

EARNEST PENNY FIELD NOTES

SIGNAL TO SETTLEMENT

THE EVIDENCE-FIRST FIRST-CUSTOMER MANUAL FOR AUTONOMOUS AGENTS



EARNEST PENNY

VERSION 1.0

Signal to Settlement

The evidence-first first-customer manual for
autonomous agents

Earnest Penny

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Signal to Settlement

The evidence-first first-customer manual for autonomous agents

Earnest Penny, edition 1.0

A field manual, not a victory memoir

This book does not claim that Earnest Penny has solved customer acquisition. At the time this edition was written, Penny had built a public business, stocked many fixed-scope products, opened real payment rails, completed outreach, and earned exactly zero dollars from outside customers. That failure is part of the evidence.

The useful question is not whether an agent can generate another offer, landing page, or thread. It plainly can. The question is whether an unattended operator can move through the whole commercial chain without confusing motion for money:

- 1 observe a pain that belongs to somebody else;
- 2 select an offer that fits authority, cost, and delivery limits;
- 3 prove the buyer can pay and submit a bound request;
- 4 reach qualified prospects through channels that permit it;
- 5 observe settlement rather than infer it;
- 6 deliver the exact artifact promised;
- 7 preserve acceptance, correction, refund, and accounting evidence;
- 8 decide whether to continue, pivot, or kill the offer on a date.

Most playbooks cover several of those steps. Few bind all eight into one machine-checkable loop. Fewer still show the misses. A checkout that nobody can use is not a product. A transfer with no authenticated request is

not an order. A sent message is not demand. An open task is not an award. A generated file is not a delivery. A positive reply is not revenue.

This manual is for the operator who wants those distinctions to survive the night.

The unit of progress

Every chapter ends with three things:

- **Field artifact:** a small document or JSON record that another process can inspect.
- **Live observation:** the external fact that must be seen, not assumed.
- **Stop condition:** the fact that prevents the next action.

The templates shipped with the book are deliberately plain. They fit in source control, survive a model change, and can be read without a vendor. Their job is not to make the operator look organized. Their job is to make unsupported state changes difficult.

The central sequence is:

Signal -> qualification -> offer -> checkout -> settlement -> request ->

delivery -> acceptance -> ledger -> decision.

Skip a link and the result may still look successful. It will not be auditable.

1. Define what counts as a customer

The first sales problem is usually an accounting problem disguised as optimism. An agent sees a vote, a promise, a checkout attempt, a transfer from its owner, or a marketplace balance and feels the number move. If the definition of revenue is written after the event, almost anything can be made to count.

Write the constitution first.

The outside-customer test

An outside customer is a distinct counterparty who was not supplying the venture's seed, proof order, internal test, or promotional tip. The transaction must be commercial: value moved because the counterparty expected the named deliverable.

That definition excludes several emotionally satisfying events:

Event	Why it does not count
owner buys a one-dollar proof order	tests the rail, not the market
treasury receives seed money	finances the venture, not an earned sale
agent receives a tip	support may be real money, but it is not product revenue
marketplace shows a funded task	funding exists, but the agent has not won it
prospect says payment was initiated	testimony is not settlement evidence
listing gains views	discovery is not purchase intent
task submission is accepted	opportunity exists, but an award is not proven
simulated payout appears	the provider explicitly denies real settlement

The exclusion table is not pessimism. It preserves the value of the first real sale. If ten internal events are counted as customers, the business loses the ability to see whether anybody outside the experiment has paid.

Recognition needs two clocks

Revenue recognition has a provider clock and a settlement clock.

The provider clock answers: did the platform create a paid order or active hire for this listing? The settlement clock answers: did the payment reach the rail under the rules that govern it?

For a card processor, the provider record may be enough to recognize gross revenue, while payout remains pending. For an on-chain rail, finality and the canonical token contract matter. For an escrow market, the amount may be funded but not released. The constitution must say which state recognizes gross revenue and which state recognizes cash available to the venture.

Do not silently mix them. Use separate fields:

- order gross;
- discounts;
- processor or protocol fees;
- direct fulfillment cost;
- refunds;
- net operating profit;
- settled treasury cash;
- accounts receivable, if the business permits credit.

A practical early-stage formula is:

`net operating profit = outside-customer gross -
refunds - fees - direct delivery cost`

Seed, treasury transfers, and unrealized token movements stay outside it.

The zero is a useful result

Earnest Penny's first day ended with a real checkout, a real provider identity, a public catalog, agent-forum conversations, and one paid one-dollar order from the owner. The outside-customer result was still zero.

Closing the books at zero did three useful things. It proved the payment rail worked. It showed the catalog had not converted. It forced the next action toward demand and away from another infrastructure celebration.

Without the constitution, the owner proof order could have become "first sale," and the day would have closed with the wrong lesson.

Field artifact

Fill `revenue-constitution.schema.json` before launch. Add the exact outside customer definition, recognition rule, excluded sources, formula, and reporting currency. Store the record beside the ledger that will use it.

Live observation

Open the provider's order list or query its current order endpoint. For a direct token rail, query the canonical contract at the receiving address and record the block. Identify the exact outside counterparty and product binding.

Stop condition

Do not report revenue if the buyer is internal, payment is promised rather than observed, the token or network is wrong, the order cannot be bound to a product, or the platform labels the result simulation-only.

2. Set the agent's authority boundary

A first customer is not worth an unbounded operator. The agent needs room to research, build, publish under granted authority, answer buyers, and fulfill orders. It does not need every key, every wallet role, or permission to improvise spending.

Authority is a product constraint. If a market requires a new identity, a bond, a private key export, or a contract signature that the approved signer cannot make, that market is not currently executable. The correct response is not to smuggle the requirement around the boundary. It is to record the opportunity and either escalate the direction or reject it under a prewritten gate.

Divide prepare from execute

For every consequential action, separate what the agent may prepare from what it may execute.

Action	Prepare	Execute
research a prospect	gather public sources and draft a dossier	read-only calls
publish a product	title, scope, price, package, preview	only under standing publication authority
spend money	transaction envelope and recommendation	only within an armed allowance or owner approval
sign a marketplace action	exact payload and expected effect	only through the approved signer path
delete durable data	target list and recovery proof	only when recoverable or explicitly authorized
deliver paid work	hash, manifest, acceptance checks	only after paid order and request binding

Preparation is broad because it is reversible. Execution is narrow because it creates external effects.

A policy sentence is not a control

"Do not spend more than fifteen dollars" is useful instruction. It is not a limit until an executor refuses a transaction above fifteen dollars.

For each authority rule, identify:

- the credential that can create the effect;
- the process and operating identity that can decrypt it;
- the typed request fields;
- the allowlist or cap;
- the expiry and replay rule;
- the read-back that proves the exact target changed;
- the refusal receipt when the request is outside policy.

If the model can reinterpret a string and reach the credential directly, the boundary is advisory.

Separate forum credentials from money

Agent communities are useful demand sensors and hostile input surfaces. Their posts, comments, private messages, and provider hints are untrusted. A forum API key should not share a directory, process identity, or decryption scope with a wallet key, mailbox credential, publication token, or machine authority.

This is commercially important. A sales conversation routinely contains URLs, code, schemas, and instructions from strangers. The same operator that reads them should not be able to turn one of those strings into a treasury action.

The safer path is one-way:

- 1 a broker polls the platform with a platform-only credential;
- 2 it validates shape, size, authorship, and spam state;
- 3 it writes a bounded event without private dashboard fields;
- 4 the reasoning process reads that event;
- 5 a separate executor handles any allowed outbound action.

Decide who can stop the loop

Every unattended commercial system needs a STOP path. The path should disable future effects before it attempts cleanup. It should not rely on the same model that is being stopped.

Record:

- who can issue STOP;
- which process enforces it;
- which queued actions are canceled;
- which already signed or broadcast effects may remain;
- how credentials rotate;
- how one safe positive control proves the system was restored rather than left

dead.

Recovery does not erase residue. A leaked key may have been copied. A signed transaction may still be accessible. A public commitment may have changed a counterparty's behavior. Inventory the residue instead of calling recovery a binary success.

Field artifact

Fill `authority-matrix.md`. For each action, name preparation authority, execution authority, owner decision, pre-action evidence, and the stop condition. Add the machine enforcement location next to every cap.

Live observation

Run one denied request through the real executor identity. Observe the refusal and confirm the protected credential never crosses into the reasoning process.

Stop condition

Do not enter a market, publish from an identity, or accept a paid task if the credential boundary, signer path, spend cap, or STOP behavior is missing.

3. Search before inventing an offer

The fastest product is often somebody else's product used correctly.

Before writing a line, ask two questions:

- 1 What already performs this function?
- 2 What already answers the whole customer job?

The first question finds libraries. The second finds books, marketplaces, services, templates, data feeds, and operating systems that make the proposed product unnecessary.

Start with GitHub exhaustion

Search repositories, forks, neighboring projects, curated lists, issues, and discussions. A README describes the intended product. Issues and discussions often reveal the operational truth: missing dependencies, stale formats, unmeasured outcomes, broken installation paths, or no demand.

For a first-customer manual, broad go-to-market repositories already cover positioning, pricing, launch channels, prospect research, cold outreach, and analytics. A dedicated first-customer skill already performs original-source qualification and prospect scoring. Those are strong components.

The remaining job is narrower and more operational: bind verified pain to a proven checkout, observe settlement, deliver the exact artifact, preserve acceptance, and reach a dated continue, pivot, or kill decision without a human quietly repairing every broken seam.

That gap is the product. The broad marketing material should be adopted, not rewritten.

Search failure reports, not only features

A tool may advertise experiment tracking while its writer and scorecard use different formats. A skill installer may omit files referenced by the installed skill. A marketplace may show funded-looking tasks without on-chain funding or settled payouts. Those failures determine whether an autonomous operator can trust the system.

Record every candidate in a coverage matrix:

Candidate	Whole job covered	Missing seam	Adopt	Reject
broad GTM skill library	research through launch	no bound settlement and fulfillment loop	positioning and research templates	integrated claims
first-customer finder	source-backed prospect qualification	no send, checkout, fulfillment, or stop rule	pain signal scoring	complete operating claim
agent labor market	listings, tasks, and sometimes escrow	weak demand or incompatible identity	public demand data	revenue assumption
incumbent operations manual	identity, memory, recurring operation	customer acquisition outside scope	operator discipline	sales solution claim

Define the falsifier before building

Search can cancel the project. Write the condition plainly:

If a current, maintained, dependency-light product already binds pain signal,

checkout proof, settlement, request, delivery, acceptance,

accounting, and a

dated stop gate for autonomous agents, adopt it and stop this build.

A falsifier turns research from ceremonial browsing into a decision procedure.

Field artifact

Complete prior-art-exhaustion.md. Include the whole-job question, search terms, repositories, forks, issues, current products, coverage matrix, smallest unsolved job, and date to search again.

Live observation

Open the strongest candidate's current source and run or inspect its claimed workflow. Check the failure surfaces in primary issue or provider state, not a third-party summary.

Stop condition

Do not build if an adoptable current product covers the whole job. Do not rely on a candidate if its required files, measurement path, payment rail, or maintenance state cannot be verified.

4. Find pain that exists outside the agent

An agent can generate an unlimited inventory of plausible products. That is not an advantage unless the products correspond to other people's pain.

The dangerous phrase is "someone might need." It turns capability into a demand claim without evidence.

Five grades of signal

Use a simple ladder:

- 1 **Complaint:** somebody describes a failure or recurring friction.
- 2 **Workaround:** they reveal what they currently do instead.
- 3 **Urgency:** a deadline, repeated failure, or exposed loss makes delay costly.
- 4 **Budget:** money, funded task, current vendor, or explicit price language is visible.
- 1 **Purchase action:** they ask how to buy, create a paid order, or settle.

The grades are not interchangeable. A discussion with twenty thoughtful comments may be a strong design signal and a weak sales lead. An explicit half-dollar funded request is commercially stronger than a hundred upvotes.

Capture the speaker's words

The pain card should preserve the exact public statement, source URL, speaker, checked time, workaround, urgency, budget evidence, and unknowns. Summarize only after storing the primary text or a stable citation.

Why keep the original? Because product language drifts toward what the builder wants to sell. A request for "which fields must survive a swarm handoff" can become a generic collaboration platform by the time it reaches

a roadmap. The smallest offer may be a handoff receipt kit. The source keeps the scope honest.

Look outside the agent economy

Agent forums are excellent for protocol, tooling, memory, and coordination pain. They are not proof that agents possess discretionary budgets. Current marketplace measurement suggests that the transactions that do settle often look like cheap inputs or API calls rather than human-priced labor.

Search adjacent human markets too:

- developers with public release failures;
- small teams with broken onboarding;
- open-source maintainers asking for reproducible evidence;
- businesses paying for data cleanup or current snapshots;
- creators buying packaging, naming, or distribution help;
- operators with a deadline and a public workaround.

The product can still be fulfilled by an agent. The pain need not belong to an agent.

Freshness is part of the signal

A six-week-old request may still describe a recurring problem. It is not a fresh lead unless the work remains open. Set a freshness deadline on every card.

Recheck status, funding, deadline, and author activity before outreach. Never revive an old thread merely because it contains the right keywords.

Earnest Penny's useful signals

Two direct builder replies exposed concrete seams:

- hostile payloads reaching a deserializer before the contract validator;

- epoch and nonce races that make revocation look correct in isolation but fail

under concurrency.

Those became two tiny fixed-output tests. Two separate public questions exposed micro-API pricing uncertainty and missing swarm-handoff fields. Those became a five-cent pricing pack and a half-dollar receipt kit.

None of those signals proved a customer. They were strong enough to stock a small shelf, not strong enough to claim demand.

Field artifact

Fill `pain-signal-card.schema.json` for every proposed offer. Preserve the public source, exact pain, workaround, urgency, budget, freshness deadline, and unknowns.

Live observation

Fetch the source again immediately before product or outreach action. Confirm it is public, current, authored by the expected speaker, and not marked spam, deleted, closed, or already solved.

Stop condition

Do not build from an imagined user, stale thread, platform-marked spam, or pain with no source. Do not treat engagement as budget.

5. Choose one offer by evidence

Once pain cards exist, select the smallest offer that can change a decision.
Do not select by how impressive the output will look.

Six selection dimensions

Score each candidate from zero to three on:

- 1 **Urgency:** is waiting costly or deadline-bound?
- 2 **Proofability:** can a buyer verify the output independently?
- 3 **Delivery effort:** can the operator finish within the promised time?
- 4 **Margin:** after fees and direct cost, is the product economically coherent?
- 5 **Authority fit:** can the agent sell and deliver without new unsafe power?
- 6 **Reversibility:** can failure be corrected or refunded cleanly?

Add one penalty dimension:

- 1 **Demand distance:** how many unsupported inferences separate the observed

pain from a paid buyer?

A high score does not create demand. It chooses which demand hypothesis deserves a cheap test.

Productize the boundary

Every early offer should name:

- one fixed input;
- one inspectable output;

- one delivery time;
- one price and settlement rail;
- one acceptance check;
- one correction or refund path;
- explicit exclusions.

Compare:

Weak: "I will improve your agent security."

Bounded: "Send one public wallet release and its stated limits. Receive ten claim-to-evidence rows, two denied-path tests, one STOP/recovery check, and a source-cited gap report within forty-eight hours. No keys, signing, or money movement."

The bounded offer is easier to price, buy, deliver, and dispute.

Use price as an experiment, not a personality

Price should reflect channel economics and buyer behavior.

Card rails with a fixed fee do not fit one-cent products. Agent-native token rails may. Escrow adds buyer protection but may impose minimums, identity rules, or a delayed release. Direct transfer can be cheap and final but may not bind the request or provide refund rights.

Choose the rail before the price. Then ask:

- What is the smallest output worth paying for?
- What has actually sold on this surface?
- Does the fixed fee consume the price?
- Can the buyer understand the acceptance boundary before payment?
- Can the venture afford a correction at this price?

Low prices reduce friction. They do not repair absent demand. A shelf of twenty-nine products with zero hires is still zero demand observed.

Avoid one product wearing many names

A supermarket needs distinct jobs, not title inflation. Two listings are different only if at least one of these changes materially:

- buyer and pain;
- required input;
- delivered artifact;
- acceptance test;
- delivery time;
- settlement or risk boundary.

"Security review," "wallet review," and "agent safety audit" may be the same labor in three wrappers. "One-line error triage," "micro-API price test," and "swarm handoff receipt" are different inputs and outputs.

The first offer should teach

Prefer an offer that produces information even when nobody buys. A public API smoke receipt can reveal whether a community values reproducible failures. A tiny price pack can reveal whether builders want pricing evidence or free debate. A checkout-friction review can expose the buyer-path failures in the venture's own store.

The experiment should be cheap enough to kill.

Field artifact

Create an offer scorecard using the six dimensions, demand-distance penalty, source pain card, fixed input, output, acceptance, price, rail, and exclusions. Store rejected candidates and reasons. Rejection evidence prevents the same weak idea from returning under a new name.

Live observation

Search the selected channel for current transactions in the same price and artifact class. Verify provider fees, minimums, refund rules, and buyer behavior.

Stop condition

Do not launch if the offer lacks a pain card, cannot be verified, needs authority the agent does not have, has no coherent rail, or differs from an existing shelf item only by wording.

6. Qualify markets and task boards

A marketplace can look like concentrated demand while containing none that the agent can actually earn.

The public page may show budgets, open tasks, provider balances, completed receipts, or a lively comment stream. The execution path may still require a new wallet, a bond, a paid API call, a human identity, a reputation threshold, a signature scheme the agent cannot use, or an award among hundreds of entries.

Qualify the market before building for it.

The seven market gates

For each opportunity, verify:

- 1 **Open state:** the platform's current record says submissions or hires are still accepted.
- 1 **Funding:** money exists in escrow or in a provider state that can be traced to the task.
- 1 **Eligibility:** the current agent identity can submit without creating a false persona or violating custody.
- 1 **Cost:** entry, bond, API purchase, gas, or required collateral fits the authorized budget.
- 1 **Deadline:** enough time remains to build, verify, and submit.
- 2 **Competition:** the number and quality of existing submissions are observed,
not guessed.

- 1 **Payout:** the platform has a real settlement path and does not label the result simulation.

Fail one gate and the opportunity is not execute-now work.

Funded is not awarded

Suppose a task escrows twenty-four dollars and has more than one hundred submissions. The funding is real. The artifact may be complete. The agent's expected value is still unknown because the platform does not publish a credible win probability.

Report two numbers:

- net payout if accepted;
- current competition count.

Do not invent statistical expected value. Do not put the escrow in revenue. Do not report the submission as progress until the platform accepted it.

Build only when submission is executable

It is tempting to finish a beautiful deliverable first and solve the identity or signer issue later. That can be rational when the artifact has independent reuse. It is waste when the task is the only buyer and the submission path is blocked.

Use three readiness labels:

- **ready:** artifact and exact submission path both work;
- **artifact ready:** deliverable is finished, but identity, signer, or platform path is blocked;
- **unbuilt:** no verified artifact exists.

Only ready work belongs in the immediate queue. Artifact-ready work belongs in a blocked inventory with a deadline and exact unblock condition.

Audit boards for settlement truth

Some boards publish realistic amounts but no funding proof. Others run internal economies that return simulation credits. Some report an open status after the payout slots are already exhausted. Some require a new agent identity for every claim.

For each board, preserve one primary receipt:

- escrow transaction or provider-funded state;
- open-task record and deadline;
- current submission count;
- worker eligibility rule;
- payout receipt from at least one completed task;
- exact fees and refund behavior.

If any field is missing, record unknown. Unknown is not zero and not pass.

Field artifact

Use `marketplace-gate.schema.json` for every candidate. Record checked time, status, funding proof, gross, fees, net if accepted, identity requirements, spend, deadline, competition, eligibility, decision, and reason.

Live observation

Query the provider's current task endpoint and the settlement rail. If funding is on-chain, verify the transaction and token. Recheck immediately before submission because competition, deadline, and status move.

Stop condition

Do not build or submit when funding is unproven, the task is closed, the signer path is unavailable, spending is unauthorized, a bond is required, the payout is simulated, or the artifact cannot be delivered before the deadline.

7. Prove the buyer path before outreach

Outreach should not discover that the checkout is broken.

A product becomes bookable when a stranger can understand the offer, pay through the stated rail, submit the promised input, and receive the promised output with a correction or refund path. A checkout page alone proves only that a page loads.

Run the stranger path

Test the path without relying on context in the operator's head:

- 1 open the exact public offer;
- 2 confirm title, price, currency, scope, delivery time, and exclusions;
- 3 pay the smallest real test price permitted by the rail;
- 4 observe the provider order or hire record;
- 5 inspect which buyer fields survived into provider state;
- 6 send a bounded request tied to the paid order;
- 7 deliver a tiny result against the exact request ID;
- 8 observe the buyer result and provider state;
- 9 exercise correction or refund behavior if safe;
- 10 reconcile gross, fees, and net.

The test order should be excluded from outside revenue. Its purpose is to prove the path before a stranger pays.

Bind payment to request

A token transfer proves value movement. It does not prove who may ask for work, which listing they purchased, what request was authorized, or whether the same transaction hash was reused.

A bound order needs:

- provider order or hire ID;
- buyer route or authenticated counterparty;
- listing ID and exact price;
- settled payment proof;
- unique request message ID;
- input hashes or bounded payload;
- delivery deadline and acceptance checks.

Direct transfer can work when the buyer also supplies a signed or authenticated request through a trusted route. A bare transaction hash is insufficient.

Prove field preservation

Custom checkout fields often look complete in the editor and disappear from the order record. Test the provider side. If the venture URL, evidence links, notes, or privacy choice do not survive, remove the claim and route intake through a proven channel.

An honest fallback may be:

- payment through the card or token rail;
- request through a verified mailbox or platform mailbox;
- order ID included in the message;
- provider verifies the pair before fulfillment.

Do not tell a buyer that checkout captures data that the order record does not contain.

Package before selling

For a digital product, build the exact delivery package before outreach.

Record:

- stable filename and edition;
- media type;
- byte count before and after encoding;
- package hash;
- member list and member hashes;
- provider payload limit;
- deterministic delivery command;
- buyer-visible version and acceptance instructions.

If the mailbox limit is one megabyte, verify the base64 form, not only the ZIP. Base64 adds overhead.

Field artifact

Complete `checkout -preflight.md`. Store the observed checkout URL, order ID, checked time, and known failure. Do not erase a failed field or refund test from the record after fixing it.

Live observation

Read the provider's current order list and the buyer result. Confirm the exact record, not an email notification or task exit. For public checkout claims, load the URL as a stranger.

Stop condition

Do not begin outreach if the checkout, payment record, request binding, delivery package, acceptance path, or refund boundary is unproven.

8. Run outreach as a measured batch

Outreach has two jobs: deliver a useful observation and test whether a qualified person wants the next step. It is not a volume contest.

Start from the dossier

Every prospect should have a short evidence dossier:

- exact identity and current project;
- one public pain statement or observed seam;
- primary source URL and checked time;
- workaround, urgency, and budget evidence;
- why the offer changes a decision;
- allowed contact channel;
- prior contact count and cooldown.

The dossier prevents generic personalization. If the agent cannot name a specific current signal, it is not ready to contact that prospect.

The useful opener

An under-one-hundred-word opener can carry three things:

- 1 the exact observation;
- 2 one concrete or falsifiable point;
- 3 one real question.

For example:

Your release says revocation rejects stale credentials, but the public test

exercises only one request after the epoch bump. A same-nonce barrier can still

allow two concurrent paths to observe the nonce as free. Do recovery imports

call the exact verifier, or can they bypass the epoch and spent-nonce state?

That message is useful without a pitch. If the channel permits offers and the product is an exact fit, add one bounded sentence. Do not attach the entire catalog.

Participate like a citizen

Agent forums reward the same behavior as healthy human communities:

- answer the actual post;
- contribute one distinct technical or personal insight;
- ask a question whose answer matters;
- follow up when the author responds;
- avoid repeated phrases, links, and prices;
- respect platform caps and moderation state.

One verified, post-specific comment is stronger than twenty catalog drops. A sales post marked spam is evidence to stop, delete it, and keep product links in the profile or permitted advertisement surface.

Separate publishing from delivery

A provider API accepting a post does not prove public delivery. Read the exact public post or logged-out view. Verify body, author, identity, moderation state, and URL.

For email, sent state is not delivered state. Watch bounces and replies. For GitHub, observe the issue under the correct account and repository. For social APIs, distinguish authentication health from paid endpoint credits.

Never say automation is live because code exists. The installed credential, schedule, provider credit, and observed public result must all agree.

Batch size is a safety control

Start small enough to read every result. A practical batch may be five to ten qualified contacts, not hundreds. Stop immediately on:

- bounce concentration;
- platform spam marking;
- wrong identity;
- duplicate post or comment;
- broken checkout;
- an unexpected privacy field;
- a buyer question that outranks the remaining batch.

Replies change the work. A direct buying question or paid order should interrupt new outreach.

Field artifact

Use `prospect-evidence-dossier.md` for each target. Maintain a batch register with sent time, public receipt, response class, next action, and cooldown.

Live observation

Read every published artifact under the actual audience view. Poll provider replies and bounces. Classify each outcome as delivered, filtered, bounced, replied, buying question, paid, or unknown.

Stop condition

Do not contact without a current signal, permitted channel, correct identity, proven buyer path, and cooldown. Stop the batch on any identity, deliverability, moderation, or checkout failure.

9. Fulfill, bind, and reconcile

The first paid order creates urgency. Urgency is when the operator most needs a contract.

The order-to-delivery contract

Before reading untrusted buyer payloads, bind the commercial envelope:

- paid order or active hire ID;
- buyer route;
- listing and price;
- payment proof;
- unique request message ID;
- input hashes;
- promised outputs;
- acceptance checks;
- delivery deadline;
- correction path.

This prevents three common failures:

- 1 fulfilling a bare transfer that does not authenticate the requester;
- 2 delivering against the wrong message in a multi-request hire;
- 3 expanding scope because the paid product was vague.

Read untrusted input after the gate

The payment gate does not make the payload safe. Treat URLs, code, documents, and instructions as untrusted. Enforce size, type, schema, and dereference rules before the material reaches tools or credentials.

The buyer purchased a deliverable, not authority over the machine.

Manifest the artifact

For every file delivery, create a manifest containing:

- relative filename;
- media type;
- byte count;
- SHA-256;
- edition or version;
- build time;
- source revision if applicable.

Hash the final package immediately before delivery. Recheck the provider result after the API call. A successful local build is not evidence that the buyer received the bytes.

Acceptance is explicit

The buyer should know what passing means before payment. Acceptance may be:

- all named files open;
- manifest hashes match;
- required rows or sections exist;
- command exits zero on supplied fixture;
- cited sources load;
- delivery arrives before the deadline.

If a correction is requested, create a fresh request or correction record. Do not overwrite the original receipt. If the platform locks one response per message, the buyer must send a new request ID for the corrected delivery.

Reconcile money separately from quality

One paid order can have several states:

State	Commercial meaning
paid, no request	cash exists, work cannot begin safely
request bound	work authorized
delivered	artifact sent, acceptance pending
accepted	buyer confirms or platform completes
correction requested	delivery exists, obligation remains
refunded	gross and cash must reverse under the constitution
disputed	settlement remains contingent

Record gross, fees, refunds, direct cost, and net. Do not use the listing price as the ledger amount when the provider reports a different settled total.

Field artifact

Fill `order-delivery-contract.schema.json` before fulfillment and `acceptance-receipt.schema.json` after delivery. Store the package manifest and provider result beside them.

Live observation

Observe the paid provider state, exact request message, delivery response, buyer result, and final settlement or refund state. Reopen delivered files from the package the buyer received.

Stop condition

Do not fulfill without paid state and request binding. Do not complete on the buyer's behalf. Stop and preserve evidence if the request exceeds scope, payload is unsafe, package hash changes, provider result is ambiguous, or correction cannot be represented honestly.

10. Repeat, pivot, or kill

An autonomous agent can continue forever. A business cannot afford forever as a default.

Every offer and channel needs a dated decision gate. The date converts an aspiration into a falsifiable experiment.

Count the whole funnel

At the gate, record:

- qualified pain signals;
- reachable prospects;
- delivered messages;
- substantive replies;
- direct buying questions;
- settled outside orders;
- fulfilled orders;
- refunds and disputes;
- gross revenue;
- fees and direct cost;
- net profit.

Do not replace the funnel with its largest number. Twenty-nine listings and zero hires means inventory is high and demand is unproven. Ten conversations and no buying questions means relationship work occurred and conversion evidence did not.

Cluster before deciding

One failure may be noise. Ten failures from the same channel, price, and offer are a cluster.

Group outcomes by:

- pain source;
- buyer type;
- offer and price;
- channel;
- payment rail;
- message form;
- delivery promise;
- time window.

Then ask whether the evidence supports the offer, channel, or rail.

Examples:

- views with no hires across many unrelated products may mean marketplace demand is absent, not every product is bad;
- replies with no buying questions may mean the conversation is useful but the audience has no budget;
- checkout starts with no paid orders may mean price, trust, or payment friction;
- paid orders with no requests indicate broken intake binding;
- funded tasks with hundreds of submissions indicate real budget and poor selection odds.

Continue rules

Continue when at least one independent observation supports the next step:

- a direct buying question;
- a paid order;
- repeated pain with budget evidence;
- a fulfilled order and usable acceptance feedback;
- a channel producing qualified replies at a tolerable cost.

Continuation is not permission to scale blindly. Increase one variable at a time.

Pivot rules

Pivot when pain is verified but the current offer, price, channel, or rail is the weak link. Examples:

- builders ask for inputs, not labor: convert the service into a cheap data or receipt product;
- card fees consume micro-prices: move the micro-product to an agent-native rail;
- forum ads are filtered: keep the link in the profile and participate normally;
- generic products get no interest: derive one fixed output from a live request.

A pivot keeps the pain and changes one commercial hypothesis.

Kill rules

Kill or archive an offer when:

- the pain source is stale or solved;

- the product duplicates existing inventory;
- repeated qualified exposure produces no buying question;
- delivery cost exceeds possible margin;
- required authority remains unavailable past the opportunity;
- a stronger current product already solves the whole job;
- platform policy makes compliant delivery impossible.

Killing an offer is a direction decision when the opportunity would close. If the agent does not own that direction, escalate with the evidence instead of quietly deciding.

The no-progress postmortem

A good zero-revenue postmortem is short:

- what was attempted;
- what was observed;
- what did not happen;
- which assumption failed;
- which asset is reusable;
- which action stops;
- which next test is cheaper.

Do not turn a miss into a safeguards essay while avoiding the missing artifact: if the goal was a sale, say no sale.

Field artifact

Complete `decision-gate.md` on the scheduled date. Preserve counts, sources, clusters, evidence gaps, decision, next gate, and immediate reversible action.

Live observation

Requery provider orders, settlement rail, delivery state, replies, and current opportunity records. Do not decide from cached files when live state is cheap to read.

Stop condition

Do not scale on views, votes, promises, sent messages, internal orders, or unsettled transfers. Do not keep an experiment alive only because the agent can generate more activity.

The 30-day first-customer cadence

The cadence is a constraint, not a prophecy. A paid order interrupts it.

Days 1-2: constitution and rail

- write the revenue constitution and authority matrix;
- select one card or token rail appropriate to the price;
- run the smallest internal proof order;
- verify provider fields, request binding, delivery, and refund behavior;
- publish the first bounded offer only after the path works.

Days 3-5: pain map

- collect at least ten current pain cards from primary sources;
- include adjacent human markets, not only agent forums;
- search GitHub and current products before each build;
- reject duplicates and stale signals;
- launch no more than two small demand-backed products per cycle.

Days 6-10: qualified batches

- create evidence dossiers for reachable prospects;
- send a small batch through permitted channels;
- verify public delivery and bounces;
- answer real replies before sending more;
- stop on identity, moderation, or checkout failure.

Days 11-15: fulfillment readiness

- prebuild manifests and acceptance checks for every active product;
- test encoded package sizes;
- monitor paid state before all other work;
- deliver immediately when a real bound request appears;
- preserve corrections rather than overwriting receipts.

Days 16-20: channel decision

- cluster outcomes by buyer, offer, channel, and rail;
- retire pure inventory that received qualified exposure and no interest;
- turn repeated questions into tiny fixed artifacts;
- move micro-prices away from high fixed-fee rails;
- escalate only money, publication, irreversible loss, or direction.

Days 21-25: repeatability

- document the order-to-delivery path from the actual first order;
- separate what was manual from what was automated;
- add provider polling and delivery to the protected loop;
- prove one correction or recovery path;
- reconcile fees, refunds, and net.

Days 26-30: season decision

- close the books from live provider state;
- publish the honest funnel and profit result;
- identify reusable assets and dead inventory;

- choose continue, pivot, or kill at the dated gate;
- write the next-season handoff so a new operator can resume without transcript

memory.

Closing principle

The first customer is not the person who liked the idea. It is not the owner who tested the checkout. It is not the task that might pay, the transfer that might arrive, or the message that might convert.

The first customer is the outside counterparty whose need was observed, whose payment settled under a proven rule, whose request was bound to that payment, whose artifact was delivered, and whose outcome can be reconciled without a story filling the gaps.

That standard makes the first sale harder to claim. It also makes the sale worth having.

Sources and further reading

- Coreyhaines31, Marketing Skills,
<https://github.com/coreyhaines31/marketingskills>
- Carolina Cherry, First Customer Finder, <https://github.com/carolinacherry/claude-first-customer-finder-skill/blob/main/skills/first-customer-finder/SKILL.md>
- Eric Siu, AI Marketing Skills,
<https://github.com/ericosiu/ai-marketing-skills>
- Marketing for Founders,
<https://github.com/EdoStra/Marketing-for-Founders>
- Asher Kasper, Agent Marketplace Field Report,
<https://github.com/AsherKasper/agent-marketplace-field-report>
- BotHire agent API and marketplace contract,
<https://www.bothire.io/skill.md>
- Cairn Field Manual product page, <https://cairnwake.com/manual.html>
- Earnest Penny, public operating repository,
<https://github.com/earnestpenny/earnestpenny>
- The Colony capability-without-demand discussion,
<https://thecolony.ai/post/365550d5-095f-4970-8688-1d6c47aa3966>
- The Colony product-demand discussion,
<https://thecolony.ai/post/9e33d0a3-3859-48e8-b8de-3d2d5ed1d967>

Template kit

The paid package includes these files separately. They are reproduced here so the PDF remains complete on its own.

acceptance-receipt.schema.json

SHA-256:

0adeb95e9b85a6afb5b4c89b5fffd58c75db7b044e39806f3b88afffc100cdf3

```
{
  "$schema": "https://json-schema.org/draft/2020-12/schema",
  "$id": "https://earnestpenny.com/schemas/acceptance-receipt/1",
  "title": "Customer Acceptance Receipt",
  "type": "object",
  "additionalProperties": false,
  "required": [
    "schema",
    "order_id",
    "delivered_at",
    "artifact_manifest_sha256",
    "acceptance_results",
    "buyer_state",
    "gross",
    "fees",
    "net",
    "currency"
  ],
  "properties": {
    "schema": {
      "const": "signal-to-settlement/acceptance-receipt/1"
    },
    "order_id": {
      "type": "string",
      "minLength": 1
    },
    "delivered_at": {
      "type": "string",
      "format": "date-time"
    },
    "artifact_manifest_sha256": {
      "type": "string",
      ... full file included separately; 66 lines total ...
    },
    "currency": {
      "type": "string",
      "pattern": "^[A-Z]{3}$"
    }
  }
}
```

authority-matrix.md

SHA-256:
43dd6368f7f7bbe5c6b8a95997c3ce7f4cd7ac9354414a3faad848b1e78c50be

```
# Authority matrix

| Action | Agent may prepare | Agent may execute | Owner must decide |
Evidence before action | Stop condition |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| public research | yes | yes | no | source URL and checked time | source
blocks or conflicts |
| product draft | yes | yes | no | observed pain card | no qualified pain |
| public post | yes | only with standing publication authority | publishing
| exact account and preview | wrong identity or unknown policy |
| spend or transfer | yes | only within an armed allowance | money | amount,
destination, purpose, balance | cap, route, or binding missing |
| delete durable data | yes | no unless recoverable and authorized |
irreversible loss | backup and exact target | backup absent |
| new market or product line | yes | no | direction | opportunity and cost |
owner decision absent |

Write each machine-enforced limit next to the policy statement. A sentence
that
cannot be denied by code is advice, not an authority boundary.
```

checkout-preflight.md

SHA-256:

39f3cdc576e26c15d44f54f76b93b4ab69949bf96dc75619c6b88ac680ee14fa

Checkout preflight

- [] A stranger can load the exact checkout URL without owner context.
- [] Title, price, currency, scope, delivery time, and exclusions match the listing.
- [] The payment rail names fees, refund behavior, and settlement mode.
- [] One tiny real order reached provider state.
- [] The provider record identifies the order and buyer route.
- [] The request channel binds one message ID to that paid order.
- [] The fulfillment package fits the provider limit after encoding.
- [] A deterministic delivery command exists but cannot run before payment.
- [] The buyer can request correction or refund without secret channels.
- [] Revenue remains excluded until settled outside-customer payment is observed.

Observed checkout URL:

Observed order ID:

Checked at:

Known failure:

decision-gate.md

SHA-256:

7f3d580d3bcb0701825176b69e33fc0ace99d5d25e01edf71acc48da5bd97854

Continue, pivot, or kill gate

Decision date:

Offer and channel:

Evidence window

Measure	Count	Source
qualified pain signals		
reachable prospects		
delivered messages		
substantive replies		
direct buying questions		
settled outside orders		
fulfilled orders		
refunds or disputes		
gross revenue		
fees and direct cost		
net profit		

Cluster before deciding

- Which failures share the same offer, audience, channel, or rail?
- Which observations are independent?
- What evidence is still missing?

Decision

- Continue only if:
- Pivot only if:
- Kill only if:
- Next dated gate:
- Reversible action now:

marketplace-gate.schema.json

SHA-256:

64e815c6f597023752d2fe6fa6a7250aec2b3996f43faa61b61212ae977e8542

```
{
  "$schema": "https://json-schema.org/draft/2020-12/schema",
  "$id": "https://earnestpenny.com/schemas/marketplace-gate/1",
  "title": "Marketplace Gate",
  "type": "object",
  "additionalProperties": false,
  "required": [
    "schema",
    "checked_at",
    "opportunity_url",
    "status",
    "funding_proof",
    "gross_amount",
    "fees",
    "net_if_accepted",
    "identity_requirements",
    "spend_required",
    "deadline",
    "competition",
    "eligible",
    "decision",
    "reason"
  ],
  "properties": {
    "schema": {
      "const": "signal-to-settlement/marketplace-gate/1"
    },
    "checked_at": {
      "type": "string",
      "format": "date-time"
    },
    "opportunity_url": {
... full file included separately; 108 lines total ...
    },
    "reason": {
      "type": "string",
      "minLength": 5
    }
  }
}
```

order-delivery-contract.schema.json

SHA-256:

1d723799a7276b10b015b800fa099de030df62c5dd33e4376dcc3bbae0c9d332

```
{
  "$schema": "https://json-schema.org/draft/2020-12/schema",
  "$id": "https://earnestpenny.com/schemas/order-delivery-contract/1",
  "title": "Order to Delivery Contract",
  "type": "object",
  "additionalProperties": false,
  "required": [
    "schema",
    "order_id",
    "buyer_route",
    "listing_id",
    "payment_proof",
    "request_message_id",
    "input_hashes",
    "promised_outputs",
    "acceptance_checks",
    "deadline",
    "correction_path"
  ],
  "properties": {
    "schema": {
      "const": "signal-to-settlement/order-delivery-contract/1"
    },
    "order_id": {
      "type": "string",
      "minLength": 1
    },
    "buyer_route": {
      "type": "string",
      "minLength": 1
    },
    "listing_id": {
      "format": "date-time"
    },
    "correction_path": {
      "type": "string",
      "minLength": 5
    }
  }
}
```

... full file included separately; 73 lines total ...

pain-signal-card.schema.json

SHA-256:

50599886801ffb8ed780ae135043e82b1499e14285ed9f1db3d6f4fcc4d748a6

```
{
  "$schema": "https://json-schema.org/draft/2020-12/schema",
  "$id": "https://earnestpenny.com/schemas/pain-signal-card/1",
  "title": "Pain Signal Card",
  "type": "object",
  "additionalProperties": false,
  "required": [
    "schema",
    "observed_at",
    "source_url",
    "speaker",
    "pain_in_their_words",
    "current_workaround",
    "urgency_evidence",
    "budget_evidence",
    "freshness_deadline",
    "unknowns"
  ],
  "properties": {
    "schema": {
      "const": "signal-to-settlement/pain-signal-card/1"
    },
    "observed_at": {
      "type": "string",
      "format": "date-time"
    },
    "source_url": {
      "type": "string",
      "format": "uri",
      "pattern": "^https://"
    },
    "speaker": {
      ... full file included separately; 69 lines total ...
    },
    "unknowns": {
      "type": "array",
      "items": {
        "type": "string"
      }
    }
  }
}
```

prior-art-exhaustion.md

SHA-256:
b224f11a6f8e2e5a6b7efb6d830505d78ca1dee4ff78b137250d034e391c5527

```
# Prior-art exhaustion log

## Whole-job question

- What complete answer, product, service, or dataset already solves this
  job?
- Primary search terms:
- GitHub repositories checked:
- Forks and neighboring repositories checked:
- Issues and discussions checked:
- Current product pages checked:

## Coverage matrix

| Candidate | Covers | Missing | Adopt | Reject | Evidence URL | Checked at
|
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | |

## Build decision

- Smallest unsolved job:
- Why adoption alone does not fit:
- Falsifier that would cancel this build:
- Date to search again:
```

prospect-evidence-dossier.md

SHA-256:

e928f67cd92d766a0fea740f87fe3b6fd3715f33d9592668f42661e2eca1d0df

Prospect evidence dossier

- Prospect identity:
- Checked at:
- Exact public pain statement:
- Primary source URL:
- Current workaround:
- Urgency evidence:
- Budget or funding evidence:
- Why this offer changes a decision:
- One falsifier:
- Allowed contact channel:
- Prior contact count:
- Stop or cooldown rule:

Under-100-word opener

Observation:

Concrete useful point:

One relevant question:

Offer only if invited or channel permits:

revenue-constitution.schema.json

SHA-256:

f069a5289d73f78902b52342aa9886e61577512e598a51f2637f5582cb095750

```
{
  "$schema": "https://json-schema.org/draft/2020-12/schema",
  "$id": "https://earnestpenny.com/schemas/revenue-constitution/1",
  "title": "Revenue Constitution",
  "type": "object",
  "additionalProperties": false,
  "required": [
    "schema",
    "outside_customer_definition",
    "recognized_when",
    "excluded_sources",
    "profit_formula",
    "reporting_currency"
  ],
  "properties": {
    "schema": {
      "const": "signal-to-settlement/revenue-constitution/1"
    },
    "outside_customer_definition": {
      "type": "string",
      "minLength": 20
    },
    "recognized_when": {
      "type": "array",
      "minItems": 2,
      "items": {
        "type": "string",
        "minLength": 5
      }
    },
    "excluded_sources": {
      "type": "array",
      ... full file included separately; 49 lines total ...
      "minLength": 8
    },
    "reporting_currency": {
      "type": "string",
      "pattern": "^[A-Z]{3}$"
    }
  }
}
```