Distribution beats features: notes from cold-calling schools

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ABSTRACT

What cold-calling school principals taught me about selling software to schools: the script, the numbers, and why a rejected call beats a landing page.

Keywords: sales, distribution, edtech, lessons

> **TL;DR**
>
> A great product that nobody hears about is a hobby. Cold-calling schools for Oxygen LMS was uncomfortable, but every call gave me information no analytics dashboard could. Here is the process I used and what it taught me.

After the POS, I promised myself the next product would start with customers, not code. For Oxygen LMS, an operating system for schools, that meant doing the thing most engineers avoid: picking up the phone.

Why the phone

Schools in Pakistan don't discover software through Product Hunt or Google Ads. Decisions are made by a principal or an owner who is busy, cautious and gets pitched by a lot of people. A landing page doesn't reach them. A short, respectful conversation sometimes does.

> **Note**
>
> "Cold calling" here means calling schools I had no relationship with, using publicly listed numbers, and asking for ten minutes, not a sale.

The process

1. Week 1

Build a list

A spreadsheet of private schools in one city: name, phone, size, fee range, who decides.

2. Week 1–2

   Write a 20-second opener

   Who I am, the one problem I'm solving, and a small ask. No feature list.

3. Week 2–4

   Call every afternoon

   A fixed block every day. Log every call in the sheet: outcome, objection, next step.

4. Week 4

   Visit the warm ones

   Sit in the office, watch how attendance and fees actually work, and show a rough demo.

The opener

The first version of my script was a feature list. It failed. The version that worked was short and about *their* problem:

> "Assalam o Alaikum, I'm Gulzaib, a software engineer in Islamabad. I'm building a simple system for fee collection and attendance for schools like yours, and I'm speaking to principals before I finish it. Could I ask you two quick questions about how you handle fees today?"

Asking for advice instead of a sale changes the tone of the whole call. People like being asked about their work.

What the calls taught me

Most calls go nowhere. That's fine. The value is in the pattern across dozens of them.

- **The pain wasn't where I expected.** I thought schools wanted smart timetables. What came up again and again was fee collection and parent communication (what schools actually pay for).
- **The user isn't the buyer.** Teachers use the system, the owner pays for it, and the admin clerk can quietly kill it. You need all three.
- **Simplicity is a feature.** "My staff can't use complicated software" was one of the most common objections. More on that in the next post.
- **Trust is local.** "Which other schools use it?" came up on almost every positive call. Your first three customers are your marketing.

> Every rejected call is a free lesson in positioning. A landing page with no traffic teaches you nothing.

The founder's math

Distribution is a numbers game, so treat it like one. The exact numbers vary by market. The shape of the funnel doesn't.

Stage	What it means	What to measure
Dial	You called	Calls per day
Connect	You reached the decision maker	Connect rate
Conversation	They gave you two minutes	Conversations per week
Visit or demo	They agreed to meet	Demo rate
Pilot	They agreed to try it	Pilots, and why the others said no

> **Log the objections, not just the outcomes**
>
> A column for *"why not?"* is the most valuable column in the sheet. After a few weeks it becomes your roadmap and your FAQ.

For engineers who hate selling

I get it. I'm an engineer too. Three things made it bearable:

1. **Time-box it.** One hour a day, then back to code. You don't need to become a salesperson. You just need to learn.
2. **Use a script, then drop it.** The script gets you through the first ten calls. After that, you'll know what to say.
3. **Remember you're helping.** If the product genuinely solves their problem, telling them about it is a service.

> **Key takeaways**
>
> - Your customers' buying habits decide your distribution channel, not your preferences.
> - Ask for advice, not a sale.
> - Log every objection. That's your roadmap.
> - Your first customers are your best marketing. Make them succeed.

*[Figure: image]***Simple wins: designing for the least technical user in the room**: People pick software they enjoy over the longest feature list. A practical guide to designing SaaS for users who would rather not use software at all.

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