

# Throwing Pasta and Finding Fit

Iterative Sales Strategy Formation in Early-Stage B2B SaaS Ventures

Master's thesis in Entrepreneurship and Business design

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# Executive Summary

This compiled thesis combines the Independent Study with four appended works created within the master's program in Entrepreneurship and Business Design at Chalmers School of Entrepreneurship. Together, these texts reflect a full year of venture-driven learning, research, and execution.

The central thesis explores how early-stage B2B startups build and adapt sales strategies under uncertainty. Through interviews with startup founders and operators, the study identifies five distinct tactics and examines how these influence early growth. The research highlights the role of trust, adaptability, and customer interaction in shaping sales success at the earliest venture stages.

The appended studies expand on this theme across key areas of the venture development process:

- The **Entrepreneurial Mindset and Teamwork Study (EMT)** investigates how individual motivation and interpersonal trust shape performance in entrepreneurial teams. It examines the psychological and contextual challenges that arise when working on ventures with uncertain outcomes. The study contributes a deeper understanding of team alignment and personal drive, which are central to both leadership and sales execution in startups.
- The **Entrepreneurial Sales Study (ES)** explores the sales landscape within the wound care industry. Through interviews with professionals from MedFour, Essity, and Firstkind, the report identifies critical challenges in procurement, reimbursement, and stakeholder engagement. It emphasizes relationship-building, real-world testing, and strategic timing as foundations for effective sales. These findings directly complement the Independent Study by anchoring sales strategy in a real-world, regulated market.
- The **Technology and Product Development Study (TPD)** evaluates whether the equine veterinary market could serve as a de-risking entry point for bioelectronic wound care technology. Although veterinary sales promise quicker market access, the report concludes that species-specific factors and low clinical transferability limit the strategic value of this path. This study illustrates how early commercialization decisions intersect with regulatory constraints, a key concern for any startup navigating sales and growth.

Together, the Independent Study and appended works form a cohesive narrative about how entrepreneurial teams navigate uncertainty, build sales strategies, and make strategic decisions in complex environments. This compilation demonstrates how theory and practice are deeply intertwined in the education at Chalmers School of Entrepreneurship, with research insights grounded in real venture experience.

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## Abstract

This study explores how lead entrepreneurs in early stage B2B SaaS ventures develop and adapt sales strategies under conditions of commercial uncertainty. Based on eight in-depth interviews with founders within the Chalmers entrepreneurial ecosystem, the research examines the use of various sales tactics including Sell First Build Later, consultative selling, outbound outreach, and pilot programs. Rather than following predefined strategies, founders engaged in continuous experimentation by trying multiple approaches in parallel and adapting based on customer response, available resources, and contextual insights. Using the Gioia method for analysis, the study identifies eight strategic dimensions that reflect how sales work functions as both a learning process and a way to shape direction. At the center of these findings is the metaphor of the Pasta Method, which describes a process where founders try different tactics and continue with those that generate traction. This reflects a practical logic rooted in effectuation, Lean Startup thinking, and strategy as practice. The study contributes to entrepreneurship and sales literature by demonstrating how strategy is shaped through action rather than planning. It highlights how early sales efforts support both external traction and internal clarity. For entrepreneurs, the findings emphasize the value of adaptability, real time learning, and sensitivity to context when navigating the early commercial journey of a startup.

# Key Terminology

## B2B (Business-to-Business)

Refers to commercial transactions between businesses, rather than between a business and individual consumers (B2C). In this study, B2B describes startups whose customers are other organizations or enterprises.

## SaaS (Software-as-a-Service)

A software distribution model where applications are hosted in the cloud and accessed via the internet on a subscription basis. SaaS products are typically updated continuously, scale easily, and require minimal on-premise installation.

## B2B SaaS

The intersection of the above two concepts, software services delivered via the cloud and sold to business customers. These models often involve complex sales cycles, multiple decision-makers, and a need for ongoing support and onboarding.

## Early-Stage Startup

A company in the initial phase of development, usually characterized by a small team, limited financial resources, and a focus on validating its product-market fit. These startups often rely on iterative learning and founder-led efforts in sales, product development, and operations.

## Sales Strategy

The evolving set of principles and practices a startup uses to identify, attract, and convert customers. In early-stage ventures, sales strategies are often experimental, founder-driven, and shaped by feedback rather than formal planning.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

B2B SaaS startups represent a particularly compelling context for studying early sales strategy. These companies often operate in complex sales environments, where customer acquisition involves multiple stakeholders, longer decision cycles, and high expectations of trust and credibility. At the same time, SaaS business models require quick validation of market need and recurring revenue streams to ensure survival and scalability. The combination of low initial resources and high execution demands forces founders to engage in active experimentation with their sales approach. These conditions make B2B SaaS ventures an ideal setting for exploring how early-stage founders actually develop and adapt sales strategies under uncertainty.

Effective sales strategies play a pivotal role in helping early-stage B2B startups overcome long sales cycles, build credibility, and drive initial growth. Understanding how these strategies emerge and evolve is essential for ventures aiming to scale in competitive, uncertain markets.

The study leverages the ecosystem of the Chalmers School of Entrepreneurship, which provides access to a network of startups, entrepreneurs, and industry stakeholders. This network offers a rich foundation for exploring how entrepreneurs approach their first sales and adapt their strategies in dynamic business environments. By engaging with this ecosystem, the study aims to produce insights that are both theoretically robust and practically relevant.

## 1.2. Research purpose

This study focuses on the lived experiences of founders in early-stage B2B SaaS companies, exploring how they form their sales strategies and what factors shape those decisions.

In the high-stakes environment of entrepreneurial B2B startups, identifying effective sales strategies is critical for achieving early growth and overcoming the unique challenges of deep-tech markets. Understanding how different approaches, such as building trust versus focusing on ROI, influence outcomes offers valuable insights for entrepreneurs and industry stakeholders.

This study explores the research question:

- *How do lead entrepreneurs in B2B SaaS startups form, adapt, and combine sales strategies during early-stage venture development?*

By answering this, we aim to uncover how sales strategies are formed, tested, and adapted in practice, not as fixed plans, but as evolving processes shaped by uncertainty, feedback, and intuition. Our findings offer

insight into how entrepreneurs experiment with different sales tactics, make decisions under ambiguity, and learn what “sticks” when there is no clear playbook.

The outcome is both analytical and metaphorical: we introduce the Pasta Method, a way to understand strategy formation as an emergent, experimental process where founders “throw sales tactics at the wall” and keep what works.

## 2. Theory

Sales strategies in early-stage B2B SaaS startups emerge at the intersection of established theory and real-world improvisation. While many frameworks in sales, entrepreneurship, and strategy offer useful guidance, founders in resource-constrained environments often blend these theories with a trial-and-error mindset. This chapter outlines the key conceptual foundations used to understand and analyze the sales strategies explored in this study. It begins with a review of the five sales tactics identified in literature and used as sensitizing concepts in this research. It then expands into entrepreneurial strategy perspectives that help explain how these tactics are selected and adapted over time.

### 2.1. Sales Tactics Overview

This section introduces five sales tactics commonly discussed in both practice and literature, all of which were used as initial categories to guide data collection and early analysis. These are not mutually exclusive strategies, but rather distinct entry points into how startups approach sales when facing limited resources, unvalidated markets, and uncertain customer needs.

#### 2.1.1 Sell First, Build Later

A strategy that focuses on securing customer commitments or pre-sales before fully developing a product, minimizing financial and market risks. Rooted in Lean Startup principles (Ries, 2011), SFBL emphasizes testing product-market fit early by selling the vision of the product, similar to the concept of a Minimum Viable Product (MVP). This approach allows startups to validate customer demand and iterate based on feedback without incurring high development costs.

Looking at prior studies from the Chalmers E-School, Odin and Ringqvist's (2022) action-based framework for Sell First, Build Later (SFBL) offers a structured approach that blends lean startup philosophies with proactive stakeholder engagement. By focusing on transparent communication of product limitations and early-stage commitments, SFBL empowers startups to mitigate risk, validate market demand, and conserve resources.

Entrepreneurial abilities		Business case evidence	
<b>Motivation factor</b> Framework of five different types of value creation	<b>Communication abilities</b> Bounday object Pitch deck Target group oriented Transparency	<b>Technology insight</b> Leveraging contingencies principle	<b>Technology evidence</b> MVP Specification sheet
		<b>Market insight</b> MWG "Where to play", "How to play"	<b>Market evidence</b> Business model canvas Letter of intent Customer evidence
		<b>Financing insight</b> Affordable loss principle Cap table Financial ecosystem	<b>Entrepreneurial evidence</b> Bird in hand External image Entrepreneurial self

Figure 1. The SFBL Framework by Odin and Ringqvist's (2022)

This model also emphasizes alignment between stakeholder interests and entrepreneurial capabilities such as adaptability, negotiation, and market insight. In high-risk, innovation-driven environments, particularly deep tech or software, SFBL provides a roadmap for reducing uncertainty through iterative, evidence-based methods, thereby minimizing financial exposure while sharpening product-market fit. While Barreng and Krutmeijer (2021) highlight SFBL as a strategy for early-stage ventures to secure funding and validate market interest simultaneously. They distinguish it from traditional MVP approaches by emphasizing customer collaboration and transparency, where the focus is on selling a product's vision and potential rather than its immediate functionality.

### 2.1.2 Relationship-Based Selling

In contrast to process-driven models, relationship-based selling focuses on leveraging existing networks to gain traction. Drawing from Rackham's (1989) work on major account sales, this approach centers on credibility, referrals, and trust—elements that are especially critical in complex B2B environments where new entrants lack brand recognition. For early-stage founders, personal introductions often serve as the first door into sales conversations, acting as social proof in the absence of case studies or validated features.

### 2.1.3 Pilot Projects

Offering potential customers a low-risk opportunity to test a product. This strategy resonates with concepts from Crossing the Chasm (Moore, 2014), which discusses bridging the gap between early adopters and the mainstream market. Rather than pushing for immediate conversions, pilots create space for mutual learning while enabling startups to refine onboarding, feature sets, and positioning. In regulated or conservative

industries, this tactic can help overcome internal stakeholder resistance and lower the perceived risk of adoption.

#### 2.1.4 Consultative Selling

By emphasizing deep customer understanding and solution co-creation. This method relies on listening, questioning, and framing value propositions around client-specific pain points, rather than fixed features. Ries (2011) suggests that such customer-centric iterations are essential for uncovering true needs. In B2B SaaS, where offerings often require tailoring, consultative methods help founders avoid misalignment by engaging customers as collaborators rather than passive buyers.

#### 2.1.5 Outbound Sales

Outbound strategies involve proactively reaching out to prospective customers through cold calls, targeted emails, or outreach campaigns. This tactic enables startups to test new markets and customer segments quickly. Blank and Dorf (2012) emphasize outbound sales as a way to pressure-test assumptions and gather early signals. While often described as resource-intensive, the actual cost and effectiveness of outbound sales depend heavily on how resources are allocated and how well the outreach is targeted. Research suggests that when outbound efforts are guided by structured resource practices—such as clear segmentation, customer prioritization, and coordinated messaging—firms can improve sales effectiveness and reduce wasted effort (Kohtamäki et al., 2016).

For startups, this means that outbound sales need not be prohibitively expensive or inefficient. With thoughtful targeting and basic tools, such as customer databases or CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems, founders can test hypotheses about new segments and reduce dependence on inbound leads or personal networks. While early attempts may yield limited results, many founders in this study described how iteratively refining their outbound process led to greater traction and learning over time.

#### Summary

These five tactics form the starting point for this study but are not treated as fixed categories. As the findings will show, entrepreneurs often combine and iterate these approaches based on context, feedback, and internal learning. To better understand this adaptive behavior, the next section turns to entrepreneurial strategy frameworks that explain how such sales strategies evolve.

Tactic	Initiation Mode	Customization	Resource Intensity	Typical Use Case
Relationship based	Inbound / Warm Leads	High	Low	Early traction via founder networks
SFBL	Mixed	Medium-High	Low-Medium	Pre-product validation, budget-limited
Consultative	Mixed	Very High	Medium	Complex B2B with unclear needs
Pilot Program	Inbound/Consultative	Medium	Medium	Regulated or hesitant industries
Outbound	Cold	Variable	Depends on tool	Market expansion, segment testing

*Table 1. Sales Tactic Comparison by Sales Characteristics*

This table reflects how startups often combine tactics depending on context, resource constraints, and customer segment. Rather than following a linear model, founders select from this toolkit iteratively based on traction, learning, and internal capacity.

## 2.2 Entrepreneurial Sales Strategy

In early-stage ventures, strategies rarely advance and execute as planned due to constant shifts in customer response, resource availability, and product development needs. The market is often undefined, feedback loops are immediate, and founders lack the data required for predictive decision-making. As a result, strategies must evolve iteratively based on real-time learning rather than long-term forecasting (Giardino et al., 2017).

### 2.2.1 Effectuation

Effectuation, introduced by Sarasvathy (2001), is a theory of entrepreneurial decision-making that emphasizes action under conditions of uncertainty. Instead of beginning with a specific goal and identifying the means to achieve it, effectual reasoning starts from what the entrepreneur already has: their identity, knowledge, and network. These means are used to explore a variety of possible outcomes as the venture unfolds.

This perspective is particularly relevant in early-stage B2B SaaS startups, where resources are limited, customer demand is uncertain, and market conditions change rapidly. In such settings, rigid planning often gives way to adaptive experimentation. Founders tend to act first, learn from the outcome, and adjust their approach accordingly. Sarasvathy outlines five core principles of effectuation that align closely with how sales strategies are formed in these environments:

- Bird-in-Hand: Start with existing resources and relationships. Founders frequently rely on their current networks and domain experience to initiate sales conversations rather than waiting for ideal conditions or exhaustive planning.
- Affordable Loss: Focus on what can be risked rather than potential returns. Tactics such as Sell First, Build Later (SFBL) and pilot projects reflect this principle, allowing founders to test demand before making significant investments.
- Crazy Quilt: Form partnerships with stakeholders who are willing to commit to the venture. Collaborating with others allows entrepreneurs to leverage additional resources and share risks.
- Lemonade: Embrace surprises and leverage them as opportunities. Entrepreneurs remain flexible and adapt their strategies in response to unexpected events.
- Pilot-in-the-Plane: Take an active role in shaping the future. Rather than waiting for ideal market conditions, founders use sales activities to drive product development, validate needs, and discover viable directions for growth.

The relevance of effectuation to this study is twofold. First, it shapes how a sales strategy is created, not as a fixed, premeditated plan, but as something that emerges through doing. This understanding supports the decision to treat sales tactics such as SFBL, consultative selling, and outbound efforts not as exclusive categories, but as adaptable tools that founders test and combine in response to evolving circumstances. Second, it directly informed the research design. Since the study investigates how sales strategies develop over time in uncertain contexts, an inductive and process-oriented method, specifically the Gioia approach, was selected to capture the nuances of founder experience.

Moreover, the Pasta Method metaphor, which emerges from the data, reflects this effectual logic. Founders do not follow a rigid sales playbook; instead, they try various approaches to see what gains traction with customers. This approach illustrates how early sales is not only about revenue generation, but also about learning, sensemaking, and strategic direction-setting.

Grounding this study in effectuation theory helps reframe founder behavior as adaptive and opportunity-driven rather than inconsistent or unstructured. It provides a theoretical foundation for understanding why sales strategies evolve the way they do in early-stage B2B SaaS ventures.

### 2.2.2 Bootstrapping

While effectuation provides a framework for understanding how entrepreneurs navigate uncertainty, bootstrapping offers a complementary perspective that helps explain why certain sales tactics are favored in early-stage B2B SaaS startups. Bootstrapping refers to the practice of building and sustaining a business with minimal external capital, relying instead on internal cash flow, unpaid labor, and customer-funded development.

Bhide (1992) describes bootstrapping as a constraint-driven approach in which founders prioritize strategies with immediate or near-term returns. Rather than investing in long-term infrastructure or large-scale

initiatives, entrepreneurs focus on generating early revenue and managing risk through small, reversible actions. In the sales context, this often results in the use of low-cost, high-feedback tactics such as Sell First, Build Later (SFBL) or pilot programs, which are favored over resource-intensive methods like professionalized outbound sales campaigns.

Winborg and Landström (2001) highlight that bootstrapping involves tactical trade-offs, including delaying hiring, leveraging personal relationships, and pursuing monetization strategies that minimize up-front investment. These constraints affect how founders allocate their time and effort, often leading to personalized outreach, informal customer validation calls, or pilot negotiations that postpone full-scale commercial commitments.

A common challenge for startups, particularly in their earliest stages, is limited financial capital. This constraint often leads founders to favor sales tactics that reduce up-front costs, accelerate feedback, and improve the chance of generating early revenue. According to Winborg and Landström (2001), bootstrapping shapes not only financial decision-making but also operational priorities such as customer acquisition and go-to-market strategy. Founders may delay building a formal sales team or investing in paid campaigns, instead turning to tactics that draw on personal networks or rely on early customer engagement to fund product development.

Bootstrapped startups operate under conditions that demand efficient resource allocation. Unlike venture-backed firms that may prioritize growth and market share, bootstrapped companies must adapt their sales strategies to ensure short-term viability. As Ebben and Johnson (2006) note, this leads to an emphasis on high-impact, low-cost techniques such as networking, referrals, and founder-led sales efforts. Lean teams are common, and pricing structures are often flexible to secure early cash flow.

Vanacker et al. (2014) further argue that bootstrapped firms rely on continuous feedback rather than formal scaling plans to refine their sales approach. This adaptive process ensures that strategy remains responsive to both financial realities and customer demand, reinforcing the experimental and iterative nature of sales work in early-stage ventures.

### 2.2.3 B2B Sales Complexity

Selling in early-stage B2B SaaS markets involves navigating a particularly demanding set of challenges. Unlike consumer sales or mature B2B operations, these startups must persuade risk-averse buyers to adopt unproven solutions, often within long and politically complex buying processes. This section outlines key sources of complexity that influence how sales strategies are formed in this setting.

#### Multi-Stakeholder Decision Processes

In B2B sales, particularly within enterprise or institutional markets, purchase decisions rarely rest with a single buyer. Guenzi and Storbacka (2015) describe how B2B sales frequently involve multiple stakeholders,

such as operational managers, technical evaluators, finance departments, and procurement teams. Each actor brings different priorities and concerns, requiring startups to craft messages that can appeal to diverse interests within the same organization.

For early-stage startups, this poses a challenge. Tailoring value propositions across functions adds cognitive and practical load to each sales effort. When operating without a formal sales team or established materials, founders must personally adapt to each context, increasing the complexity and time required to progress a deal. These stakeholder dynamics often push startups toward flexible sales tactics that allow for iteration, improvisation, and relational access.

### The Role of Trust in Early-Stage Sales

Trust plays a pivotal role in complex B2B sales environments. Plouffe et al. (2014) highlight that perceived risk in high-value, long-term B2B relationships leads buyers to emphasize relational factors such as credibility, consistency, and social proof. For early-stage SaaS startups, which lack brand recognition or proven implementation outcomes, this creates a significant hurdle.

Without established case studies or customer references, many startups must compensate for this credibility gap by investing time in building relationships and emphasizing shared understanding. As a result, trust-building becomes a sales priority rather than a byproduct. This need often explains the prevalence of relationship-based and consultative selling approaches in early-stage contexts, where rapport and access matter more than product polish.

### Solution-Oriented and Co-Creative Approaches

Beyond navigating stakeholders and building trust, early-stage sales in complex B2B settings often involves co-developing the offering itself. Challagalla et al. (2014) argue that solution-based selling is increasingly central to markets where needs are not predefined and customers expect vendors to help articulate and solve problems.

For many startups, this means engaging in consultative conversations that blur the line between selling and product discovery. Rather than presenting a finalized product, founders often lead exploratory dialogues, revise feature sets, and design pilot programs together with potential clients. These activities help reduce uncertainty for the buyer and generate critical feedback for the seller, but they also extend the sales cycle and require ongoing iteration.

Together, these multi-stakeholder complexity factors where the centrality of trust, and the need for co-creation, makes it difficult for early-stage SaaS startups to rely on standardized sales processes. Instead, founders must often combine tactics, respond to unpredictable developments, and adjust their approach on a case-by-case basis.

## 2.3 Strategic Management Perspectives on Sales

Sales is often treated as a downstream function, executed after strategic decisions have been made. However, in early-stage B2B SaaS startups, where uncertainty is high and direction is fluid, sales becomes a key site where strategy is not only implemented but actively shaped. This section draws on perspectives from strategic management to support the idea that sales activities are central to how startups form, test, and refine their direction over time.

### Emergent Strategies

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) distinguish between deliberate strategies, which are developed through planning and executed intentionally, and emergent strategies, which evolve through action, experimentation, and ongoing adaptation. In dynamic and uncertain environments, emergent strategies are especially relevant, as organizations must respond to new information and adjust direction over time. For early-stage

startups operating without stable markets, predictable customer behavior, or established routines, this concept offers a useful lens for interpreting how sales strategies might form—not as rigid plans, but as outcomes of continuous interaction with external stakeholders and internal constraints.

#### Strategy-as-Practice

The strategy-as-practice perspective emphasizes that strategy is not something organizations have, but something people do (Whittington, 1996). In this view, everyday actions like pitching, negotiating, and refining offers are strategic acts. This is especially relevant in early-stage startups, where the founder is often both strategist and salesperson. Sales conversations are not only about conversion but about sensemaking: understanding the market, interpreting customer needs, and identifying viable paths forward. This perspective supports the methodological choice to analyze how founders describe their sales work, as it reflects their evolving strategic thinking.

#### Entrepreneurial Capabilities in Action

In some cases, the ability to build trust, conduct consultative sales, or gain access through personal networks appeared to function as strategic capabilities. While this does not fully align with the traditional resource-based view (Barney, 1991), it suggests that certain founder-specific traits and relational skills can create differentiation, especially when product features are not yet mature. These capabilities may become strategic assets when consistently applied and hard to replicate.

Together, these perspectives support the idea that sales in early-stage B2B SaaS ventures is not simply operational. It is where strategy happens emergent, action-driven, and continuously adapted based on real-world interaction. This logic aligns closely with what is later described in this thesis as the Pasta Method, where founders test, learn, and adapt through direct engagement with the market rather than predefined execution.

## 3. Research Methodology

To examine the sales strategies used by lead entrepreneurs in entrepreneurial B2B startups during early growth and understand their perceived impact, this study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach. It involves semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs who meet the defined criteria. Through analysing their responses, the study aims to uncover insights into the sales tactics they employ and their views on how these strategies influence business growth.

### 3.1 Data Collection

To ensure a high-quality data collection process, we chose to focus on entrepreneurs within the Chalmers Ecosystem, which includes Chalmers University of Technology, Chalmers Ventures, and the Chalmers School of Entrepreneurship (CSE). This ecosystem provides direct access to early-stage ventures and entrepreneurs actively engaged in B2B sales and has previously shown high accessibility and receptivity in research on entrepreneurial practices.

Research has highlighted the importance of studying nascent ventures in their formative stages, as this period is critical in shaping long-term business strategy (Davidsson & Gordon, 2012). Early-stage decisions are often difficult to observe retrospectively and benefit from data collected close to the events themselves (Davidsson, 2015). The Chalmers Ecosystem thus offers a relevant and accessible sampling frame for this type of investigation. Our interview subjects were predominantly entrepreneurs engaged in B2B sales, most likely based in Sweden, though we did not limit participation geographically. The interviewing process was iterative and semi-structured, beginning with a predefined interview guide but allowing for follow-up questions driven by emerging themes. This structure enabled a more nuanced understanding of B2B sales strategies among entrepreneurial ventures.

Given practical constraints such as geographical distribution and scheduling, interviews were conducted in person when feasible, but primarily through digital platforms such as Teams or Zoom. All interviews were recorded, transcribed digitally, anonymised, and summarised to extract key takeaways.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

We used the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2012) to ensure our analysis directly addressed our research question. This approach involves identifying first-order categories from the transcripts, grouping these into second-order themes, and deriving overarching dimensions. It provides a structured way of moving from raw quotes to higher-level concepts and helps clarify both what strategies entrepreneurs use and how they perceive and adapt these over time.

AI tools were used in two ways during the data analysis process. First, we used AI-assisted transcription software to convert recorded interviews into text, enabling faster and more accurate preparation of the

empirical material. Second, we used AI support to help initially organise quotes into first-order categories, in line with the Gioia methodology. This step provided a preliminary structure for the coding process. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed and refined manually by the researchers to ensure alignment with the study context and maintain interpretive rigour. Final theme construction and analytical interpretation were based on iterative human judgment.

An example of how findings are structured using the Gioia method is shown below, see Table 2.

Overarching Dimension	Second-Order Themes	First-Order Categories
Sales Strategy Adaptation	Iterative Refinement	“We adjusted our sales pitch after the first meetings.”
		“We refined product demos based on early client feedback.”
	Channel Experimentation	“We experimented with email, LinkedIn, and calls to find what worked best.”
		“We tailored messaging when certain outreach methods resonated better than others.”

[Table 2]

### 3.3 Methodological Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the study relies on semi-structured interviews with a relatively small sample of founders from early-stage B2B SaaS ventures. While this enabled in-depth exploration of strategic behaviour and provided rich empirical material, the limited sample size restricts generalisability and does not allow for broad comparative analysis across sectors or geographies.

Second, the data collected is retrospective. Founders were asked to reflect on past decisions and strategy development processes, which may introduce recall bias or post-rationalisation. Their descriptions of how strategies evolved may be shaped by current outcomes or simplified in hindsight. To address this, the interviews included follow-up prompts to elicit concrete examples and emphasised process-level reflection rather than general conclusions.

Third, the analysis was conducted by researchers who are part of the same entrepreneurial environment as many of the participants. This insider position offered access and contextual familiarity, but it also introduces potential bias in interpretation. To reduce this risk, the interview material was reviewed collaboratively, and interpretations were grounded in repeated patterns across cases rather than singular accounts.

Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of the study means that the findings reflect a snapshot in time. While some participants described changes over months or years, these are reported experiences rather than observations made over time. A longitudinal design would offer stronger insight into how sales strategies are shaped, layered, and institutionalised over the course of a venture's development.

Finally, the study focuses on the earliest phases of sales activity. It does not account for how strategies evolve once product-market fit is more firmly established or how scaling efforts affect sales organisation. The findings are therefore most applicable to ventures in the early traction phase and should not be extrapolated beyond that context without further empirical validation.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Gioia Data Structure

The Gioia Method enabled a rigorous and transparent process of data analysis, where first-order concepts (grounded in the interviewees' own words and interpretations) were iteratively grouped into second-order themes (reflecting more abstract patterns across cases), and subsequently synthesized into higher-order aggregate dimensions (see figure 2 below). This approach allowed for the development of a grounded, yet theoretically informed understanding of how entrepreneurial sales strategies are formed and refined over time.

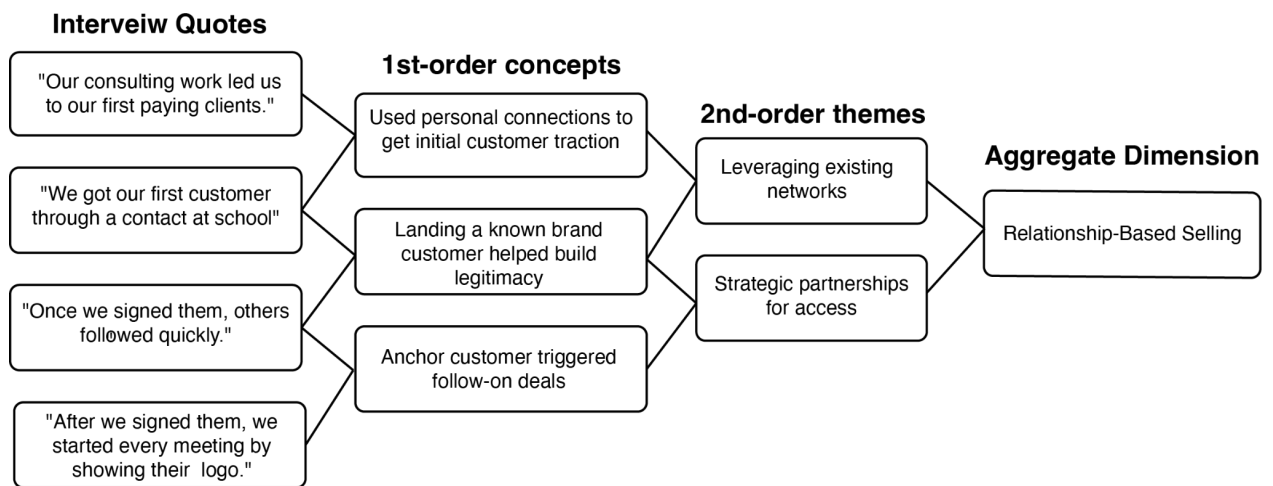


Figure 2. Simplified Gioia data structure illustrating the relationship between Interviewee quotes, first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions.

This figure serves as an example of how the Gioia methodology was applied in the study. Interview quotes were first coded into 1st-order concepts, then grouped into 2nd-order themes, and finally synthesized into the aggregate dimension "Relationship-Based Selling." This same bottom-up process was used to develop all other aggregate dimensions presented in the findings chapter. The example illustrates how meaning was constructed inductively from participant insights.

### 4.2 Interview Sample and Industry Context

To explore how early-stage B2B SaaS startups approach sales, Eight in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with founders from a variety of industries. All participants had direct responsibility for sales in the early phases of their company's growth and offered firsthand insight into sales challenges, tactics, and strategic decision-making.

The companies represented in the study operate in diverse B2B SaaS domains, including property management, construction technology, fintech, and pharmaceutical services. Despite differences in their customer bases and product offerings, all startups shared common traits: they operated with limited initial resources, were founder-led during the early sales phase, and had to navigate uncertainty around pricing, product fit, and market targeting.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or remotely via video conferencing tools such as Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. One interview was conducted live, while the remaining seven were held remotely. The semi-structured format ensured consistency in topic coverage, including pricing, outreach, product development, and customer relationships.

The table below summarizes the anonymized participant profiles:

Interviewee	Role	Industry Field	Interview Length
#1	Co-founder & CEO	Property	44 min
#2	Co-founder & CEO	Property	54 min
#3	Co-founder & CEO	Healthcare	48 min
#4	Co-founder & CEO	Property	53 min
#5	Co-founder & CEO	Financial	40 min
#6	Co-founder & CEO	Energy	52 min
#7	Co-founder & Chairman	Education	52 min
#8	Co-founder & CEO	LegalTech	37 min

*Table x: Overview of interview participants*

This table summarizes the eight B2B SaaS startups included in the study. Each participant is a founder who has also been directly responsible for early sales activities. Company names and identifying details have been anonymized, but industries are included to provide context for their strategic choices and to illustrate the variety across cases.

Additional information about the interviewees has been presented to the supervisor, who approved that details such as company names, the identity of the interviewees, and the age of the companies have been anonymized to protect respondent confidentiality.

## 4.3 Aggregate Dimensions

This section presents the eight aggregate dimensions identified through the analysis. Each dimension captures a key pattern in how early-stage B2B SaaS startups approached sales. The dimensions are based on insights shared by the interviewees and reflect how different tactics and decisions evolved across cases. Each one is supported by examples and quotes that illustrate how founders navigated the challenges of selling in uncertain and resource-constrained environments.

### 4.3.1 Relationship-Based Selling

This sales method captures the importance of pre-existing relationships and network-driven access in securing early customers. This theme emerged across all interviews and was particularly emphasized in the initial stages of company development, when credibility and trust had yet to be established through the product itself.

Founders often relied on their personal network, professional connections, and previous experiences in the industry to gain access to key decision-makers. These warm introductions provided not only an initial point of contact but also acted as a form of social validation that reduced the perceived risk for early adopters. In several cases, the founders' background in consulting or accelerator programs played a key role in opening doors.

In one example, a founder described how their previous consulting work allowed them to identify a specific use case and approach clients directly with a tailored solution. Another founder emphasized the role of university networks and early collaborators in enabling the first sales meetings:

*“Our first customer came from a connection I had at the university. Without that intro, we wouldn't have been taken seriously.” – (Interviewee #1)*

Similarly, one startup secured its initial bank partnership due to the visibility and success of its consumer-facing app, which attracted inbound interest from financial institutions:

*“We didn't even approach the banks at first. They came to us because they saw we were solving a real problem that they couldn't.” – (Interviewee #5)*

These early connections often extended into strategic partnerships. In one case, securing a customer with good recognition as a first customer led to rapid follow-up deals with other customers who saw the first one's involvement as a credibility signal. This cascade effect was noted by several interviewees and formed a crucial foundation for scaling.

*“Once we had \*\*\*\*\*, everything changed. Others started contacting us because they didn't want to be left behind.” – (Interviewee #4)*

Over time, the reliance on personal connections began to shift toward more structured sales processes. However, even in later stages, relationship-building remained a core aspect of enterprise sales strategy, particularly in complex or high-risk industries like fintech. One founder explained:

*“Even when we had a sales team, they had to build personal relationships. In our industry, deals happen over dinners and long-term trust, not over automated emails.” – (Interviewee #5)*

In summary, the dimension of Relationship-Based Selling reveals that in the absence of brand recognition or validated products, startups often turn to personal credibility and network strength as a substitute for traditional sales collateral. This approach helps them bridge the trust gap with early customers, establish reference accounts, and gain initial traction in the market.

#### 4.3.2 Sell First, Build Later (SFBL)

This strategy involves attempting to validate the market by securing customer commitments before developing the full product. Founders described it as a way to reduce risk, increase capital efficiency, and ensure that development efforts were aligned with actual customer demand.

In multiple cases, interviewees explicitly stated that they sold products that were not yet built, sometimes using slide decks, prototypes, or minimal functional demos. One founder recounted:

*“We sold the idea before it was even functional. Just some mockups and a PowerPoint presentation. But that was enough to secure a pilot.” – (Interviewee #2)*

This pre-selling approach was not just a lean tactic, but a philosophical stance on how to reduce waste and focus only on what the market demanded. The logic was simple: if no one is willing to pay for the solution as it is described, then there’s no point in building it.

Another founder noted that early customers were surprisingly understanding, especially when the need was strong and the alternative solutions were outdated or lacking:

*“They knew we didn’t have everything ready, but they still wanted to move forward. We promised to build it during onboarding, and we did.” – (Interviewee #4)*

However, this approach was not without challenges. One founder shared that while selling before building worked in theory, it created tension with technical teams and required careful expectation management with clients:

*“You can’t oversell. We had to be very clear about what would be ready when. Otherwise, it would damage the trust we were trying to build.” – (Interviewee #3)*

In most cases, the SFBL approach evolved into a more structured delivery pipeline where development was prioritized based on signed deals or serious sales conversations. Founders described the importance of flexibility and transparency in this model.

### 4.3.3 Pilot Programs

The fifth aggregate dimension, Pilot Programs, refers to the widespread use of low-risk entry models such as freemium versions, time-limited trials, or limited-scope pilots to encourage adoption, particularly among enterprise customers.

Many of the founders described pilot programs as a strategic tool to overcome buyer hesitation. In highly regulated or conservative industries, risk aversion was a major barrier to early deals. Offering a trial version, a test period, or ramp-up discounts provided a non-committal way for customers to experience the value of the product.

*“We never offered a full freemium model, but we allowed them to try it for a month with limited features. It helped them justify the internal discussion.” – (Interviewee #4)*

Some startups tested the freemium model but eventually pivoted away from it. One founder recalled launching with a freemium offering that failed to convert into paying customers and ultimately required significant support resources.

*“Freemium looked good on paper, but the conversion was terrible. It just wasn’t the right kind of signal for our product.” – (Interviewee #1)*

Instead, most settled on controlled pilot programs where the scope and timeline were clear. These pilots often served two functions: (1) to generate internal buy-in at the customer’s organization, and (2) to refine onboarding and implementation processes on the startup’s side.

*“We used pilots not as giveaways, but as structured learning. We tested onboarding flows, documentation, customer support, everything.” – (Interviewee #4)*

Ramp-up pricing was another tactic employed, especially in large deals. One founder described a strategy where customers paid a reduced rate during the adoption phase, with fees increasing as usage and integration grew over time.

*“In the beginning, we didn’t charge full price. We knew the onboarding would be resource-intensive. But once they were up and running, we raised the price to reflect the value.” – (Interviewee #5)*

Interestingly, several founders such as interviewee 2,3,4,5, 7 and 8 framed pilot programs not just as sales tools but as product discovery tools, allowing them to observe how customers interacted with the platform

and what features they valued most. In this sense, pilots bridged the gap between consultative selling and customer-driven development. Pilot Programs served as a critical de-risking mechanism that enabled both customers and startups to build confidence before making long-term commitments. They were particularly effective in regulated industries, complex deployments, or when internal alignment at the client organization was a hurdle.

#### 4.3.4 Consultative Selling

This approach highlights the way entrepreneurs engaged deeply with their customers to understand their needs, co-develop solutions, and position the offering as a tailored value-add rather than a standard product. This form of selling was particularly emphasized in contexts involving longer sales cycles, enterprise customers, or regulatory complexity.

Consultative selling differs from transactional sales approaches in that it requires high levels of dialogue, discovery, and empathy. Founders often acted more like advisors than vendors, helping clients articulate their problems and suggesting how their product could provide value. One founder explained:

*“In the early days, we spent a lot of time just listening. Customers didn’t always know what they needed, but they could describe the pain, and we helped them figure out the rest.” – (Interviewee #3)*

Rather than presenting a fixed feature list, entrepreneurs framed conversations around outcomes, use cases, and long-term goals. Discovery calls and assessment tools were common, not only to qualify leads but also to better shape the narrative and scope of the offering. One company even created storytelling frameworks to allow customers to explain their current situation:

*“We didn’t ask what features they wanted. We asked them to tell stories about their workflows. That told us everything we needed to know.” – (Interviewee #3)*

Another recurring theme was the importance of strategic pricing. Instead of pricing based on cost or competitors, several interviewees described efforts to understand the customer’s internal value metrics such as money saved, time reduced, or risk avoided and then priced accordingly. This iterative approach to pricing often involved trial-and-error and post-sale feedback:

*“We priced our product based on how much money we saved them, not how much it cost us to build. That took some time to figure out, but it changed everything.” – (Interviewee #6)*

Over time, consultative selling also became a way to filter ideal customers. Rather than selling to anyone who showed interest, founders began using discovery questions and use case validation as a method to determine product fit. This process not only increased conversion rates but also reduced churn:

*“We started saying no to leads who didn’t really fit. That was scary at first, but it paid off. Our customers were happier, and support costs went down.” – (Interviewee #5)*

In industries with long decision cycles or multiple stakeholders (e.g., banking), consultative approaches also helped manage internal politics and build coalitions within the buyer organization. Founders described these sales as being less about the product and more about navigating complex decision-making environments.

In sum, Consultative Selling reflects a pattern where sales conversations are used not just to persuade, but to educate, qualify, and co-create. It allows startups to differentiate themselves in crowded markets by positioning their product as a strategic partner, one that understands and adapts to the unique needs of each customer.

#### 4.3.5 Outbound Sales

While many early deals were driven by relationships and inbound interest, nearly all founders described a shift toward more proactive outbound sales as their companies grew. This aggregate dimension, Outbound Sales, includes cold calling, email outreach, SDR (Sales Development Representative) teams, and structured campaigns aimed at engaging prospects who were previously unaware of the offering.

Outbound sales often emerged after the initial traction phase, when companies sought to expand beyond their immediate network. Founders acknowledged that outbound sales required discipline, experimentation, and often failure before results materialized.

*“We did cold outreach early, but it was a mess. Too many segments, unclear ICP, no script. It was only later, when we had a clearer focus, that outbound started working.” – (Interviewee #8)*

Initial outbound efforts were usually founder-led and manual. In one case, the team compiled spreadsheets of potential clients, divided up the leads, and made calls themselves. Another founder shared that while early outbound sales were inefficient, they provided valuable feedback about positioning and messaging.

*“Even when no one replied, we learned what subject lines worked, what made people open emails, and what didn’t.” – (Interviewee #8)*

As companies matured, outbound efforts became more structured. Some founders hired SDRs or regional sales reps to scale outreach efforts. Others invested in CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems and outbound automation tools. Targeting also improved, one company narrowed its outreach to a single use case or segment per campaign, resulting in higher response rates and better data on conversion.

*“We learned to test one market at a time. Not spray and pray. That’s when outbound started making sense.” – (Interviewee #4)*

Outbound also served as a mechanism for validating new customer segments or international markets. One founder described using cold outreach in the Benelux and UK regions as a way to test whether local banks were interested in the same value proposition that worked in Sweden:

*“Before hiring locally, we just emailed a bunch of decision-makers to see what stuck. Once we got some interest, we sent people out.” – (Interviewee #5)*

Despite its potential, several founders warned about the cost and time required to make outbound work. In complex industries, cold outreach alone was rarely enough to close deals, it had to be followed by deep relationship-building and a long consultative process.

Outbound sales, then, emerged as a scalable channel, but one that required strategic focus, infrastructure, and tight alignment with the company’s broader positioning. It marked the transition from founder-driven sales to repeatable processes, a hallmark of growing B2B SaaS firms.

#### 4.3.6 Sales Strategy Refinement

Throughout the interviews, another key theme was the continuous refinement of the startup’s sales strategy. This sixth aggregate dimension, Sales Strategy Refinement, captures how founders evolved their approach over time based on internal learning, market feedback, and strategic pivots.

Most startups began with a broad target audience or a loosely defined ideal customer profile (ICP). In the early stages, this was often due to uncertainty, optimism, or a desire to test multiple markets. However, over time, a clearer understanding of the ICP emerged, often through trial and error.

*“At first, we tried to sell to everyone. It was chaotic. Eventually, we learned that one use case worked best and focused all efforts there.” – (Interviewee #4)*

For example, one company began as a B2C app before shifting entirely to B2B, following unsolicited inbound interest from banks. The pivot required not just a change in business model, but a rethinking of sales messaging, pricing, and product roadmap.

*“We didn’t even consider B2B at first. But when the banks came to us, we saw the opportunity and changed direction.” – (Interviewee #5)*

Other founders described missteps in international expansion such as entering multiple markets simultaneously without sufficient local traction. These mistakes were often cited as expensive lessons that led to more focused scaling strategies in later stages.

*“Being in five countries at once, with only one customer per market, was a nightmare. We should’ve gone deep before going wide.” – (Interviewee #6)*

Several founders also reflected on the emotional difficulty of refining sales strategy. Saying no to certain leads, walking away from large but unfocused opportunities, or narrowing the market felt counterintuitive in growth-oriented environments. However, in retrospect, these decisions were seen as pivotal.

*“Turning down a big lead because they didn’t fit used to feel wrong. Now, it’s standard practice. We only chase what aligns with our vision.” – (Interviewee #2)*

This dimension highlights the entrepreneurial capacity for self-reflection, strategic focus, and adaptability, traits that seem essential for navigating the uncertainty of early-stage B2B sales. Sales strategy was not fixed, but rather something continuously iterated in response to experience and evidence.

#### 4.3.7 Customer-Driven Development

This dimension emerged directly from the interviews, rather than being predefined in the theoretical framework. Founders consistently described how sales conversations and early customer interactions influenced product decisions and development priorities. While some startups began with a fixed product vision, most followed an adaptive approach in which feedback from early users shaped everything from UI adjustments to long-term feature roadmaps.

One of the clearest examples came from a founder who explained how onboarding large customers led to new technical and compliance requirements that hadn’t been part of the original plan:

*“We thought we were solving for usability. But when the banks came onboard, it became clear that we needed to address security and compliance first. That’s what unlocked further deals.” – (Interviewee #5)*

In some cases, founders described building features in real time, during onboarding or pilot phases, to respond to customer needs and expectations. This “just-in-time” development was resource-intensive but perceived as crucial for building trust and showing commitment.

*“We had developers sitting in on sales calls. That way we could deliver features while the client was still excited about the project.” – (Interviewee #7)*

However, not all customer feedback led to action. Several interviewees noted the importance of interpreting feedback rather than reacting to it literally. Rather than building every requested feature, they sought to understand the underlying need and find scalable solutions.

*“Customers would ask for X, but what they really needed was Y. Our job was to decode that and find a way to deliver without breaking the product.” – (Interviewee #2)*

Over time, teams became more deliberate about which customer voices they listened to. Enterprise clients with high stakes and long-term value often had more influence than smaller accounts. Some founders even described segmenting customer feedback and weighting it differently during planning sessions.

This dimension also overlaps with other themes, especially Consultative Selling and Pilot Programs, where product feedback often emerged through structured engagements like discovery calls or trial implementations. In many ways, Customer-Driven Development was not a separate phase from sales, but an ongoing process embedded in the sales experience itself. This dimension reveals that for early-stage SaaS startups, product development is rarely divorced from the commercial journey. Instead, it is co-created in tandem with the customer, based on real-world problems, evolving requirements, and shared experimentation.

#### 4.3.8 Sales Execution Strategy

Similarly to customer-driven development, this dimension emerged from the interviews rather than from prior theory. Founders reflected on how their approach to sales execution evolved as their ventures matured. In the earliest stages, most sales were founder-led, relying on personal relationships, ad hoc communication, and improvisation. As customer bases expanded, however, many began formalizing their sales efforts by introducing repeatable processes, specialized roles, and supporting tools.

This evolution in sales execution was described by several interviewees and included common steps such as:

- ❖ Implementing CRMs to track leads and follow-ups
- ❖ Creating standardized pitch materials
- ❖ Hiring dedicated SDRs or sales reps
- ❖ Building comp plans and quotas
- ❖ Segmenting markets to focus team efforts

These practices were not universal but reflect patterns shared by multiple founders as they scaled their sales operations beyond the initial founder-led phase.

Initially, most sales efforts were highly personal and intuitive. Founders relied on their instincts, experience, and persistence to close early deals. But as the need for scale and consistency grew, so did the pressure to formalize processes.

*“In the beginning, it was all hustle. No scripts, no CRM. Just us, calling people and figuring it out. But eventually, that stopped working.” – (Interviewee #3)*

Several startups developed playbooks, internal documents that codified messaging, objections handling, lead qualification criteria, and onboarding steps. These playbooks helped shorten sales cycles and made it easier to train new hires.

*“Once we had a repeatable playbook, we could bring in new reps and get them productive much faster. It also helped us understand what was actually working.” – (Interviewee #4)*

Some founders implemented structured lead qualification frameworks, such as BANT (Budget, Authority, Need, Timing) to evaluate which opportunities to pursue. Others described refining their metrics, moving from top-of-funnel vanity metrics to more meaningful indicators like hours-to-close, trial-to-paid conversion, and retention rate.

*“We stopped caring about the number of leads. Instead, we focused on how many hours it took to close a deal and whether that effort was worth it.” – (Interviewee #8)*

Several companies built internal tools or dashboards to track sales performance, and some even created incentives based on deal quality rather than volume. One interviewee described their transition from founder selling to hiring an experienced sales lead and building a regionally distributed team.

*“I knew I had to step back. Selling was taking up all my time. So we brought in someone who had scaled a SaaS sales org before and gave them room to build.” – (Interviewee #7)*

This transition was not always smooth. Founders often struggled with letting go of control, balancing automation with personalization, and maintaining the agility that helped them succeed in the first place. Nonetheless, the move toward structured execution was seen as a necessary milestone for sustainable growth. This dimension illustrates how successful startups move from “figuring it out” to “scaling it up” building systems, tools, and teams that allow them to grow beyond the founder’s individual capacity.

## 4.4 Triggers of Sales Strategy Change

Although individual sales strategies varied across startups, a unifying pattern was that no strategy remained fixed. Founders frequently described how their approach evolved over time in response to changing internal conditions, customer reactions, and growing market insight. This section presents three core types of change-driving factors that emerged from the data.

### Customer Response as a Feedback Loop

Customer reactions to early sales efforts often triggered immediate or progressive shifts in approach. For some, a lack of engagement in initial outreach signaled poor targeting, while for others, positive feedback prompted a decision to scale a particular tactic. This feedback loop became a central mechanism for testing and adjusting strategies.

*“We made a lot of nice strategies. Then we joined an accelerator and the mentor said, ‘How many are paying for this?’ And after that, it was just about picking up the phone.” – (Interviewee #1)*

This quote reflects the move from theoretical planning to practical adaptation based on market response — a common turning point for several participants.

#### Resource Limitations Forcing Tactical Choices

Financial and time constraints also played a significant role in shifting strategies. Manual outreach methods or consultative calls became difficult to scale as teams grew busier, prompting a transition toward automation, delegation, or more structured outbound routines.

*“We couldn’t afford to do the fancy stuff. So we just called everyone. In hindsight, I wish we had done that earlier.” – (Interviewee #1)*

Bootstrapped conditions often forced founders to drop ineffective or resource-heavy methods, reinforcing lean experimentation and iterative learning.

#### Maturation and Strategic Repositioning

As products matured or customer segments became clearer, the sales process also had to evolve. Many founders reported that they started by selling indirectly (e.g., via architects or consultants) before shifting to direct outreach once they had stronger references and clearer product-market fit.

*“In the beginning, we sold to architects to get warm introductions to end customers. Now we call the decision-makers directly.” – (Interviewee #1)*

This transition was frequently tied to better internal clarity about ideal customer profiles and the value proposition, leading to more confident, scalable sales motions.

## 4.5 The Emergence of The Pasta Method

While the previous section examined the key triggers that led founders to adapt their sales strategies, this section presents a conceptual metaphor that captures the broader pattern underlying those shifts. Across all interviews, founders described an iterative, trial-and-error approach to sales which rarely followed a fixed process, but rather testing tactics in real time to see what gained traction. This behavior resembled “throwing pasta at the wall to see what sticks,” and that image became the foundation for what is referred to in this thesis as The Pasta Method.

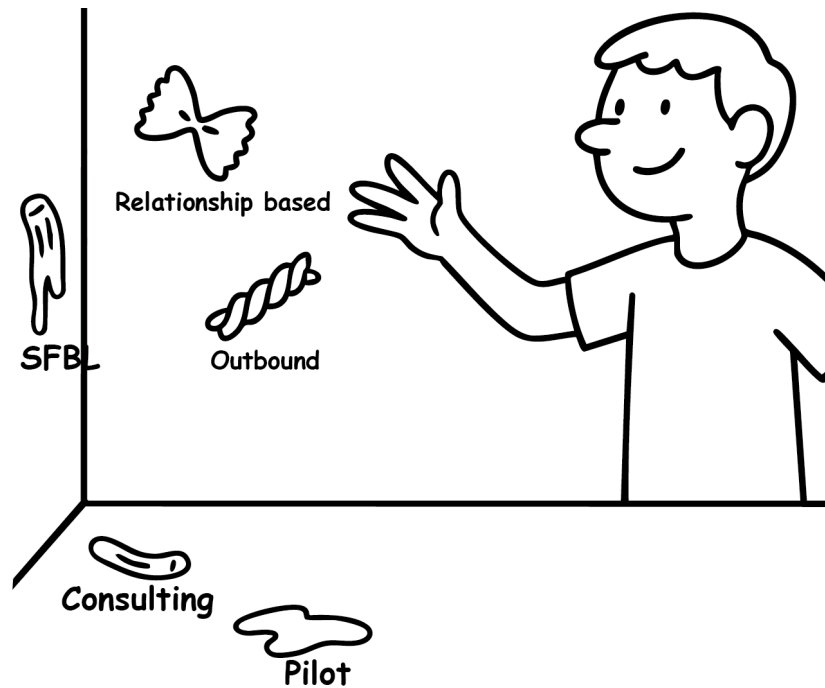


Figure 3. Illustration of the Pasta Method: founders experimented with multiple sales tactics to see what stuck.

At its core, the Pasta Method describes an emergent approach to sales strategy in which tactics are not chosen from a predefined framework, but discovered through action. Rather than deciding in advance whether to use outbound, pilots, or consultative selling, founders often tried multiple approaches in parallel or in quick succession. Decisions were driven by context, resource availability, and real-time customer response, not by theoretical models or structured planning.

*“We tested everything from DMs, emails, cold calls and then followed up on what actually worked.” – (Interviewee #8)*

This mindset reflects a high tolerance for uncertainty and an emphasis on learning through doing. Just as undercooked pasta slides off the wall while the properly cooked piece sticks, founders were looking for early signals of interest, engagement, or conversion. Approaches that failed were quickly dropped or modified, while those that gained traction were repeated, refined, or scaled.

Importantly, the Pasta Method is not a rejection of strategic thinking. Rather, it reflects a different form of strategy formation—one rooted in effectual reasoning, where founders act based on available means, test assumptions, and adapt direction based on feedback. It also resonates with the concept of emergent strategy (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), in which actions and patterns come before formal plans.

In this way, the Pasta Method captures the essence of how sales strategies in early-stage B2B SaaS startups are actually formed. Not through deliberate execution of fixed models, but through a messy, adaptive, and often intuitive process of experimentation. This metaphor not only reflects the empirical findings of this study, but also frames the interpretation that follows in the Discussion chapter.

This metaphor helps frame the empirical reality of sales strategy as something emergent, reactive, and shaped by learning through doing. The Pasta Method will be developed further in the next chapter, where it is used as an analytical lens to interpret the role of experimentation in early-stage startup sales.

## 4.6 Summary of Findings

The analysis reveals a multifaceted and evolving set of sales strategies employed by early-stage B2B SaaS startups. Rather than relying on a single model, founders combine and adapt different tactics over time, influenced by market dynamics, customer feedback, product maturity, and organizational capacity.

Eight aggregate dimensions emerged across the data:

1. Relationship-Based Selling – leveraging personal networks and credibility
2. Sell First, Build Later – validating demand before building
3. Consultative Selling – deep customer discovery and tailored pitching
4. Outbound Sales – structured cold outreach and market testing
5. Pilot Programs – low-risk trials to reduce barriers to adoption
6. Sales Strategy Refinement – iterating focus, pricing, and targeting
7. Customer-Driven Development – building features based on sales feedback
8. Sales Execution Strategy – evolving from founder-led to scalable operations

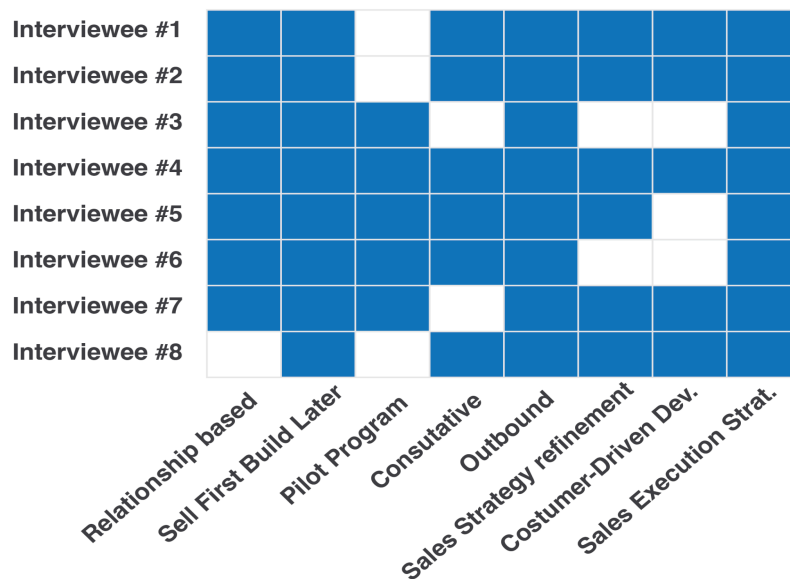


Figure 4. Mapping of Interviewee Contributions to Sales Strategy Dimensions

This matrix presents which interviewees provided supporting evidence for each of the eight identified sales strategy dimensions. Filled cells indicate that a given founder described actions or reflections aligning with that dimension. The table illustrates both common patterns (e.g., widespread use of relationship-based selling and SFBL) and selective strategies that varied based on company maturity, product readiness, and context.

These strategies were not used in isolation, but as part of an adaptive toolkit where founders learned by doing, responded to feedback, and refined their approach accordingly. Some patterns such as starting with relationships or selling before building were almost universal. Others, like outbound sales or formalized execution, emerged later in the company lifecycle or were more context-dependent.

A unifying pattern across all interviews was the experimental nature of sales strategy development. Founders often described trying multiple approaches in parallel, keeping those that gained traction and replacing those that did not. However, this experimentation was not random. In many cases, founders consciously applied strategies they believed could resonate based on prior experience, contextual knowledge, or early signals from the market.

This iterative and responsive behavior is captured in what this study terms “The Pasta Method”, a metaphor that reflects a process of testing and refining rather than blind guessing. Whether it was a pilot framing, a pricing model, or an outbound message, approaches were adopted, adjusted, or abandoned based on observed customer response. While some tactics were exploratory, others reflected deliberate bets made under uncertainty, consistent with an effectual mindset that evolved as customer understanding improved.

## 5. Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings of the study by connecting them to relevant theoretical perspectives and previous research. The purpose is to deepen the understanding of how early-stage B2B SaaS ventures design and adapt their sales strategies to support growth. Emphasis is placed on how strategies are discovered through action, shaped by context, and iteratively adjusted over time. The structure of the chapter follows four main themes: strategic action under uncertainty, the practical use and boundaries of the Sell First, Build Later (SFBL) approach, a metaphorical interpretation of iterative strategy development, and practical implications for entrepreneurs seeking early sales traction. The chapter concludes with methodological reflections.

### 5.1 Navigating Sales through Strategic Action

The findings show that early sales strategies in B2B SaaS ventures were often developed through repeated engagement rather than structured planning. Several founders described shifting their messaging, changing pricing logic, or narrowing their segment focus based on how customers responded. In one case, a founder described selling across five countries with little traction before realising the need to focus deeply in a single market (Interviewee #6). Another explained how subject lines and pitch formats were adjusted weekly based on response rates (Interviewee #8). These examples reflect a pattern of acting first and learning through response, rather than choosing a direction in advance.

This approach reflects what Sarasvathy (2001) describes as effectual logic: a mode of entrepreneurial action where decision making is grounded in available means rather than pre-set goals. In the context of B2B sales, this translates to starting with who the founders know, what knowledge or credibility they possess, and how they can frame a relevant value proposition in conversation with early prospects. Several interviewees emphasised that there was no established playbook for how to approach their customers, only iterative testing.

Interviewee #8 illustrated this trial-and-error process: “We did cold outreach early, but it was a mess. Too many segments, unclear ICP, no script. It was only later, when we had a clearer focus, that outbound started working.”

This form of action-first learning echoes Ringqvist and Krutmeijer’s (2022) findings, where early-stage ventures were found to shift commercial logic over time as they explored what resonated in different customer dialogues. In the present study, strategy was not perceived as something developed and then executed, but as something discovered through repeated attempts. A common behaviour across cases was to start with a narrower approach, often relationship-based or network-driven, and then iterate toward more structured outreach or process-oriented methods as internal clarity and market understanding increased.

Interviewee #4 described this progression: “At first, we tried to sell to everyone. It was chaotic. Eventually, we learned that one use case worked best and focused all efforts there.”

Interviewee #3 explained how subtle feedback guided refinement: “In the early days, we spent a lot of time just listening. Customers didn’t always know what they needed, but they could describe the pain, and we helped them figure out the rest.”

These actions are also consistent with the Lean Startup principle of validated learning (Ries, 2011), but with a notable distinction: in several cases, the learning took place not through MVP testing, but through human interaction. Instead of testing product features, founders tested narratives, value promises, and potential ways of working with customers. This reflects the relational and trust-based nature of early-stage B2B selling, where the substance of what is being sold often remains fluid, and the credibility of the founder plays a central role.

Furthermore, the strategic action observed was rarely isolated. Founders typically layered approaches depending on what was accessible or perceived as promising. For instance, Interviewee #5 shared: “We thought we were solving for usability. But when the banks came onboard, it became clear that we needed to address security and compliance first. That’s what unlocked further deals.”

This approach reflects a broader shift from strategy as planning to strategy as practice. Founders were not executing predefined plans but building a working understanding of what might create traction through repeated engagement. Strategy emerged through interaction, reflection, and adaptation. This learning-through-action logic reinforces the notion that strategy, in early-stage ventures, is inseparable from doing.

What differentiates these early sales efforts from traditional planning models is their proximity to uncertainty. Most founders did not know what would work until they tried it. Rather than choosing between alternatives based on forecasts, they relied on real-world signals and ongoing correction. The actions they took were often small and reversible, consistent with the effectual principle of Affordable Loss. The most effective strategies were not designed in advance, but emerged through repeated engagement with the market and reflection on the results. Interviewee #1 illustrated this shift: “We made a lot of nice strategies. Then we joined an accelerator and the mentor said, ‘How many are paying for this?’ And after that, it was just about picking up the phone.”

In this way, early sales work was not only about generating leads or validating hypotheses, but also about building internal clarity. By acting early and interpreting results, founders sharpened their own understanding of the offer, the segment, and the appropriate positioning. This dynamic underlines the central role of action in shaping strategy, particularly under conditions where uncertainty is high and information is incomplete.

These findings collectively suggest that early sales work functions as a discovery mechanism that is as much about internal alignment as it is about external traction. In a context where the product, audience, and message are all in motion, acting becomes the primary way to make sense of the commercial environment. The sales process, then, is not simply a channel to the market but a structuring device through which the

business takes shape. This broader view underscores why sales activity should not be postponed until readiness, but embraced as a core input to early-stage venture development.

## 5.2 Rethinking Sell First, Build Later

Sell First, Build Later (SFBL) emerged in the data as a recurring approach used by founders to validate early-stage demand, build customer engagement, and reduce risk. It was not applied uniformly across cases, nor always consciously, but it functioned as a logic that enabled startups to explore value creation without full product readiness. The approach is grounded in Lean Startup theory, particularly the principles of iterating based on feedback and minimising resource expenditure before demand is confirmed.

The practice of SFBL varied. In some cases, founders sold using only mockups, slide decks, or partially functional prototypes. As Interviewee #2 stated, "We sold the idea before it was even functional. Just some mockups and a PowerPoint presentation. But that was enough to secure a pilot."

This tactic was not solely about securing revenue. It also acted as a discovery tool, allowing ventures to refine product concepts through real-world interactions. In these instances, founders positioned themselves not as vendors of a finished product, but as co-creators of a solution in response to a verified need. As Interviewee #4 explained, "They knew we didn't have everything ready, but they still wanted to move forward. We promised to build it during onboarding, and we did." However, SFBL was not without challenges. One founder noted that while selling before building worked in theory, it created tension with technical teams and required careful expectation management with clients. Interviewee #3 reflected, "You can't oversell. We had to be very clear about what would be ready when. Otherwise, it would damage the trust we were trying to build."

This underscores the importance of transparency, as also stressed by Barreng and Krutmeijer (2021), who distinguish SFBL from more speculative MVP strategies by its emphasis on customer collaboration and honesty about product maturity. SFBL is not merely an execution tactic. For some founders, it functioned as an underlying mindset that shaped how they viewed product development, sales, and customer engagement. This reflects Odin and Ringqvist's (2022) action-based SFBL framework, which emphasises building trust, communicating transparently, and aligning stakeholder incentives. In most cases, the SFBL approach evolved into a more structured delivery pipeline where development was prioritised based on signed deals or serious sales conversations. Founders described the importance of flexibility and communication in this model. SFBL was also frequently layered with consultative selling or pilot programs, which allowed founders to adapt based on customer feedback and stage of the sales process.

The findings suggest that SFBL, when used with care and transparency, can be an effective tool for navigating early sales. It enables market validation before committing extensive resources, aligns with effectual principles of working with available means, and facilitates co-creation with early customers. At the same time, it requires attention to context, communication, and follow-through in order to maintain trust and convert early interest into long-term traction.

### 5.3 Strategy Experimentation and Contextual Fit (The Pasta Method)

The findings demonstrate that founders did not rely on a single predefined sales strategy. Instead, they approached early-stage sales through experimentation, testing different tactics in parallel and adjusting based on the response they received. This behaviour was not presented as formal experimentation but rather as a practical way to learn what gained traction. Founders tried multiple approaches across different contexts, assessing which ones resonated most with customers.

Several founders described applying a broad outreach approach, engaging different customer segments and using varied messaging styles in order to observe what triggered engagement. As Interviewee #4 explained, "At first, we tried to sell to everyone. It was chaotic. Eventually, we learned that one use case worked best and focused all efforts there." Another participant, Interviewee #8, described how early outreach served as a testing ground: "Even when no one replied, we learned what subject lines worked, what made people open emails, and what didn't."

This adaptive behaviour is summarised in this study through the metaphor of the Pasta Method. While not a term introduced by the participants themselves, it captures the recurring pattern that emerged across interviews. The image of "throwing pasta at the wall to see what sticks" was used to describe how founders tested tactics to identify which ones generated movement, such as booked meetings, positive feedback, or expressions of interest. As Interviewee #8 put it, "We tested everything from DMs, emails, cold calls and then followed up on what actually worked."

This mindset reflects a high tolerance for uncertainty and an emphasis on learning through doing. Just as undercooked pasta slides off the wall while properly cooked pasta sticks, founders interpreted customer response as a signal of contextual fit. Approaches that failed were quickly dropped or modified, while those that showed potential were repeated, refined, or scaled. This experimentation also extended beyond outreach to include pricing strategies and customer segmentation. Some founders began with a freemium model and adjusted it based on feedback. Interviewee #1 shared, "Freemium looked good on paper, but the conversion was terrible. It just wasn't the right kind of signal for our product."

Similarly, geographical expansion was sometimes approached through light testing before resource investment. Interviewee #5 explained, "Before hiring locally, we just emailed a bunch of decision makers to see what stuck. Once we got some interest, we sent people out."

The Pasta Method thus captures not only the logic of trial and error but the interpretive nature of strategy formation. Founders described sensing which narratives resonated, where engagement deepened, and how different framings produced different responses. Across cases, experimentation was not random. It was guided by intuition, available means, and early signals from the market.

This logic also resonates with effectual reasoning. Rather than designing a strategy in advance and executing it, founders acted based on what they had, observed the outcomes, and adjusted their direction accordingly. This approach enabled ventures to build clarity about product market fit, customer segment, and sales approach in real time. In early-stage B2B SaaS ventures, this process of repeated testing and refinement functioned as the core of strategy development. Founders built their understanding through interaction, learning what stuck and using those patterns to structure their next steps. The Pasta Method offers a metaphor that makes visible this iterative, learning-oriented logic. A logic not of rigid planning, but of adaptation, discovery, and fit through real world engagement.

## 5.4 Strategic Learning Through Sales Execution

This section builds on the prior findings but shifts focus to the role of sales not just as a means of discovery, but as an engine for aligning growth efforts with strategic learning. The data shows that as early-stage B2B SaaS ventures navigate uncertainty, sales becomes tightly intertwined with decision-making, internal prioritisation, and how founders interpret customer and market signals to set direction.

Rather than identifying one optimal strategy, the cases suggest that successful sales efforts were grounded in responsiveness to feedback, contextual adaptation, and close integration with product and strategy. These patterns align with the logic of effectuation (Saravathy, 2001), which frames entrepreneurial action as shaped by available means, a willingness to iterate, and the ability to adapt goals based on learning. Founders did not wait for full clarity before engaging the market, nor did they treat sales as a downstream execution task. Instead, sales became a method for structuring the venture's direction through real-time learning. Interviewee #2 said "Turning down a big lead because they didn't fit used to feel wrong. Now, it's standard practice. We only chase what aligns with our vision." This type of selectivity marks a departure from the initial exploratory mode described in earlier chapters. Here, the focus shifts toward refining positioning, identifying strategic customers, and building sustainable delivery structures.

The practice of selling before full readiness, as discussed in the Sell First, Build Later (SFBL) chapter, continues here but with a different emphasis. Rather than validating demand, the emphasis becomes shaping what gets built and for whom. Founders spoke of sales calls guiding prioritisation and revealing internal misalignments. Interviewee #7 shared: "We had developers sitting in on sales calls. That way we could deliver features while the client was still excited about the project." This blurring of product and sales roles reinforces the idea that early-stage structures are fluid and that learning is embedded in doing.

Sales also played a role in filtering and focusing the venture's scope. Interviewee #5 explained: "We started saying no to leads who didn't really fit. That was scary at first, but it paid off. Our customers were happier, and support costs went down." In this sense, sales moved beyond acquisition to become a mechanism for alignment and operational control. These practices echo the Pilot in the Plane principle from effectuation, which stresses that entrepreneurs are not merely passengers of market forces but actors shaping the future through choice and commitment.

Strategically, these actions align with the notion of emergent strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Founders did not craft detailed plans in advance. Instead, they engaged with the market, took action, and interpreted outcomes to guide future moves. Sales became a site where strategy was enacted, assessed, and adjusted. This interpretation aligns with the strategy as practice perspective (Whittington, 1996), which positions strategy not as a formal product but as an evolving pattern of activity. Interviewee #3 “In the early days, we spent a lot of time just listening. Customers didn’t always know what they needed, but they could describe the pain, and we helped them figure out the rest.” This consultative approach not only helped refine the value proposition but also informed product priorities. Sales conversations acted as informal discovery sessions that revealed real customer problems, allowing the team to co-develop solutions that aligned with both demand and feasibility.

Finally, founder involvement was key. Direct sales engagements allowed founders to observe market responses, adjust narratives, and align internal teams. As the venture matured, this hands-on involvement gradually gave way to more formalised sales structures. Still, the legacy of that founder-led learning remained embedded in how the business continued to prioritise and deliver value. This transition reflects lean startup thinking, where processes evolve in response to validated learning rather than up-front planning.

In sum, this chapter highlights how sales evolved from a discovery tool into a strategic mechanism for execution, resource allocation, and focus. It was not merely about finding product-market fit, as explored earlier, but about using sales interactions to make sense of uncertainty, reinforce alignment, and shape scalable models. Sales in this view is not an endpoint but a central, ongoing practice through which growth-oriented entrepreneurs steer the venture toward opportunity and away from distraction.

## 5.5 Methodological Reflections and Limitations

This section outlines key methodological reflections and limitations of the study. The aim of the research was to explore how early-stage B2B SaaS ventures form sales strategy in uncertain contexts. A qualitative, exploratory design was chosen to surface rich, context-sensitive insights grounded in the lived experiences of founders. The focus was on uncovering how strategy is practiced and shaped in situ, rather than prescribing generalisable frameworks.

One strength of the study is the access gained through the Chalmers entrepreneurial ecosystem. Being part of the same environment as the participating ventures provided opportunities for trust-based dialogue and open reflection. This facilitated deeper insight into process-level decisions and strategic learning. At the same time, this proximity poses the risk of researcher bias. Being embedded in the same context may have influenced interpretations or limited the critical distance needed for full objectivity. To mitigate this, analysis was carried out collaboratively and iteratively, with a deliberate effort to challenge assumptions and validate interpretations across researchers.

The use of the Gioia Method helped translate empirical material into structured insight. The method’s emphasis on first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions enabled a balance between participant voice and conceptual abstraction. However, the framework also introduced a degree of rigidity

that shaped how findings were ultimately organised. As with any coding process, decisions were made about which patterns to highlight, and this inevitably shaped the story told. While the structure supports transparency, it should be acknowledged that the resulting model is one of many possible representations.

The retrospective nature of the interviews is another limitation. Founders reflected on early decisions and learning processes that may have occurred months or even years earlier. This raises the possibility of recall bias or narrative smoothing. Some interviewees explicitly noted that they had only recently begun to reflect on certain choices. To reduce the risk of post-rationalisation, the interviews consistently prompted participants to provide concrete examples, sequences of events, and specific actions taken at different points in time. Another important limitation concerns the sample. The eight ventures in the study were diverse in their offerings, maturity, and customer segments, but they were all part of the same Nordic entrepreneurial context. This influences the types of challenges faced and the kinds of opportunities available. It may also influence how sales work is perceived and prioritised. While the goal was not to generalise findings, readers should be cautious about extending these results to startups in other ecosystems or industries.

The focus on the early phase of venture development further narrows the scope. While some founders spoke about scaling transitions, the core material concerns the formative stage before formal sales teams or repeatable processes had been implemented. Future studies could explore how the logics identified here persist, adapt, or dissolve as ventures move into later stages. Longitudinal studies could add depth to the current snapshot and offer insight into the evolution of strategy formation over time.

Finally, the reliance on interviews means that the study primarily captures articulated reflections rather than observed behaviour. While rich in insight, this excludes other forms of data that could provide complementary perspectives. Observational research, sales activity logs, or internal communication records could offer a more complete picture of how strategy is enacted in practice. Such data might also reveal tensions or contradictions not visible in self-reported accounts. Overall, while the study has limitations, it provides a useful lens on how founders construct and evolve sales strategies under uncertainty. The value lies not in presenting a definitive model, but in surfacing the lived complexity, improvisational logic, and emergent structures that characterise early-stage strategic work.

## 6. Conclusions

This study set out to explore how lead entrepreneurs in early stage B2B SaaS ventures form, adapt, and combine sales strategies under conditions of commercial uncertainty. Drawing on interviews with eight founders from a range of industries, the findings show that sales strategies in this context do not emerge from structured planning but from iterative engagement with the market, shaped by feedback, context, and learning. The research question asked how these entrepreneurs construct and refine their sales strategies in practice. The findings reveal a strong alignment with effectuation theory, which argues that entrepreneurs act based on their available means and adapt through action rather than prediction (Sarasvathy, 2001). Founders did not follow predetermined models. Instead, they engaged directly with customers, learned from outcomes, and adjusted their messaging, pricing, and targeting accordingly. This process was central not only to revenue generation but also to shaping the strategic direction of the venture.

One widely used tactic was Sell First Build Later, which allowed founders to validate demand and secure early commitments before investing heavily in product development. This approach reflects Lean Startup principles (Ries, 2011) that emphasize learning through early market interaction and prioritizing customer needs before scaling. While effective in reducing risk and increasing capital efficiency, this tactic required clear communication to avoid misaligned expectations between founders and customers. To conceptualize the overall process, the study introduces the Pasta Method as a metaphor. Entrepreneurs experimented with multiple tactics simultaneously and retained those that generated engagement or learning. This logic reflects the concept of emergent strategy, in which patterns of strategic behavior arise through iterative adaptation rather than top down design (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Founders acted based on what was available, sensed which actions were effective, and refined their approach accordingly.

Sales work also functioned as a platform for strategic learning. Through conversations with customers, founders discovered product requirements, clarified their value proposition, and identified viable customer segments. Over time, they moved from informal, founder driven selling to more structured sales processes. This shift represents not only operational scaling but also a deepening of strategic clarity based on accumulated learning. It reinforces the view of strategy as practice, where direction is formed through everyday actions and interactions rather than formalized strategy development (Whittington, 1996).

In summary, this study highlights that in early stage B2B SaaS ventures, sales strategy is not a fixed blueprint but a flexible, experimental process that emerges through doing. Founders build direction by acting, observing, and adjusting in real time. For entrepreneurs, this underscores the importance of starting with what is at hand, engaging deeply with early customers, and using sales work as a tool for discovery. For researchers, the study contributes to the literature on effectuation, Lean Startup, and emergent strategy by offering a grounded account of how strategy formation and customer engagement are tightly intertwined in the earliest stages of venture development.

## Suggestions for Future Research

This study has explored how early-stage B2B SaaS founders form and adapt sales strategies under uncertainty. While the findings contribute to understanding sales experimentation in young ventures, they also raise several questions that merit further exploration.

- **Scaling Beyond the Early Stage**  
This thesis focuses on the formative phase of startup development. Future studies could investigate how the trial-and-error logic described in the Pasta Method evolves as startups grow, build formal sales teams, and face pressure to scale. It remains unclear whether founders maintain their experimental mindset or if increased structure reduces flexibility.
- **Geographical Differences in Sales Strategy**  
All interviewees in this study operated primarily within Sweden. Future research could examine how geography, culture, and local market norms influence the choice and effectiveness of sales tactics. For example, relationship-based selling may function differently in Nordic countries compared to North America or Asia.
- **Influence of Team Composition and Investor Pressure**  
Future work could explore how internal factors such as team experience, diversity, or background in sales affect how strategies are formed. It would also be valuable to investigate how investor expectations and governance influence whether startups prioritize short-term revenue or long-term relationship building.

Together, these areas offer opportunities to refine and expand the understanding of sales strategy as a dynamic part of entrepreneurial practice.

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