



From Zero to First Reply

Build your first lead list, verify it, and launch campaign #1 in 7 days — without burning a domain.

Everyone teaches you how to send. Nobody tells you who to send to.

There are a hundred guides on warmup, SPF records, and subject lines. They all assume the same thing: that you already have a clean, verified list of the right people sitting in a CSV. Most people starting cold email do not. They have an idea, a product, and an empty spreadsheet — and the first thing they do is the one thing that kills the channel before it starts.

This is the playbook for the seven days before any of the deliverability advice applies. It takes you from a blank page to a live first campaign: define who you are emailing, build the list, verify it, write a sequence that gets replies, and launch it without torching a fresh domain on day one.

The day-one mistake

Buying a scraped 50,000-row list off a marketplace, loading it into a brand-new mailbox, and blasting all of it on the first send. Unverified lists run 8–15%+ bounce rates. A fresh domain that bounces above ~4% on its first batch gets reputation-flagged for weeks. You do not get that domain back cheaply. Smaller, verified, and slower beats big, dirty, and fast every single time.

What you will have by the end of the week

- A written ICP that describes people who can actually reply (not just people who exist).
- A list of 200–500 verified, deliverable contacts — your first real campaign list.
- A 3-step sequence written to the 2026 inbox-placement rules, not 2019 copy advice.
- A pre-flight check that confirms your mailbox is ready to send cold.
- A live campaign, and the four numbers to watch in its first 48 hours.

You do not need a big budget. You need 200 of the right people, a clean list, and the discipline not to rush the send. Everything below is built around that.

The 7-day plan at a glance

One week, seven outcomes. Each day produces one artifact the next day depends on. Do them in order — skipping list verification to "save a day" is how week two becomes a domain-recovery exercise.

DAY	FOCUS	YOU FINISH WITH
1	Define the ICP	A one-paragraph profile of who replies
2	Source the list	A raw list of 300–800 matching contacts
3	Enrich + verify	200–500 verified, deliverable emails
4	Write the sequence	A 3-step cadence, each email < 125 words
5	Set up the campaign	Sequence loaded, variables mapped, schedule set
6	Pre-flight check	A mailbox confirmed ready to send cold
7	Launch + read signals	A live campaign and a 48-hour watch list

A note on volume

This playbook targets a first list of 200–500 contacts and a first-week send of 20–40/day from a single warmed mailbox. That is deliberately small. The goal of campaign #1 is not pipeline — it is a clean reputation signal and proof your message gets replies. Scale comes after you have both.

Define an ICP that can actually reply

Most "ICPs" describe a company. A useful ICP describes a person who has the problem you solve, the authority to act on it, and a reason to read a cold email this month. Get this wrong and nothing downstream matters — perfect deliverability to the wrong inbox is still a 0% reply rate.

The four filters

1. **Firmographics.** Industry, company size, geography, and — if you sell software — tech stack. Be specific: "B2B SaaS, 10–50 employees, US/UK" beats "tech companies."
2. **Role + seniority.** Who feels the pain *and* can act on it. Often not the same person. For week one, prefer founders and individual contributors over VP+ titles — they reply more and complain less.
3. **A trigger.** A reason this person would care *now*: recent hiring, new funding, a tool they just adopted, a job change. A trigger turns a cold email into a timely one.
4. **Reachability.** Be honest about who you can actually find a verified email for. A perfect ICP you cannot source is a fantasy. If you can only find generic `info@` addresses, narrow the segment.

Write the anti-persona too

Just as important as who you target is who you exclude. List the segments that look right but waste sends: companies too small to pay, roles with no budget authority, industries that legally cannot adopt you, regions you cannot support. Every name you exclude here is a bounce or a non-reply you avoid later.

The one-paragraph output

By end of day 1 you should be able to fill this in: "I am emailing [role] at [company type, size, geography] who [recent trigger], because they [specific pain I solve]. I am not emailing [anti-persona]." If you cannot write that sentence yet, do not start sourcing — you will build a list you have to throw away.

Build the list — without buying a dirty one

Now you turn the ICP paragraph into a list of real people. The rule for week one: every contact must be sourced fresh and individually findable. No bulk-bought lists, no scraped dumps — those carry the bounce rates that kill new domains.

Where good first lists come from

- **A lead database with filters.** Search by title, industry, company size, and location, then export. This is the fastest path from an ICP to a list and the easiest to keep clean.
- **LinkedIn / Sales Navigator searches.** Tight filters that mirror your ICP, then enrich the results to find verified work emails.
- **Your own warm graph.** People who follow you, signed up but never converted, attended a webinar, or interacted with a post. Highest reply rate of any source.
- **Trigger-based sources.** Job boards (companies hiring for the role your product supports), funding announcements, new-tool adoption signals.

Do not buy a list for campaign #1

Marketplace lists are sold to dozens of buyers, are months stale, and are loaded with role-based and dead addresses. They are the single fastest way to put a new domain on a blocklist. If a vendor sells "500k verified leads for \$99," the word doing the lying is "verified."

How many to source

Aim to source 300–800 raw contacts on day 2. Verification on day 3 will remove 20–40% of them, leaving you the 200–500 deliverable contacts you want for campaign #1. Sourcing more than ~800 now is wasted effort — you cannot responsibly send to them in week one anyway.

How SendKit handles this

SendKit's Lead Finder searches by title, industry, and location and enriches contacts through multiple providers, so you go from an ICP to an exportable list inside the same tool you send from — no stitching together a scraper, an enrichment tool, and a verifier. The first batch of results is free to preview.

Enrich and verify — the step that protects your domain

This is the day most beginners skip and every experienced sender treats as non-negotiable.

A raw list always contains dead addresses, typos, and catch-all domains. Sending to them is what produces the bounce rate that flags your domain. Verification is cheap insurance on an expensive asset.

What verification tells you

Deliverable	Mailbox exists and accepts mail. Safe to send.
Risky / catch-all	Domain accepts all addresses, so existence cannot be confirmed. Hold these out of week one.
Undeliverable	Mailbox does not exist. Remove entirely — every one is a guaranteed bounce.
Unknown	Verifier could not get a definitive answer. Treat as risky; exclude for now.

The rules for campaign #1

1. Send only to **deliverable** addresses in week one. Exclude risky, catch-all, undeliverable, and unknown.
2. Remove **role-based addresses** (`info@` , `sales@` , `support@` , `admin@`). They carry higher complaint rates and rarely reach a person.
3. Verify within **30 days** of sending. Email lists decay roughly 2–3% per month as people change jobs — a list verified six months ago is no longer a verified list.
4. Target a projected bounce rate **under 2%**. If your verified list still looks shaky, cut deeper rather than send wider.

Why the bounce gate matters

Bounce rate is the metric mailbox providers watch most closely on a new sender. Stay under ~2% and you build reputation. Cross ~4% and Gmail de-prioritises your domain for weeks. Verification is the difference between those two outcomes — and on a 500-contact list it costs a few dollars.

How SendKit handles this

SendKit verifies emails on import and again at send time — flagging deliverable, risky, undeliverable, and unknown, and detecting catch-all domains — so undeliverable contacts never reach a live send. The bounce gate is enforced for you instead of discovered after the damage.

Write a 3-step sequence built for 2026 inboxes

You have a clean list. Now the message. Forget the long AIDA scripts from old swipe files — they read as marketing, and marketing lands in Promotions or Spam. A first cold email should look like a short note a real person typed to one other person.

The first-touch rules

1. **Under 125 words.** Shorter first touches consistently place and reply better. If it scrolls, it is too long.
2. **Subject under 60 characters.** No **FREE**, no **GUARANTEE**, no all-caps, no emoji. Lowercase and specific beats clever.
3. **One idea, one ask.** Name the problem, show you understand their situation, ask one low-friction question. Do not pitch features.
4. **One link maximum — or none.** First touches with zero links place best. If you must link, point to your root domain, never a tracker.
5. **No images, no attachments, no tracking pixel on step 1.** Each of these is a spam signal from a stranger. A plain-text-looking email wins.
6. **Personalise the first line.** One specific, true detail about them or their company. Generic "I came across your profile" openers are ignored.

The 3-step cadence

STEP	TIMING	JOB OF THE EMAIL
1 — First touch	Day 0	Trigger + problem + one question. Under 125 words.
2 — Reframe	Day 3–4	Same thread. New angle or a one-line proof point. Even shorter.
3 — Breakup	Day 7–8	Short, low-pressure close: "Should I close the loop on this?" Often the highest-reply step.

Reply to the same thread

Steps 2 and 3 should be replies on the original thread, not fresh emails. Threaded follow-ups place better and read as a continuing conversation rather than a campaign. Keep each follow-up shorter than the last.

Need a starting point for the copy itself? SendKit's "60 Cold Email Templates by Industry" gives you tested, under-125-word first touches organised by buyer — a faster start than a blank page.

Set up the campaign

The list is clean and the copy is written. Day 5 is assembly: load the sequence, map your personalisation variables, and set a send schedule that looks human. This is mechanical — the thinking is already done.

The build checklist

1. Import the verified list and **map every variable** your copy uses — first name, company, the personalised first-line field. A broken `{{first_name}}` that renders as "Hi ," kills the email instantly.
2. Load all **three steps** with their day-3 and day-7 delays. Confirm steps 2 and 3 are threaded replies, not new sends.
3. Set a **send window** of 09:00–11:00 in the recipient's local time, weekdays only. Cold email sent at 3am or on Sunday reads as automated.
4. Cap the campaign at **20–40 sends per day** for week one. Resist the urge to send the whole list on day one.
5. Turn on **auto-stop on reply** so anyone who responds drops out of the remaining steps. Nothing burns goodwill like a follow-up to someone who already replied.

Send a test to yourself first

Before the campaign goes live, send step 1 to a personal Gmail and a personal Outlook address. Check three things: variables render correctly, the email lands in the primary inbox (not Promotions or Spam), and it looks like a personal note on mobile. Fix the message if it lands wrong — do not blame the mailbox yet.

How SendKit handles this

SendKit's campaign builder loads multi-step sequences with conditional logic and per-step delays, handles variable mapping and spintax, auto-stops leads on reply, and matches send patterns to look human. The starter cadence above maps directly onto it.

Confirm the mailbox is ready to send cold

A clean list sent from an unprepared mailbox still lands in spam. Day 6 is the foundation check. If the mailbox is brand new and unwarmed, this is where you find out — and it is far cheaper to find out today than after launch.

The pre-flight checklist

1. **Authentication.** SPF, DKIM (2048-bit), and DMARC are all published and validating. This is now required by Gmail and Yahoo for bulk senders — not optional.
2. **Sending subdomain.** You are sending from a subdomain (e.g. `mail.yourdomain.com`), never the root domain you use for everything else.
3. **Warmup.** The mailbox has been warming for at least a few weeks and is placing in the primary inbox on a seed test. A cold mailbox sending cold mail on day one is the classic mistake.
4. **Domain age.** The sending domain is at least ~30 days old. Brand-new domains get sandboxed automatically.
5. **Reply-to is monitored.** Replies go to an inbox a human actually watches. Replies into a void waste your best signal.
6. **Signature + identity.** Real name, role, company, and a working unsubscribe line. The display name matches a real person.

If the mailbox is not warmed yet

Do not launch. A new mailbox needs warmup before it carries cold sends, or the first batch torches the reputation you are trying to build. Start warmup now and shift launch to next week. This is the one place "wait" is the right call — see the 30/60/90-Day Warmup Playbook for the full ramp.

How SendKit handles this

SendKit auto-publishes SPF/DKIM/DMARC the moment a mailbox connects, runs AI warmup on a non-linear ramp, and watches DNS health continuously. Every account also gets a dedicated, isolated IP — so another sender's bad behaviour can never drag down a clean campaign of yours.

Launch — and read the first 48 hours

Everything is ready. You launch the campaign at a small daily volume and then resist the urge to judge it by replies alone. The first two days are about health signals, not pipeline. Reputation first; results follow.

The four numbers to watch

SIGNAL	HEALTHY	WARNING	STOP AND FIX
Bounce rate	< 2%	2–4%	> 4% — pause, re-verify the list
Spam complaints	< 0.1%	0.1–0.3%	> 0.3% — pause, fix targeting/copy
Reply rate (B2B)	2–4%+	1–2%	< 1% — rework message or ICP
Inbox placement	> 80% primary	60–80%	< 60% — fix copy, recheck warmup

What to do — and not do — in week one

- **Watch bounce rate first.** It is the earliest sign of a list problem. If it climbs above 4%, pause immediately and re-verify before sending more.
- **Reply, fast, to everyone who responds** — even "not interested." A live conversation is the strongest deliverability signal you can send.
- **Do not scale on day two.** Hold volume flat for the full week. A clean week at 30/day earns you the right to ramp; a big day-two blast undoes it.
- **Do not obsess over open rate.** Since iOS privacy changes, opens are inflated and unreliable. Reply rate is the signal that matters.
- **Log what landed.** Note which subject lines and first lines got replies. That is the raw material for campaign #2.

You have completed the loop

List → verified → sequenced → sent → first replies. You now have a repeatable system and real data instead of guesses. Campaign #2 is the same seven steps with a tighter ICP and the copy that actually got responses.

The one-page launch checklist

Print this. It is the entire playbook compressed into the checks that matter, in order.

LIST

- ICP paragraph written, anti-persona defined
- 200–500 contacts sourced fresh (no bought lists)
- Verified within 30 days; deliverable-only
- Role-based addresses (`info@` , `sales@`) removed
- Projected bounce rate under 2%

MESSAGE

- Step 1 under 125 words, subject under 60 characters
- No images, attachments, or tracking pixel on step 1
- One link max (or none), pointing to root domain
- Steps 2 and 3 are threaded replies, each shorter
- First line personalised with one true detail

MAILBOX

- SPF + DKIM (2048-bit) + DMARC published and validating
- Sending from a subdomain, domain $\geq$ 30 days old
- Warmed and placing in primary on a seed test
- Reply-to monitored by a human

LAUNCH

- Variables mapped; test sent to Gmail + Outlook
- Send window 09:00–11:00 local, weekdays, 20–40/day
- Auto-stop on reply enabled
- Watching bounce, complaints, reply rate, placement

The list is the campaign.

Most cold email failures are blamed on copy or deliverability. The real cause is usually upstream: the wrong people, an unverified list, a domain sent too hard too soon. Get the first three days right and the rest of cold email gets dramatically easier.

You can run this entire playbook with a spreadsheet, a separate enrichment tool, a separate verifier, and a separate sending tool stitched together. It works — it is just slow and easy to break at the seams.

SendKit collapses the whole loop into one place: find and enrich leads, verify them on import and at send, build the sequence, and send from a warmed mailbox on a dedicated, isolated IP with authentication handled for you. The thinking in this playbook is still yours to do — the plumbing is not.

Start your first campaign in SendKit

Find your list with Lead Finder, verify it on import, load the 3-step cadence above, and send from a warmed mailbox — set up in under 15 minutes, no onboarding call. → sendkit.ai

Sources & references.

Industry data behind the bounce thresholds, reply benchmarks, list-decay figures, and post-2024 authentication rules referenced in this playbook.

- 01** Email sender guidelines — official Gmail / Google Workspace requirements (SPF, DKIM, DMARC, < 0.3% complaint rate) effective Feb 1, 2024
Google · 2024
<https://support.google.com/a/answer/81126?hl=en>
- 02** An Overview of Bulk Sender Changes at Yahoo / Gmail — authentication and complaint-rate requirements
AWS Messaging & Targeting Blog · Updated Feb 27, 2024
<https://aws.amazon.com/blogs/messaging-and-targeting/an-overview-of-bulk-sender-changes-at-yahoo-gmail/>
- 03** B2B Cold Email Response Rates (2025 Study) — 16.5M emails analyzed; reply-rate benchmarks and pixel-tracking impact
Belkins · 2025
<https://belkins.io/blog/cold-email-response-rates>
- 04** Cold Email Response Rates: 3.1% Average (2026 Data) — reply and bounce distribution by performance tier
Cleanlist · Feb 18, 2026
<https://www.cleanlist.ai/blog/2026-02-18-cold-email-response-rate-statistics>
- 05** Cold Email Bounce Rate — acceptable thresholds and the impact of list verification
Mailwarm · 2024–2026
<https://www.mailwarm.com/blog/cold-email-bounce-rate-acceptable-reduction>
- 06** Email list decay and data hygiene — why B2B lists lose ~2–3% of contacts per month
ZeroBounce · 2024
<https://www.zerobounce.net/email-list-decay/>
- 07** How Apple iOS 15 is Impacting Email Marketers — open-rate inflation and why reply rate is the reliable signal
HubSpot · 2022, ongoing
<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/apple-ios-15-email-marketing-impact-data>