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Which Acquisition Channels do Consistently Work for Founders? I Found 34.

Many of you guys often ask where you can promote your SaaS/service/(e)book/newsletter and get (paying) users as a result.

The problem with most of the answers you get is that they're either a) a single experience b) someone providing advice, but you don't know on what basis they claim you should focus on X-acquisition-channel rather than Y-acquisition-channel. Wouldn't it be great if you could instead get the collective experience of 487 founders who went through thousands of hours of hustle?

I spent nearly 200 hours reading and analyzing all 487 interviews on Indie Hackers (one interview takes on average 30 mins to read/analyze) to find out which acquisition channels work consistently / repeatedly for founders. After finishing with my analysis, I found 34 acquisition channels with more than 10 successful mentions (meaning, 10+ different founders mentioned the channel is working for them). Here they are (ordered by the number of successful mentions):

1. SEO (after getting results with another acquisition channel). Worked for **84** founders
2. Marketplaces & Existing Platforms. Worked for **78** founders
3. Product Hunt. Worked for **78** founders
4. Reddit. Worked for **45** founders
5. Cold email outreach. Worked for **42** founders
6. "Powered by" marketing. Worked for **42** founders
7. Hacker News. Worked for **39** founders
8. Having an existing media brand. Worked for **39** founders
9. Using your own network. Worked for **37** founders
10. Google Ads (AdWords). Worked for **31** founders
11. Affiliate marketing. Worked for **30** founders
12. Niche communities. Worked for **30** founders
13. SEO (where founders started immediately). Worked for **29** founders
14. Twitter posting / engagement. Worked for **28** founders
15. Facebook groups. Worked for **28** founders

16. Mainstream press outreach/being mentioned. Worked for **27** founders
17. Niche authority websites outreach/coverage. Worked for **27** founders
18. Partnering with someone with a similar audience. Worked for **23** founders
19. Influencer outreach. Worked for **22** founders
20. Engineering as marketing. Worked for **21** founders
21. Quora. Worked for **20** founders
22. Word of Mouth Tactics. Worked for **19** founders
23. Referral marketing. Worked for **18** founders
24. Discount / deals websites. Worked for **17** founders
25. Facebook Ads. Worked for **17** founders
26. Content integration partnerships. Worked for **16** founders
27. BetaList. Worked for **15** founders
28. Having an existing audience from a similar product. Worked for **15** founders
29. Having a service-based business before migrating to a product-based one. Worked for **14** founders
30. YouTube posting. Worked for **12** founders
31. Guest posting. Worked for **11** founders
32. Meetups. Worked for **11** founders
33. Software directories. Worked for **10** founders
34. Retargeting. Worked for **10** founders

Below, you'll find an explanation for each acquisition channel (as well as an actual quote/mini-case-study that I found useful). Enjoy! - *Darko, founder of ZeroToUsers.com*

1. SEO (after getting results with another acquisition channel) (working for 84 founders)

As I was reading the founder interviews on IndieHackers, I've noticed 2 types of people who mentioned SEO as an acquisition channel working for them:

- a) Those who started with SEO immediately (without having had much success with other distribution channels)
- b) Those who were successful with other acquisition channels first, and then focused on SEO. Many of these founders have noticed that search traffic is getting them more and more users (often as a result of another acquisition strategy working, like press mentions), so they've decided to double down on it.

I've noticed a 84 founders mentioning b). Take Take Snipcart (\$33k/mo), a tool that enables you to add a shipping cart to any website:

“ In time, we realized our shaky, well-intentioned blogging was driving more and more organic traffic and even a few direct conversions. Especially our platform-specific e-commerce tutorials. So we decided to really own that channel. ([source](#))

It was mostly a) Press b) A successful launch that led to more word-of-mouth or c) A mix of acquisition strategies, that led to founders noticing that search traffic slowly started to increase and get them actual users as a result. Google is pretty smart in knowing what to rank you for (unless you really screw up your on-page SEO).



Note on Founder Quotes

You'll notice that next to each company (like Snipcart above) I list the monthly revenue, eg: (\$33k/mo). This data is available in the founder interview itself. At the end of each quote, you'll see a (source) link which points to the original interview where you can see the quote/revenue data.

2. Marketplaces & Existing Platforms (working for 78 founders)

We've all heard of **Google Play Store** or **Apple App Store**. Huge platforms with billions of users and a fairly large % of them using the apps built for those app stores. If you've ever developed a mobile app, you'll know that these app stores will be one of your primary acquisition channels to get new users. But what about SaaS?

Here's the thing: **Almost every major (digital) platform has their own "App Store"** with extensions on it. Shopify, Slack, QuickBooks, Chrome (the browser), Wordpress. Why should you care?

As it turns out, these platforms are a pretty good way to get to a new audience. A large % of the users on those platforms install those extensions. For example, 87% of Shopify's users have installed at least one app from the app store.

The way you "integrate" with those app stores is by creating an extension/app/plugin for them. I was really surprised by how many founders found these platforms to be successful in driving new users. Tettra (\$24k/mo) is a communication tool for teams to document processes & projects. They got started by creating a Slack bot and listed themselves in the Slack app directory:

Another massive source of trials was the Slack App Directory. After our experience, I highly recommend launching on a platform like Slack, WordPress, or Shopify. There's a whole chunk of functionality that you can essentially "outsource" to the platform. For us, that was authentication, user management, and access to the "work graph". You also get free distribution from the parent platform and a clear target persona you can attract. source

For some reason, B2B platforms are usually more reliable than B2C platforms (I've seen Shopify apps making 5-figures/mo for years. I couldn't say the same for Facebook Apps) and is also something you want to take into consideration.

3. Product Hunt (working for 78 founders)

Product Hunt is (currently) the world's largest website for discovering new products. I've seen 78 founders having success with it in driving new users.

One thing to be aware of: Product Hunt is one of these "spike-y" channels that are great for validation, but not so good for sustained traffic. Take EpicPxls (\$400+/mo), a site selling designs (UI kits, templates, etc.). Here's what they said in their IndieHackers interview back in 2019:

For us, the best way to attract users was by promoting our website and products on Product Hunt. We launched on March 6, 2016, and ended up at #2 with 650 upvotes and 5,799 new users, but our traffic went down to normal shortly thereafter. ([source](#))

I've seen some founders solve for this by releasing multiple versions of their software (they'll launch v1 on ProductHunt in April, v2 in July, etc.) Some went and launched new features as a stand-alone product (see the section for "engineering as marketing" for more info).

4. Reddit (working for 45 founders)

Right now there are 544,343+ subreddits on Reddit. There are probably a handful of these that are relevant to your niche. I've seen 45 founders mention Reddit. Some had minor success, and some took a more scalable approach.

One such company was WriteMapper (\$1K/mo), a mind-mapping desktop app for writers. They started with smaller sub-reddits and climbed their way to the top:

I posted WriteMapper to Reddit's /r/macapps, making sure to share details I thought were interesting, and replied to every comment that came in. As a > small subreddit that 1) doesn't get many posts to begin with and 2) typically gets posts with no effort made to either provide a background story or active comments by the original poster, I was able to have my post stay on the front page of the subreddit for quite a while. ([source](#))

They then did a bit of press outreach, landing on Forbes and Cult of Mac. After this success, WriteMapper decided to try their luck (again) with Reddit:

I then decided to go a little bigger, and post to /r/apple, which has more than 600k subscribers (compared to /r/macapps's 19k). Besides making sure to stick to the subreddit's rules, I also used WriteMapper's positive reception on /r/macapps and Cult of Mac as social validation that the product would be something of interest to this community as well. That post took off, ending up with 1.3k upvotes and attracting almost 9k visitors to WriteMapper's website.

Cumulatively, these efforts attracted almost 16k visitors within the first two weeks alone of WriteMapper launching, and about 21k page views, which then translated into actual sales. ([source](#))

5. Cold Email Outreach (working for 42 founders)

Cold email outreach is basically taking a list of emails you've never got in touch with and sending them something that would ultimately lead to them buying your product & service. Yes, it can be spammy, but it works in certain industries.

What I found is that founders who succeed with cold email tend to have those emails readily available. Consider Web4Realty (\$100K/mo), a tool to easily create real estate websites:

‘ We're very lucky to be in an industry where gathering lead information is very easy. Fortunately for us, real estate agents plaster their emails and phone numbers all over the place, which is very convenient. Raza and I spent the first several months cold-calling leads, continuously collecting more email addresses and numbers, and sending individual marketing emails, one by one. Sometimes the client wanted a demo in real-life so we went and did it. We operated this way for a good 5-6 months, and grinded our way to about 200-300 paying users.

Email marketing was by far the best way to attract new business and get sales, at least to our target market... ([source](#))

According to my analysis, the thing that separated successful from non-successful cold email approaches was a) Supply (how easily you can find people to email) b) Demand (are these people sick of getting cold email every single day?) For example, there was a music startup and they struggled to reach to music influencers (because there were 1000s of musicians sending "hey, check my new song" emails every single day.) It helps a LOT if you do research into your target market's inbox and see what/how much email they're getting, so you can stand out.

6. "Powered by" marketing (working for 42 founders)

Disclaimer: I had to invent a name for this acquisition channel because I couldn't find a suitable one. I decided to call it "powered by" because we all know the "powered by" links that live chat websites use.

Well, it turns out it works for all sorts of industries where your customers can "show off" they are "powered by" you. If you think you can't display some type of "powered by" credits, think again. EndCrawl (\$20k/m) did this. They are a SaaS tool that generates end credits (those boring lists of

names of every actor/director at the end of movies). When asked how they attracted users and grown revenue, here's one of the things they mentioned:



Worked: Native Ads

We place our name and logo in all new Endcrawl projects. Customers can remove them if they like of course, but the power of default is strong. As a result, our name and logo are sprinkled across hundreds of films and will be seen for many years to come.

We encourage all founders to think creatively about what constitutes a "native ad" in their space. ([source](#)).

I actually [wrote an article on this](#) recently. You'll find more examples there.

7. Hacker News (working for 39 founders)

One of the biggest tech/dev community in the world. Also the place you're most likely to receive the harshest feedback from :) Still, it works in getting new users if you've got a good product.

One of the ways you can post on Hacker News (without spamming) is through the "Show HN" format. Take Qobserve (\$2K/mo), a time tracking app for Mac:



I created a "Show HN" on Hacker News, and Qobserve became one of the top submissions that week, bringing a huge stream of sales and feedback.

After exhausting most of the options of getting links to the app's landing page itself, we switched to content marketing. I spent a couple of months learning to write better and drafting some in-depth articles for our blog. A couple of them got to the top of Hacker News and attracted quality backlinks to our site... [source](#)

You can "promote" yourself on HackerNews by a) Posting under "Show HN:" b) Content marketing, posting a useful piece c) Mentioning your product in a comment in a useful way. These are the 3 approaches I've seen working most often.

8. Having a media brand before a product/service (working for 39 founders)

A lot of SaaS influencers, including Nathan Latka say things like "build a media brand before building a product". 38 founders did that and were successful.

Ghost (\$62K/mo) is an open-source web publishing platform. Before launching Ghost, John (the founder) had a pretty big blog and a successful Kickstarter campaign:

I had a pre-existing twitter/blog audience of about 15,000 people (built up over about 5 years) which meant I had a sizeable amount of exposure for my initial tweet about the idea. That was the seed which got the initial readers...

My blog had a few thousand subscribers who were the first to be notified when I wrote the original idea post. That post had an email signup form which generated about 30k subscribers interested in finding out if it would ever become a reality, and those 30k people were the first to find out when the Kickstarter campaign launched.

When it did launch, all of the press and interest around the campaign further grew that list from 30k up to around 80k, and so when we actually came to launch the first version of the product about a year after the original blog post, we had this huge captive audience of people waiting to hear about it.

As a result, when we finally did launch, we got well over 100,000 signups on day 1. ([source](#))

Your "media brand" doesn't have to be a big name with millions of visitors. Also, it doesn't have to be a website: Having a Twitter/Facebook following or an email list counts as well.

9. Using your own network/connections (working for 37 founders)

Everyone has a personal network. Not everyone knows how to use it. Some founders used their connections and turned that into a main traction channel.

Many people think only of their close network of friends when you mention the phrase a "personal network". You probably have a bigger network than you think, though. Ask yourself: are there any communities were part in the past? Have you taken any courses?

AlgoExpert (\$40K/mo) sells courses to help you prepare for coding interviews, and the founder attended something in a similar market before he created his business:

‘ We've grown very organically to over 150 users, thanks in large part to my connection to Fullstack Academy (FSA), the coding bootcamp I attended between September and December 2016. ([source](#))

Think beyond your close network and you'll find you probably know more people (and communities/businesses) than you think.

10. Google Ads (working for 31 founders)

Yes, Google Ads works for bootstrapped businesses as well. I was surprised to see 31 founders mention this acquisition channel. One notable example is ScreenshotAPI (\$400/mo). They're an API that allows you to take website screenshots by only entering the website URL:

‘ The thing that really worked well for me was Google advertising. I'm currently spending \$100/month on the "screenshot API" keyword on Google. And so far, 13 of the 20 paying users came from that paid Google advertisement. ([source](#))

Who knows how many other businesses like this rank for 1-2 highly targeted keywords & get a consistent stream of visitors & paid users over time...

11. Affiliate marketing (working for 30 founders)

Having an affiliate marketing program can be a pretty sweet way to start new partnerships.

What type of affiliate commission works? I've seen it all: some offer recurring commissions, some offer them one-time (ranging from 10 to 90%). It really depends on what you sell / how much you sell it for. DesignPac (\$20K/mo) is a marketplace to hire verified designers/developers for a fixed monthly fee:

‘ Affiliate Marketing

This is the most effective method for B2B business. We've onboarded a total of 29 clients since the day we launched; 17 are active clients and half of them came from affiliate

marketers. We provide a 10% commission for each sign up and have a dashboard which provides an affiliate link after signing up. ([source](#))

For DesignPac, 10% works because an average project is worth 3-4 figures. 10% may not be enticing if you're selling a \$5/month SaaS though.

12. Niche communities (working for 30 founders)

I was surprised at the number of niche communities that exist out there. Your audience isn't only on Facebook/Reddit/Twitter. For example, take Levels.fyi (\$5K/mo). They're a website to compare career ladders across big (mostly tech-based) companies. Here's what they said when asked how did they acquire their first users:

‘ We seeded traffic to Levels.fyi by answering related questions on Blind and other Q&A forums with a link to the site Other Blind users started linking to Levels.fyi ([source](#))

Levels in Microsoft, Google, Facebook

Microsoft · guz

Oct 19, 2017

I'd like to see a mapping table for Google, Microsoft, facebook. Eg. What does a 62, 65 or 66 in Microsoft map to at Google and Facebook?



LinkedIn · Worldmap

Levels.fyi

Oct 19, 2017

👍 11 Likes

💬 Reply



Microsoft / Eng · wf25

[Www.levels.fyi](http://www.levels.fyi)

Oct 19, 2017

👍 4 Likes

💬 Reply



Advisory / Eng · chrischuck

Levels.fyi

Oct 19, 2017

👍 2 Likes

💬 Reply



LinkedIn · \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

levels.fyi

Oct 19, 2017

👍 2 Likes

💬 Reply



Blind is basically an anonymous version of LinkedIn, and they were a perfect fit for Levels.fyi.

Often niche communities/forums are country-based (for example, [this is](#) a pretty big UK forum for books). They're more rare than they were 5 years ago (due to people going on FB groups/Reddit subs), but still exist.

13. SEO (where founders got started immediately) (working for 29 founders)

These were companies that **were intentional** about getting started with SEO right away vs. the #1 acquisition channel, where founders first got validation via (faster) acquisition channels, and then added SEO (often as a result of noticing an increase in SEO traffic.)

One example of this is Repost Network (\$500k/mo) - a tool for artists to expand their SoundCloud reach:

‘ I thought if I named the company Repost and dominated the SEO on that specific search we could get some free inbound traffic. My assumption worked. I believe if you search "SoundCloud repost" in Google we're one of the top hits, and something like 25% of our inbound applicants come organically. ([source](#))

In this case, the founder was immersed into the market & knew what people searched for. "SoundCloud repost" was a pretty clear-intent/easy-to-rank keyword. I found that getting started with SEO may pay off for such keywords (but even then, you probably want to spend some money bidding on AdWords to see if the keyword converts before spending months trying to rank).

14. Twitter Posting / Engagement (working for 28 founders)

I've seen 2 types of approaches working on Twitter: a) Posting often (so people find you in search) b) Engaging with the community.

Referral Rock (\$70K/mo) is a tool for creating a refer-a-friend (referral) programs. They've used Twitter (search) to acquire some initial users:

‘ I was also active on Twitter where I reached out to marketers or anyone that mentioned "referral programs." I would comment or favorite tweets from the Referral Rock Twitter account which listed a free referral program. Throughout the year-long beta I had over 500 individuals kicking the tires on the free referral program before I started charging. ([source](#))

Ask yourself: What are my (potential) users likely to type into Twitter if they're looking for my product/service?

15. Facebook Groups (working for 28 founders)

You're likely part of at least 3 (often more) Facebook groups. So are your (potential) users. Just as with sub-reddits, there are niche-specific groups on Facebook for almost everything. ManyPixels (\$50k/mo) is a service providing unlimited designs for a fixed monthly fee:

I posted the site on a few Facebook groups for entrepreneurs, and we made our first sales (about \$1,500 in one day). We got our initial users solely via niche Facebook groups of entrepreneurs and startups. I joined many Facebook groups and wrote a post asking for feedback on ManyPixels and our value proposition. My message basically was, "Hey guys, here is what we do, would you be interested in this? Yes/No/Why not?" I also experimented by promising that each person giving us feedback would have a promo code. This worked well – lots of people commented, and this was a small hack that got us a lot of buzz. ([source](#))

The Facebook search box is pretty good at giving you the most active groups when you type certain keywords; and it's a great starting point for finding groups.

16. Mainstream Press (working for 27 founders)

These are publications with millions of monthly visitors; a small percent of these visitors are usually within your target market.

From my analysis, press works best for hot/trendy niches. Take Game Quitters(\$6k/mo) - an online support community (providing support & online courses) for people struggling with video game addiction:

One of our other main focuses has been press. We are fortunate that "video game addiction" is a hot debate and trending topic in the media, and we have leveraged that as much as possible. I regularly appear in the press, with over 75 features in the last two years, many of which were initially sparked by reaching out to journalists with a simple pitch for a story hook that was interesting, local, and timely. ([source](#))

Often, getting to these journalists is hard (they're flooded with emails), which is why you might want to try with the next acquisition channel...

17. Niche Authority Websites (working for 27 founders)

These blogs/sites don't get as many visitors as TechCrunch. But they are read by a large percentage of *your target audience* = which means that you get VERY qualified traffic & potential users.

Also, editors are not flooded with emails like the mainstream press. This is what "Get me to Europe" (\$300-400/mo), a tool that helps you find cheap flights from the US to Europe, realized:

‘ The second thing that's worked well for us is cold-email outreach out to news websites and medium-size bloggers.

We've reached out to hundreds of small- and medium-sized travel blogs, and to our surprise we've received a much more positive response than some of the larger blogs.

These small and medium blogs want great content for their growing audiences, and they've been much more willing to work with us for free in exchange for some insider tips and original pieces. We've found our leads on Twitter, Facebook groups, and blogs that focus on lists (e.g. "Top 10 Ways to XYZ").

Here is [an example](#) of a guest post that was published by blogger with around 60k followers. We found her on Twitter and sent her a friendly email asking for a guest post. The reaction from her post was fantastic, generating hundreds of new users on our site and achieving over 100 repins on Pinterest. ([source](#))

18. Partnering with someone with a similar audience (working for 23 founders)

For someone with a large audience, one of the easiest ways to increase their revenue is to partner up with someone who can offer something else/unique to their target audience. This is where you come in.

Followup Edge(\$27k/mo) is a tool to follow up with inbound leads (via email, sms, calls). They've used this fact and partnered up with a service-based company:

‘ A lot of our initial success and growth has been driven by partnering with an influential ad agency owner, Bobby Stocks, who we had worked with in the past. Chris Goss was instrumental in bringing us together, and it was a win-win for everyone. Bobby essentially gained a software development team and a custom-built solution to his problem, and we gained a very motivated affiliate and invaluable product feedback.

Early on, we determined that allowing ad agency owners to take a cut of the profit by upselling our service to their clients would be pivotal to furthering our growth. We solved their problem with follow-up, increased client their retention, earned them an added profit, and expanded our user base in the processes. ([source](#))

If you have a product, consider partnering up with someone in the same/similar niche who offers a service.

19. Influencer outreach (working for 22 founders)

With partnerships, you're getting someone to be part of your business on an ongoing basis. **With influencer marketing, you're getting** someone with a bigger audience to mention you in exchange of something (money, samples of your product, etc.)

Influencers are people too; if you get one or two to recommend you, others are likely to follow suit. This happened with Human Proof Designs (\$90K/mo), a service providing "done for you" affiliate websites:

‘ Before we had a name and a brand, I did a lot of outreach to other influencers in the space. This of course took time, because there are so many "gurus" and people teaching affiliate marketing, that I wasn't really taken seriously initially. Fair enough, actually. After a while, people started to see that I was doing good things, and once one or two influencers started recommending me, letting me guest post for them, or having me on their podcasts, then other influencers started to do the same thing. ([source](#))

Don't expect instant results with this; these people are flooded with emails. If you get one or two to endorse you though, things get easier from there.

20. Engineering as marketing (working for 21 founders)

This is about using your engineering prowess to stand out. Let's take one great example to best explain this.

LabelGrid(1142) (\$4.6K/mo) is a tool for musicians to upload and track their content on sites like SoundCloud, iTunes, Spotify. They took a genius approach to engineering as marketing:

‘ The most successful way I've grown revenue (and also proxied interest) for LabelGrid has been by breaking out some of the features, turning them into standalone SaaS products, and then cross-promoting them. For example, my service BeatTracker does one thing (track the top 100 chart placements on Beat port), and it's gained new paying subscribers very rapidly. Another standalone service we launched is Promo.ly, which has revenue comparable to LabelGrid.

There are a few other standalone tools I've launched which follow this same model, which allows us to pull in leads while monetizing a separate service at the same time. Also, the partnerships I made helped me bring in additional revenue by licensing to them as customers, which enabled me to build out additional features. ([source](#)).

From my experience (and analysis), if you create various useful/small tools, you're far more likely to have success (in general) with acquisition channels like press/influencers/etc. vs. if you create a simple blog article. The reason? Software-based tools are rare and people take notice; blog articles are not.

21. Quora (working for 20 founders)

Quora is the largest Q&A website in the world. People ask thousands of questions daily and a certain % of them are probably related to your niche.

Doorbell (\$2.3K/mo) is a tool to collect customer feedback for your website or app, and they found about Quora quite accidentally:

‘ A surprising source of users for me was Quora, where Doorbell ended up as part of an answer someone posted. Since then I've tried to increase Doorbell's exposure on Quora, without posting the usual self-promoting type of answers. I'm happy to say that it's working really well so far! ([source](#))

Quora gets the majority of its traffic from Google; so you can use a tool like SemRush to find what Quora questions rank well in your particular market & start from there.

22. Word of Mouth Tactics (worked for 19 founders)

Every product has some level of word-of-mouth. Not all try to proactively increase it. Anchor Hosting (\$20K/mo) is a Wordpress hosting provider and they've purposely focused on reaching only the people who do word-of-mouth for their product:

Anchor Hosting has grown through word of mouth. Nearly all new hosting customers come through existing relationships with web designers, web developers, and agencies. I've found that most people host their WordPress website with whichever webhost was recommended by the one who built them their website. Because of this, I haven't spent any time or energy on marketing or advertising to customers, but have instead focused on attracting the web designers, web developers, and agencies who will organically refer customers my way. ([source](#)).

Do you also have a segment of your audience who's not the primary consumer (but they bring you a large % of your users)?

23. Referral marketing (working for 18 founders)

If affiliate marketing is rewarding people with money, referral marketing is rewarding them with more product functionality. Dropbox gave you more space if you referred someone. Paypal gave you money.

My research didn't uncover a simple formula for creating a referral program. Often, founders needed to go through a painful iteration process in order to find out what users wanted, what action they needed to take etc. PeakFeed (\$500+/mo) is a tool to track your social media performance, and they're a great example of this:

From the beginning, getting my users to tell their friends has been a huge part of gaining momentum for PeakFeed.

When it was free, subscribers could unlock some features by getting a few friends to sign up

through their link. I worked really hard to drive not just shares, but shares on the right channels. Twitter shares? Meh. Facebook? Better. But for PeakFeed, someone sharing their link on LinkedIn was gold. So I put a lot of time and effort into optimizing the messaging and layout to do just that.

Once I went to paid, things were a little trickier. What I ended up doing was setting up a permanent waiting list. Meaning, nobody could just sign up for an account and pay me money — they had to give me their email address. Then, every day I'd hit them with follow-up messages. Day one was their access link to actually sign up, but then day two was a message about how if they got three friends to pay for accounts, they'd get a free account of their own.

It was a tricky balance to strike between incentivizing people to share while also not having an email list with nothing but people waiting for their friends to sign up.

Once I got it dialed I not only got a ton of shares, but I also got a steady supply of paid users, and I used that formula for over a year. ([source](#)).

Don't give up if you first don't succeed with referral marketing. It could be your offer; it could be your users (them not having friends who might be potential users); or it can be a combination of both.

24. Discount / deals websites (working for 17 founders)

AppSumo, StackShare. Facebook "Deals" Groups**. These are just some of the places I've seen founders succeed in getting new users by promoting "lifetime discounts".

AppSumo was the #1 most mentioned website. Consider Plutio (\$7K/mo), a project management / time tracking software for freelancers:

I signed a deal with AppSumo, which helped us reach over 5,000 early users and hit over \$250,000 in sales within a week! Not only did this validate Plutio, but it also helped us maintain our progress without so much exhaustion, as I was able to cut down on some of the extra work I was doing to make ends meet. ([source](#))

I know that some people are strongly against giving out lifetime subscriptions for your product. I've noticed that most of these people don't seem to understand the definition of a "lifetime license", though. Lifetime means *for the lifetime of the product*, not the lifetime of the user. So you won't be

obligated to support someone for the rest of your life, just as long as your product exists (one of the biggest complaints of lifetime-license buyers is that products they buy shut down within a few months.)

25. Facebook Ads (working for 17 founders)

Surprised to see Facebook Ads so lower down on this list? I was too. Overall, Facebook Ads was mentioned a lot as an acquisition channel. It seems though, that a lot more people failed at Facebook Ads than being successful (thus why only 17 'successful mentions'. I plan to do a second part with only 'failed mentions' later this month).

You may be like: "But Darko, I don't have any money. How can I advertise on Facebook?" Vouchers. I've seen plenty of examples where founders got Facebook Ads vouchers from unlikely places. Take CustomFilterz((\$10K/mo), an agency providing Snapchat geofilters:

After receiving the small £250 award from my university, we began to test Google and Facebook ads. For a long time we were breaking even and sometimes losing money on the campaigns as we had no experience. Over time we have refined the ads and they are now working well. ([source](#))

Another way founders kept their costs down is by advertising in a different country (this works well for SaaS, because it's far easier to translate it vs. an actual book).

26. Content integration partnerships (working for 16 founders)

There are people in your market with web pages/sites getting hundreds, if not thousands of visits per day. I've seen 16 founders succeed by asking/incentivizing these people to include them there.

The key here is to aim for a win-win scenario. egghead.io (\$275K/mo) is providing instructional videos for software engineers, and they've been able to achieve this:

One thing that's helped us has been releasing free community resource content in collaboration with open source product maintainers. We collaborate with maintainers to create courses for their projects, which are free to view for everybody. They link to their

course lessons in the documentation for their tool, and we get to pitch egghead to those who watch. The result has been open-source maintainers making regular checks for their work, and our reputation and membership grows at the same time. ([source](#))

Some founders succeeded by just asking. Some by giving out money. Some by providing some kind of incentive; and some (like egghead) by making their partners feel important :)

27. BetaList (working for 15 founders)

BetaList is a website where you can launch 'beta versions' of your product. Like ProductHunt, the main audience of BetaList is the B2B crowd. That means you're more likely to succeed if you're targeting that market vs. B2C.

This was the case with GrumpyText (\$3K/mo), a service providing unlimited blog content for a monthly fee:

After we built the MVP we launched on BetaList, which was a great way to gain some traction in the market and build up our user base. We paid to be featured in their highlighted Monday spot and to be incorporated into their Wednesday newsletter. We got 257 visits from our BetaList launch (predominately from the US, UK, and Western Europe) and landed 26 subscribers. Overall, it was a great success and I feel like we got much more out of BetaList than if we had invested in Facebook Ads or something similar at this stage. ([source](#))

Your product doesn't have to be a fully developed SaaS with a set of features in order to launch on BetaList. It can be something as simple as a "coming soon" landing page.

28. Having an existing audience from a similar product (working for 15 founders)

These are founders who launched a different product in the same niche (and used that audience for their new product). Index Nuke (\$4k/mo) is a tool to help you with backlink indexing. Before launching it, they had a successful product in the same (SEO) market called "301 Nuke":

After the successful launch of 301 Nuke, I had managed to build a loyal customer base and mailing list.

I reached out to several of my existing customers to ask them to beta test Index Nuke before I released it to the public.

With both my mailing list and affiliates on board, I pretty much started to make sales from day one. If I could give one piece of advice, it is to at least build a mailing list at the early stages, even before you launch your product. This way you will have potential beta testers and customers right away.

You could combine "engineering as marketing" and this; Release various features of your product as a standalone product, get users for each, and then cross-promote them.

29. Having a service-based business before migrating to a product-based one (working for 14 founders)

Have you thought about providing a service before releasing your product? That's what 14 founders did. Lead Cookie sells productized LinkedIn lead generation, and they started with consulting:

For the past several years I have worked as a sales consultant for agencies and consulting companies.

In order to get the ball rolling I used my existing network. In my consulting work I had held sales calls with almost 400 different agencies, so I started selling there and got a lot of early validation. I reached \$5k MRR in the first week and \$12k MRR within the second week.

(source)

Freelancing, consulting, providing a service, having an agency. These are the 4 main things founders did before creating a product (or a productized service). These 4 things have a higher likelihood to work (than having a product) because you don't have the whole winner-takes-all dynamic.

Products tend to be prone to a winner-takes all effect because it's so easy to scale a SaaS product, once successful. This is not the case with a service (serving 5 vs. 500 customers is much harder as a freelancer vs. having a SaaS product). This is why many founders start with services and use that as their initial user base for their product.

30. YouTube (working for 12 founders)

YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world and I was pretty surprised to not see it rank higher. This is probably due my sample (most IndieHackers interviews are B2B SaaS businesses). I'm pretty sure YouTube would rank higher if most of these businesses were B2C.

Nevertheless, YouTube is an acquisition channel worth exploring. Your audience is probably watching YouTube videos related to their problem. This is where you (can) come in. Take QuickAdminPanel (\$4K/mo) - an admin panel for Laravel:

Probably the biggest success in our content marketing (though we don't really call it that) were live-coding videos that took off quite fast. On my YouTube channel "Laravel Business" (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTuplgOBi6tJlleslboymGA>), I was shooting screencasts of myself building stuff with QuickAdminPanel and adding custom Laravel code on top. That attracted an audience who wanted to learn Laravel.

This video alone received 33k views on YouTube: Calendar project with Laravel + QuickAdminPanel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7mPaNfCHCE>). My advice to other indie hackers here: video is the key to describing what your product is about. People like visual, they understand visual. ([source](#))

If you're targeting developers, they're probably watching tutorials on YouTube. If you're targeting accountants, they're probably watching conferences/tutorials/career-related advice. Figure out what your audience is watching on YouTube and get yourself out there.

31. Guest posting (worked for 11 founders)

Guest posting is simply posting on someone else's blog. I honestly expected it to rank higher (though it's been overused as a tactic and bloggers nowadays are flooded with guest post requests). Still, it can work (if you're persistent). This was the case for Simple Steps Code (\$650/mo), a set of courses on becoming a front-end web developer:

What marketing strategies have you used to get students for your course? I started guest posting on various sites. I started with the ones that were looking for submissions. Sitepoint turned out to be an awesome pick because their editors are fantastic people and the articles get plenty of visibility and SEO. To get the first post approved, I submitted a pitch following their guidelines, got a friendly rejection, tried again with a new set of topics, and succeeded. It was generally a similar story for the other sites I pitched, which were also wonderful to

work with.

Current traffic is around 2000 to 4000 visitors per month, and most of it has come from guest posting. ([source](#))

32. Meetups (working for 11 founders)

Meetups are (usually) local events where you can meet other people with similar interests/careers/from the same industry. I've seen 11 examples of founders going to meetups and getting paid users that way. How? Mostly through networking/sponsorships.

Consider Chili Piper (\$250K/mo), a tool to handle inbound leads faster (someone submitting a form on your site to schedule a demo, for example):

‘ I closed the first \$1MM in revenues myself, mostly through in-person networking. I attended every industry meetup and conference. Chili Piper is in the scheduling business, so I had my Chili Piper link on my iPhone. I would go talk to people, qualify them on the spot, and talk about their scheduling problems. Then I'd suggest we have a meeting to talk about our solution, pull out my phone, and say "Let's schedule it now, do you have your phone with you?" Everybody has their phone with them, and everybody has their calendar on their phone. I'd book up to 15 demos per event. ([source](#))

Note: COVID-19 severely limited the usefulness of this acquisition channel. A lot of meetups moved online and you're more limited with what you can do. I don't have enough data for online meetups, but I'm pretty sure there are people succeeding with it as we speaking.

33. Software Directories (worked for 10 founders)

Capterra, G2, GetApp, AlternativeTo. These were the top 4 software directories mentioned by founders. I've seen a lot mention.

Doorbell (\$3k/month), an app feedback tool, saw success with AlternativeTo:

‘ I submitted Doorbell to comparison sites such as AlternativeTo that led to my first few signups. ([source](#))

Some of the directories (like Capterra) have options to boost your listing (so more people see it), so it's worth considering as you get more (paying) users & have more money for investments.

34. Retargeting (worked for 10 founders)

Almost every major platform has a retargeting option. I've seen founders fail with one but succeed with the next. This was the case for Kanban for WordPress(1570) (\$350/mo), a Wordpress plugin for practicing Kanban:

For a month I've tried retargeting ads through Adroll. This resulted in a \$2.84 CPC and no conversions. I've only just started trying retargeting ads on Facebook which initially show a lot more engagement... ([source](#)).

Don't get discouraged if one retargeting platform doesn't work for you. It may be that users are simply not on that platform. Try 2-3 different ones before deciding to give up.

More Acquisition Channels, More Examples?

Thank you for being [ZeroToUsers/FirstPayingUsers](#) subscriber. Here are some of the next reports I plan to release:

More examples for each acquisition channel

You can easily imagine this report turning into a book if I provided more examples for each acquisition channel. This is why I plan to do a separate article for each of the 34 acquisition channels above (with 5+ examples, lessons and so on.)

Acquisition channels that failed

This report only included the acquisition channels that worked for founders. I also have a separate list about acquisition channels that failed for founders, along with useful lessons for each.

Acquisition channels with less than 10 mentions

There are some pretty interesting examples there (like LinkedIn, classified websites, Github and so on)

If you're a [ZeroToUsers.com](https://zerotousers.com) (or FirstPayingUsers) subscriber, you should get these reports to your inbox as soon as they're published.

If you're on Twitter, [follow me there](#) because I plan to publish some pretty interesting/useful threads there as well.

Thank you for reading! If you have any questions, shoot me an email at darko@zerotousers.com.