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ACCOUNT-BASED MARKETING · LANDING THE HUNDRED CLIENTS THAT MATTER

The Whale Hunting Playbook.

Most firms market with a net and sort through what it drags up. This is the spear: name the hundred accounts you actually want, surround them with search and paid air cover, then reach the people inside them one human message at a time. How to build the list, run the campaign, open the conversation and keep it warm for as long as the deal takes.

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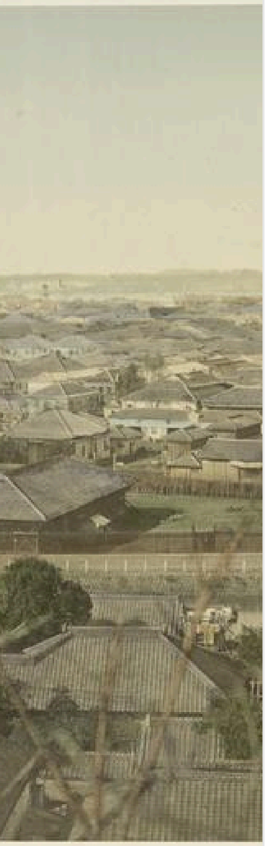
13 pages | 15 min read



View of Yokohama.

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What’s inside

You do not need a thousand leads. You need the right hundred.

This is a rewrite of our original ABM guide. The spear is the same. What has changed: the buyer researches alone for longer, AI engines now sit between them and you, and the outreach tactics that were merely rude in 2020 are now unlawful or blocked. Everything here can be run by one marketer and one seller, in the open, with the client’s name on it.

Stop fishing with a net

Most B2B firms market the way a trawler fishes: throw the widest net the budget allows, haul it in, and pay a sales team to sort the catch. Small fish, old boots, seaweed. Occasionally something worth keeping. The cost is not just the media; it is the hours spent qualifying people who were never going to buy, and the good accounts that never swam near the net at all.

Account-based marketing inverts this. You decide, by name, which hundred companies you want as clients, and you put every dollar and every hour into being known by the people inside them before they ever need you. The list is small enough that a human can hold it in their head, and valuable enough that one win pays for the year.

THE NET

Broad audiences, generic "what is marketing" content, a contact form and a hope. Leads are measured by count. Sales spends its week disqualifying. The best prospects are researching quietly and never fill in the form, so you meet them only when they are ready for a price comparison, with the shortlist already written.

THE SPEAR

One hundred named accounts. Content written for the questions they are typing right now. Ads that only their staff will ever see. A human who reads their posts, sends one useful thing, and asks for fifteen minutes when it has been earned. Measured by accounts engaged and meetings held, not by leads. Slow, specific and hard to copy.

WHY NOW · ONE

The buyer researches alone

Gartner's much-quoted finding still holds: buying groups spend roughly a sixth of their time with any supplier at all. The rest is reviews, your site, your LinkedIn, and asking peers.

WHY NOW · TWO

Machines shortlist first

A founder asks ChatGPT or Gemini who to consider before opening a browser. If your firm is not an entity the engines can describe, you are not in the room. The GEO Playbook covers the fix.

WHY NOW · THREE

Volume tactics are closing

Scraped email lists breach the Spam Act, automation gets LinkedIn accounts restricted, and inboxes filter the rest. What is left is the thing that always worked: being useful to a specific person.

Building the Dream 100

You cannot hunt whales without knowing where they swim. The Dream 100 is a spreadsheet of one hundred specific companies, chosen on evidence, that you would be proud to name as clients in three years. Nothing else starts until every row is filled. Three criteria, in this order.

01 · FIRMOGRAPHICS

The Goldilocks zone

Big enough to pay a proper retainer, small enough to decide in a quarter: for most of our clients, $2m to $20m revenue. Be narrow on industry. “Construction” is a net; “commercial fit-out contractors in Victoria” is a spear.

02 · FIT SIGNALS

Evidence they have the problem

Public technology footprints (BuiltWith, Wappalyzer) if you sell around a platform. Job ads for the role you replace. A new office, an acquisition, a rebrand. Anything you can see without logging into their systems.

03 · REACHABILITY

Can you get to a person?

Do the decision-makers post on LinkedIn, speak at events, sit in an association you can join? A whale that never surfaces is not a target, however good the fit.

FIG. 1 · WHERE THE NAMES COME FROM, RANKED BY QUALITY PER HOUR

Your own won deals	Take your ten best clients. List every firm that looks like them: same sector, same size, same problem. Twenty to thirty names, and the highest strike rate you will get.
Lost and stalled deals	Firms that shortlisted you and chose someone else. They already believe they need this; eighteen months on, the incumbent has usually disappointed. Add sector award shortlists and member directories.
Your clients’ peers	Ask five happy clients: “Who else in your world should we be talking to?” A warm name and, often, an introduction. Fill the last gaps with LinkedIn’s company filters, used to find companies, not to harvest contacts.

ACTION STEP

One sheet. Columns: company, website, sector, size, fit signal, source, tier (A: top twenty, B: the rest). One hundred rows, dated. Everything that follows hangs off this file.

WHAT NOT TO PUT IN IT

Bought contact lists, scraped emails and phone numbers, or “enriched” profiles from data brokers. Unlawful to use for unsolicited contact under the Spam Act and Privacy Act, and every bought list we have seen was a third wrong. Company data is public; people’s data is theirs.

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The people inside the account

You are not selling to a logo. Inside every firm on the list, three or four people decide, and each needs a different argument. The Buyer Personas Playbook describes the roles; here is how they show up in a whale account.

THE OWNER OR CEO

Still signs anything over $10k

In a $2m to $20m firm the founder is rarely out of the loop. Reads little, remembers everything, trusts peers and whatever the AI engine named. Your goal is recognition, not a pitch: three sightings of your name before anyone asks for a meeting.

THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Owns the problem you solve

Marketing director, CTO or operations lead, depending on what you sell. Does the searching and shortlisting. Your bottom-of-funnel content and first message are for them. As your champion the deal moves; bypassed, it dies.

THE CFO OR FINANCE MANAGER

Holds the budget, asks “why now?”

Arrives at proposal stage. Wants a number, a term, a way out and a reason this cannot wait until next financial year. Never the first contact; prepare the page that answers them early.

FIG. 2 · WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT AN ACCOUNT BEFORE THE FIRST MESSAGE · ALL FROM PUBLIC SOURCES

Who is who	Names and titles of the three roles, from the company site and LinkedIn. Nothing else.	**What they said**	The department head’s last five posts. What they are proud of, what they complain about.
What changed	New hire, site, product, award or leader. The trigger you refer to when you connect.	**Who they use now**	The incumbent, if visible: footer credit, case study, tender notice. Know them; never disparage them.
Who you share	Mutual connections, a client in their sector, a shared association. The warmest route in.	**The likely gap**	One sentence: what is broken and what it costs them. Tested in the first meeting.

THE LINE WE DO NOT CROSS

Research the company as deeply as you like; research the person only as far as they have published about their work. Personal numbers, home suburbs, family, a scraped email: none of it goes on the sheet. It is a privacy breach, and it makes the first message creepy.

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Air cover, part one: search

Picture the operations director at a $6m logistics firm on your list. The software is failing again. She does not call a salesperson; she opens Google, or increasingly ChatGPT, and types "best fleet management software for mid-sized operators Australia". If you are not in the answer, you do not exist to her. Air cover means being in the answer before the spear is thrown.

Your Dream 100 already know what your category is. Skip the "what is" articles. Write for the searches people make when they have decided to buy and are choosing whom to buy from. Four kinds, and each needs one honest, specific page.

01 · Comparison

"[Your service] vs [the alternative]"

Managed IT vs in-house; fixed-fee agency vs freelancer; your platform vs the one they use. Fair to both sides, or the reader stops trusting you at paragraph two.

02 · Best in class

"Best [service] for [sector] in [city]"

A real round-up that names competitors and says who each suits. It ranks because it is useful, and AI engines quote it because it is structured like an answer.

03 · Cost

"Cost of [service] in [city]"

Publish the range and what moves it. The CFO on your list will read this page twice. Firms that hide pricing hand this query to a rival who does not.

04 · Alternatives

"Alternatives to [incumbent]"

Whoever your Dream 100 use now, some of them are typing this. Be the calm, complete answer, with yourself listed honestly among the options.

THREE PAGES, THEN STOP

Write three bottom-of-funnel pages for the sector your Tier A accounts share, each answering one of the four query types, before publishing anything else. Build them to the standard in the SEO and AEO Playbooks: the answer in the first fifty words, named clients, real numbers. Then measure for ninety days.

THE ENGINES ARE PART OF THE AIR COVER NOW

The owner on your list asks an AI assistant "who should a 60-person engineering firm in Brisbane use for [service]?" The pages above are what it reads to answer. Add the firm's entity work from the GEO Playbook (consistent name, address, sector and clients across directories and reviews) and the prompt itself to your tracker.

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Air cover, part two: paid to a list of one hundred

Most paid media tries to reach everyone who might buy. Here the audience is the hundred companies on the sheet and nobody else. LinkedIn's company-list targeting shows ads only to people who work at firms you name. Lawful, because it targets employers not individuals; cheap, because the audience is tiny.

FIG. 3 · THE PILOT, BY THE NUMBERS

Audience	Dream 100 company list, narrowed to manager and above in the committee functions. Expect 1,500 to 4,000 members.
Budget	$1,500 to $3,000 a month for ninety days. At $6 to $9 a click that buys reach and frequency; clicks are a bonus.
Objective	Awareness or engagement, not lead forms. You are buying familiarity so the message on page 08 lands on a known name. Two to four exposures a month each.
Read it as	Accounts reached, site visits from Dream 100 domains, reply rate on outreach before and after. Not cost per lead.

Ad one · The hook

"Why most [sector] firms overpay for [service]"

A problem they recognise, stated plainly. Links to your comparison or cost page.

Ad two · The proof

Ninety-second case study, named client, before and after number

The client speaking, no music bed. Real results only; the ACCC reads LinkedIn too.

Ad three · The offer

"The 2026 [sector] benchmark: what 40 firms your size spend, and get"

Something they would pay for, given free. Built per the LinkedIn Paid Playbook; it becomes the "insight" on page 09.

EXTEND IT, CAREFULLY

Retarget Dream 100 page visitors on Meta and Google Display with the same creatives (Meta and PPC Playbooks). Never upload individuals' emails as a custom audience unless they gave them to you for that purpose, with an opt-out. Company-list targeting needs none of that, which is why it comes first.

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The spear: connect, then go quiet

The air cover has been running for a month. Names on the list have seen yours a few times. Now one person at your firm, ideally the one who will run the account, starts reaching the department heads on LinkedIn, one at a time, by hand. Four steps over roughly six weeks. The first two ask for nothing.

STEP ONE · WEEK ONE

The no-pitch connection

Send a connection request with either no note, or a note that gives context and sells nothing. Refer to something they published or something the company did. Your trigger from the account sheet goes here.

NOT THIS

“Hi, I run an agency that helps firms like yours grow. Would love to show you how we can help.”

THIS

“Hi John, saw your post on the new Brisbane warehouse. Big project. Keen to follow how the fit-out goes.”

Once accepted, do nothing. No welcome message, no deck, no “thanks for connecting, quick question”. The acceptance is not permission to sell; it is permission to be seen.

STEP TWO · WEEKS TWO AND THREE

The silent engagement

For two weeks, read what they post and respond as a peer would. A comment that adds a fact, a question, or a related experience. Two or three sentences. Never “Great post!”, never a link to your site.

Meanwhile, post yourself: the benchmark data, the case study, an opinion about their sector. The LinkedIn Organic Playbook covers the cadence. Your name appears in their notifications and your work appears in their feed, from two directions at once.

If they engage back, a like or a reply, note the date on the sheet. That is the signal to move to step three. If they do not, give it a third week, then move anyway; silence is normal.

RULE ONE · NO AUTOMATION

No connection bots, no sequenced DMs, no “AI personalisation” tools that scrape profiles. They breach LinkedIn’s terms and get the account restricted, and the people on your list can tell. Every message is written by a human who has read the profile. Twenty accounts a week is a full day’s work and the right pace.

RULE TWO · STAY WHERE YOU WERE INVITED

A LinkedIn connection is not consent to email or call. Under the Spam Act you may email a published work address only about matters relevant to that role, with a working unsubscribe, and once they ask you to stop, you stop. Keep the conversation on the platform until they move it.

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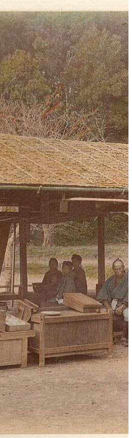


The spear: give something, then ask

Three weeks of being visible and useful buys you one direct message. Spend it on them, not on you. The research from page 05 and the benchmark from page 07 are what make it possible to send something specific rather than a brochure.

STEP THREE · WEEK FOUR

The insight message

> *"Hi Sarah, saw the company is opening in New Zealand. We took a similar-sized firm through the cross-border payroll and tax setup last year and wrote up a one-page checklist of what caught them out. Happy to send it if useful. No stress if not."*

Notice what it does. It refers to their trigger. It offers one specific, finished thing. It asks for nothing and gives them an easy out. The tone is a peer's, not a vendor's. Australians in particular buy from people who do not appear to need the sale.

If they say yes, send it inside the hour, as a file or a link with no form in front of it. If they say nothing, that is your answer for now; note the date and leave them in the air cover.

STEP FOUR · WEEK FIVE OR SIX

The transition

> *"Glad the checklist helped. We're working with a few firms in your space on the same expansion problem and are seeing some numbers on what it actually costs in year one. Would a fifteen-minute call next Thursday be useful? Happy to share what we're seeing either way."*

Now you have earned a small ask. Keep it small: fifteen minutes, a specific day, framed as sharing rather than presenting. The benchmark data is the reason to meet; your services are not mentioned.

One follow-up a week later if there is no reply, then stop asking. They stay on the list and in the air cover. A "not now" in ABM means "ask again in a quarter", not "try harder".

30–40%
Connection acceptance, with a relevant note and visible air cover. Below 20%, the note is the problem.

20%
Of connections reply to the insight message. Below 10%, the offer is not specific enough to them.

30%
Of replies agree to a meeting. Roughly six meetings per hundred accounts per cycle.

1 in 3
Meetings that become a proposal within six months. Two whales a year from a hundred names is a good programme.

The first meeting, and the long “not yet”

The whole point of the LinkedIn work was to get off LinkedIn. You have fifteen minutes on a call with someone who agreed to hear some numbers. Do not open a capabilities deck. Do not talk about your history. Ask three questions and listen to the answers.

THE GAP CONVERSATION

Current state. “Where are things now? What is working, and what is broken?” Let them describe it in their words; you will reuse those words in the proposal.

Desired state. “Where do you need this to be in twelve months? What does the owner expect to see?” This is the number the CFO will judge you against later.

The gap. “What is stopping you getting there?” Time, people, the incumbent, budget, politics. Your service is the bridge across this gap or it is not; if it is not, say so and keep the relationship.

Then share the benchmarks. The numbers you promised, with their situation placed against them. Close by asking whether a written view of the gap would be useful. That document is your proposal, and it is in their language.

NURTURING THE “NOT YET”

Most whales are not ready. Contracts run for years, budgets are set annually, and the person who wants to change is not always the one who can. A good meeting that ends in “not this year” is a win. Do not drop them; move them to a quarterly rhythm.

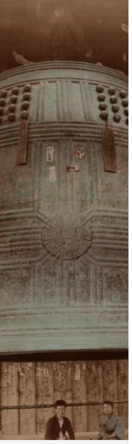
Something physical. A printed copy of the benchmark, a book you think they would value, a handwritten note after the call. Post to the office, never the home. Almost nobody does this any more, which is why it is remembered.

The small dinner. Six to eight people from the list and your clients, same sector, no presentation, no selling. You are the host who knows everyone. Two a year is enough.

Keep the air cover on. They stay in the LinkedIn company list. When their contract comes up, or the incumbent stumbles, yours is the name they already know. Australian business runs on relationships; ABM is just keeping them on purpose.

WHEN THE CFO ARRIVES

Proposal stage brings the budget-holder in. Have the page ready before you need it: price, term, notice period, who owns what, and the cost of the gap staying open for another year in their own numbers. The Website Playbook’s “how we work” pattern does this job. Send it with the proposal rather than waiting to be asked.



Running the programme

Whale hunting fails in one of two ways: the firm gives up after eight weeks because nothing has closed, or it drifts because nobody owns the sheet. Both are fixed by treating it as a standing operation with a weekly rhythm and a small set of numbers that are allowed to be slow.

THE WEEKLY HOUR

Monday, one hour, two people. The marketer who runs the air cover and the seller who throws the spear. The sheet open. Every Tier A account gets a line of status; Tier B is reviewed monthly.

Twenty new connections, twenty comments, five insight messages. That is one person's week. It keeps the whole list moving through the four steps in about six weeks per cohort.

Read the signals, not the clicks. Which Dream 100 domains visited the site this week (your analytics will show company-level traffic without identifying people). Who engaged on LinkedIn. Move those accounts up a step.

Quarterly: prune and refill. Any account with no signal after two full cycles goes back to the pool and a fresh name takes its place. The list is a hundred live accounts, not a hundred names you once liked.

FIG. 4 · WHAT TO REPORT, AND WHEN TO EXPECT IT

Month one	List complete. Three BOFU pages live. Ads reaching 60%+ of the audience. First forty connections sent.
Month three	Accounts engaged (any signal): 30 to 40 of 100. Insight messages sent: 40. Meetings held: 4 to 8. Pages ranking for their sector.
Month six	Proposals out: 3 to 5. First whale signed, if the cycle is short in your sector. Second cohort of the list under way.
Month twelve	Two to four whales won. Pipeline value against programme cost. Decide whether to run a second list or deepen this one.

THE MATHS THAT KEEPS THE BOARD PATIENT

Programme cost for a year: roughly $30k in media, $15k in content, and one day a week of one person. One whale at a $5,000 monthly retainer over a three-year relationship is $180k. Two is the target. Nothing else in this series pays back like that, and nothing else takes as long.

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The account plan

COMPANY · WEBSITE · SECTOR
e.g. Harbourline Fit-outs · harbourline.com.au · commercial fit-out, VIC

SIZE · TIER · SOURCE
Revenue or staff estimate · A / B · where the name came from

FIT SIGNAL · TRIGGER
What you can see that says they have the problem, and what changed recently

THE COMMITTEE · WORK TITLES AND WHAT THEY HAVE PUBLISHED, NOTHING PERSONAL

Role	Name · title	Last thing they posted about
Owner / CEO		
Head of dept.		
CFO / finance		

INCUMBENT · MUTUAL CONNECTIONS
Who they use now, if visible · who you both know · shared associations or clients

THE LIKELY GAP · ONE SENTENCE
What we think is broken, what it costs them, and the insight we can send about it

THE FOUR STEPS · DATE EACH ONE

01 Connected
Note referred to:

02 Engaged
Comments left · their response:

03 Insight sent
What we sent · reply:

04 Asked
Meeting date · outcome:

SIGNALS · SITE VISITS, AD ENGAGEMENT, EVENT ATTENDANCE
Company-level only. Date and type.

STATUS · NEXT ACTION · NEXT REVIEW DATE
Air cover only / in sequence / met / proposal / not yet (revisit quarter) / won / released

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Do the hard work. Be specific. Be patient.

You may spend three months on an account before anyone replies. That is the normal shape of it. But one whale is worth fifty small fish, and most of your competitors will never do this, because it cannot be automated, bought or rushed. A hundred names, three honest pages, a small ad budget aimed only at them, and one human who reads before they write. Run it for a year and it becomes the most reliable pipeline you have.

START HERE THIS WEEK

01

Open a sheet. List your ten best clients, then every firm that looks like them. Stop at one hundred. Mark the top twenty Tier A.

02

Upload the list to LinkedIn as a company audience. Turn on one ad, $50 a day, pointing at your best case study.

03

Read the last five posts of one department head on the list. Send a connection note about one of them. Then wait.

Want us to run the hunt with you?

Book a free strategy session →

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