators inside and outside your niche, with a simple revenue-share offer.
4. **Promote what works organically** before testing it as paid. If a hook earned views for free, it's already proven.

STEP 5

5 Turn on Meta when you can feed it

At $100 a day, Meta isn't learning. It's guessing with your money.

Meta's delivery system learns from conversions. Meta describes an ad set as stuck in "Learning Limited" when it's unlikely to get around 50 optimization events in a week. Below that, the algorithm never figures out who your buyer is. It keeps spending anyway.

~50
optimization events per ad set per week to exit the learning phase
META BUSINESS HELP CENTER

× $50
an optimistic cost per new customer for a supplement or wellness brand
OUR CLIENT DATA

= $2,500
per week, about $10K a month, before the numbers mean anything
THE MATH

That's the math most founders never see. Spread $100 a day across three campaigns and you'll get one or two results per ad set per week: too sparse to call winners or losers. So you reshuffle, the budget runs out, and you conclude "Meta doesn't work for us." It never had a chance.

So go narrow before you go big. Before you can afford the full budget, run tight experiments where your buyers are concentrated: specific cities where the product makes sense year-round, specific interests (surfers for a sun product, runners for recovery), one consolidated campaign rather than many thin ones. Give each test a fixed budget and a fixed window, often a week or two and a few thousand dollars, and decide in advance what result earns more.

Then commit. Once search and organic have told you which angles convert, put real budget behind them: around $250–300 a day, one or two new creatives a week, and a clear CAC ceiling from step 2. Expect it to cost more first. Meta's average price per ad rose 12% year over year in Q2 2026.

Health and wellness note: since January 2025 Meta can restrict some health and wellness advertisers from optimizing for purchases. Check your ad account's status before you plan a budget around purchase optimization.

STEP 5 · TIMING AND THE PARALLEL CHANNEL

Respect the calendar. Don't wait on Meta.

Q4 is the worst time to learn. Ad prices peak in November as every big brand piles into Black Friday and the holidays, then usually drop back in January. For a new brand, that's an expensive auction full of competitors with bigger budgets. And the customers you win there aren't always the ones who stay.



February buyers · 42%
reordered within 180 days

November buyers · 21%
reordered within 180 days

December buyers · 5%
reordered within 180 days

Cohort repeat rates for one client brand by month of first purchase. Holiday buyers came for the deal.

For seasonal products the effect is stronger still. A sun-care brand launching in autumn shouldn't fight the Q4 auction. Use the off-season for steps 1 to 4, run narrow tests in year-round markets, and arrive at spring with proven messaging and creative.

Build retail in parallel

Paid social isn't the only way to get in front of people. Small brands are winning their categories through retail, not just DTC. According to BCG, manufacturers under $1B in sales drove the majority of category growth in US retail. The usual path is DTC or Amazon traction first, then specialty stores, then mass retail.

- **Do a roadshow.** Independent stores, boutiques, surf shops, hotels, clinics. Wherever your buyer already shops. On Faire, independent stores with a physical presence grew wholesale spend about 19% year over year.
- **Use professionals as a channel.** If customers say "I need to ask my dermatologist / trainer / vet," sell to the dermatologist, trainer or vet.
- **Decide on Amazon by SKU margin.** Low-priced items that can't carry DTC shipping often belong there; for others, marketplace fees can eat roughly half the margin.

Your first 90 days

There's no universal budget split for a launch, and anyone who gives you one without seeing your margins is guessing. What does hold is the sequence, and the gates between phases.

Weeks 0–2
Steps 1 & 2

Message, offer, plumbing

- Transcribe sales calls and reviews; build the angle map
- Rewrite the homepage and product pages; run the stranger test
- Fix first-order math: pack sizes, free-shipping threshold
- Build and test all six core flows; write down your CAC ceiling

`GATE → strangers can explain the product back to you`

Weeks 3–6
Steps 3 & 4

Harvest and create

- Launch narrow Google Search campaigns on problem, ingredient and use-case terms
- Publish the first plain-language articles; enrich product data and feeds
- Film founder content weekly; re-cut existing UGC; send creator samples in volume
- Start the retail and professional roadshow

`GATE → 2-3 angles converting on search or organic`

Weeks 7–10
Step 5, narrow

Narrow Meta experiments

- One consolidated campaign; geo- or interest-targeted
- Only angles proven in weeks 3–6; 1–2 new creatives a week
- Fixed budget, fixed window, pre-agreed success line

`GATE → CAC within your ceiling in at least one test`

Weeks 11–13+
Step 5, commit

Commit and scale

- Meta at a budget that exits learning (~$250–300/day), timed to your season
- Weekly creative cadence driven by the angle map
- Read cohorts monthly: who comes back, from which channel

`RULE → no scaling decision without a CAC ceiling attached`

Launch-readiness checklist

Print it, tick it, and don't scale paid social until the first three sections are done.

01 · MESSAGE & OFFER

- [ ] One-sentence "what, who, why" at the top of every page
- [ ] Five strangers explained the product back correctly
- [ ] Angle map built from sales calls and reviews
- [ ] Hero pack size makes shipping worth paying
- [ ] Free-shipping threshold your margin can carry
- [ ] One obvious buy button; reviews beside it

02 · RETENTION & ECONOMICS

- [ ] Welcome, browse, cart, checkout, post-purchase and win-back flows live
- [ ] Test order placed through every flow; every button clicked
- [ ] Replenishment reminder timed to the product's real use
- [ ] First-order contribution margin calculated
- [ ] CAC ceiling written down (first order and 6-month)
- [ ] Landed cost modeled, including current tariffs

03 · SEARCH & AI DISCOVERY

- [ ] Keyword Planner check: is anyone searching yet?
- [ ] Narrow Search campaigns on problem and ingredient terms
- [ ] Structured data and full attributes on every product page
- [ ] Merchant Center feed complete and approved
- [ ] Monthly check of what AI assistants say about your category

04 · CONTENT ENGINE

- [ ] Founder story filmed; sales calls being recorded
- [ ] Existing UGC re-cut into 15-second edits
- [ ] Creator sampling running in volume, inside and outside the niche
- [ ] Revenue-share offer for creators and affiliates

05 · PAID SOCIAL & RETAIL

- [ ] Ad account checked for health and wellness restrictions
- [ ] One consolidated campaign, not many thin ones
- [ ] Test budget and success line agreed before launch
- [ ] Q4 plan decided: learn in search, or pay holiday prices?
- [ ] Retail and professional target list started

On landed cost: the US duty-free de minimis exemption for imports under $800 has been suspended since August 2025, with statutory repeal from July 1, 2027, and tariff rates have changed repeatedly through 2026. Check current rates before you lock pricing.

Or let us run it with you

Everything in this guide is something you can do yourself. Plenty of founders do, and it works. It's just slower, and on a cold start every month of guessing is budget you don't get back.

Brand Cold Start is the program we built for exactly this stage. We take the five steps above and run them with you: message distillation, search-first demand, the founder and creator content engine, narrow Meta experiments, and the move to scale once the numbers say so.

It's priced for brands that are just getting started. There's no big flat retainer that pays us whether you sell or not. We earn a share of what we help you sell.

BRAND COLD START

10% revenue share · $1,000/mo minimum

You pay whichever is higher. Ad spend goes directly from you to the platforms.

Message & positioning sprint · Website clarity fixes · Competitor analysis · Google Ads · Customer-voice content · Creator & affiliate playbook · Founder video scripting & editing · UGC repurposing · Geo & audience Meta experiments · Weekly read-out

GOOD FIT

Pre-traction or just launched · a category that needs explaining · a founder willing to get on camera · prefers paying for results over paying for hours

NOT A FIT

Needs guaranteed sales at $100/day next week · wants fully AI-generated ads for a health product · isn't willing to change the site or the message

Book a Cold Start audit → cal.com/finsi/audit

Bring your pitch, your reviews and whatever assets you have. We'll tell you which angle to test first, which channel to start on, and what it will cost to find out.

Sources

"From the field" examples come from Finsi Growth client work and advisory calls in 2026. Brand names are withheld, and figures are as reported to us, not audited. Third-party figures are listed below.

Paid social

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Search and AI discovery

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finsi growth

Data-first growth for ambitious e-commerce operators

1

Make the message land in five seconds

2

Build the retention plumbing before launch day

3

Harvest demand before you create it

4

Make the founder and creators your media engine

5 Turn on Meta when you can feed it, and respect the calendar.

Book your Cold Start audit

Takes 2 minutes at **cal.com/finsi/audit** · We'll show you which angle to test first and what it'll cost to find out.