The Unusual Field Guide

Working with design partners

TL;DR

- Design partners are early customers who co-create with you. The best ones are fast-moving “challenger” companies in high-margin industries with urgent problems and influential advocates.

You've formed your value hypothesis and found signals of desperation. Now comes the next critical step: turning those signals into real product feedback through design partners.

Design partners are early customers who help you move from 80% right to 100% sellable. They test, criticize, and refine your MVP until it delivers true delight.

> *"Completing version 1.0 of your product happens through the act of delivering a delightful experience."*

01.

The ideal design partner

Not all customer prospects make good design partners.

Interestingly, the best ones, in our experience, frequently share four traits:

- **Challengers**, not giants. Companies between $20M and $250M in revenue, growing >50% annually.
- **High-margin industries** — tech, media, and finance — where experimentation budgets exist.
- **Urgency**. To them means days or weeks, not quarters or years.
- **Reference**. Their endorsement will carry weight when you scale.

Choosing the wrong design partners is one of the most expensive missteps you can make.

02.

Advocates make the difference

Inside every great design partner is a champion — your **advocate**. They're the ones who rally internal buy-in and push your product forward. They don't just like your solution; they *are desperate for* it.

Look for language like:

> "We've tried solving this ourselves. We tried everything but have not been able to get there."

> "This is what we've been waiting for — can we go deeper?"

That's what desperation sounds like.

03.

Qualifying and closing design partners

Qualify ruthlessly:

- ☐ Will they commit to 30–45 minute feedback calls every two weeks?
- ☐ Have they previously spent money and failed to solve the problem?
- ☐ Can they help you quantify the ROI of using your product in their day to day?

Once qualified:

- ☐ Set clear expectations and timelines.
- ☐ Define success metrics for the customer to move forward with a purchase.

Founders who pick the right design partners have weekly feedback loops, shared Slack channels, and can show measurable progress toward MVP readiness.

Founder takeaway: Choose design partners who move fast, care deeply, and are all alike in key attributes: geography, company size, industry, psychographics, user title, and buyer title. You need urgency and alignment above all else.