SALES PLAYBOOK · PROSPECTING · EMAIL

Email as disqualification, not closing.

The full email chapter from the VGC Sales Playbook: purpose, outcomes, writing rules, structure, AI prompts, sequences and A/B testing.

The Changing Purpose of Email

Cold email is very different to cold calling.

First we make slower progress up the commitment ladder. In a cold call we can complete the first three steps: to talk, to identify a problem and to weigh the problem's value.

In a cold email all we can do is ascertain whether the content or topic is relevant enough to trigger a reply. Cold email should be seen more as a disqualification process than prospecting.

When we change that perspective our approaches to cold email can become vastly more effective. Effectively we go from trying to win commitment over email, to simply verifying whether this is someone we could talk to.

The purpose of cold email is therefore to start making progress up the commitment ladder.

We've seen this shift intensify over the past few years and it continues with the increase of AI copy and sequencer tools.

The commitment ladder

- Commitment to talk
- Commitment to admit a problem
- Commitment to discuss the problem
- Commitment to measuring the problem
- Commitment to consider solving the problem
- Commitment to considering our solution to the problem
- Commitment to forming a consensus over our solution to the problem
- Commitment to investing what it takes to access our solution to the problem
- Commitment to action

Outcomes from Email

The effective approach for email as we head into the second half of the decade asks us to focus on a couple of specific outcomes. Where just 18 months ago it might have been possible to book a call with a single cold email, the reply rates on this approach are so low it's become ineffective.

Instead now we see best results when looking to achieve two outcomes.

The first is a single-word reply from your target, telling you that "yes" your message is relevant. This gives you the green light to follow-up and start the prospecting conversation.

The second is again a single-word reply, where your target says "yes" they'd like to receive more information. This approach is based on you having an asset — a 90-second video, a simple one-page overview, a smart graphic, a short quiz, or something else they can easily digest.

Still, anything around a 2% positive reply rate is good.

You can exceed this by sending candidates speculatively to clients. If you're taking this approach pivot to a problem-menu based call as soon as you get a reply. It's crucial that whilst you might present a candidate initially, you get to talk about problems as soon as possible.

In both cases, getting the follow-up right is essential. Typically this will mean calling the prospect, but might also include a video or voice note on LinkedIn. We want to avoid conversation over email wherever possible.

The aim of the follow-up is to ascertain what led them to respond, and then to run our problem menu by them in the way we would normally approach a cold call or inbound enquiry.

Email Rules

- Sales emails should be under one hundred words. Most should be under 70.
- An email should consist of no more than 3 lines.
- One sentence per line (two max).
- One idea per email. One idea per line. One idea per sentence.
- Short sentences with no commas.
- Simple language, no jargon.
- The call to action should be a closed question and easy to answer.
- Subject lines should be three words (Written In Capital Case).
- Subject lines should be boring/operational and look like internal emails.
- Avoid attachments, links or images. Save these for your marketing cadence.
- Avoid any use of the words "I" or "we".

Email Structure

Lead with the commercial context / kingdom thinking.

Our top line will always address a specific goal or the commercial context our target is in. This ensures they read the next line.

Cite the $10M problem.

The next line points to the problem we solve.

Label your solution with proof.

Now we introduce our solution using proof and a "hero" client.

Check for relevance / Offer an asset.

Finally we close with a simple closed question.

> *Worth talking over?* · *Want to see how?*

Or close by offering an asset.

> *Want to see the exact formula they used?* · *Would you like a top-level snapshot?*

P.S.

Tie it back to the specific person you are reaching out to. Restate the goal or commercial context if you know it is true for them. Elaborate on the specific problem they are facing. Mention why your hero client is relevant to them. Or sweeten the offer.

> *P.S. Noticed it's been 6 months since (X) left your CCO role.*

> *P.S. The formula includes a specific process best suited to (describe a feature of the client).*

AI Example

Prompt:

"Using this email structure, create a cold email for me. My clients are looking to rebuild revenue and the team after 18 months of slow job flow. They struggle to stand out with BD and lose out to cheaper more transactional competitors. We built a playbook that has generated £20m in revenue for our clients this year. We have a simple guide they can see."

Sample output

Subject Line: Revenue Rebuild
Hi [Name],
Rebuilding revenue after 18 months of slow job flow requires a standout BD strategy. Many firms struggle to differentiate themselves and lose out to cheaper, transactional competitors.
Our playbook generated £20m in revenue for clients this year. Want to see our simple guide?
[Your Name]
P.S. The guide includes specific strategies for rebuilding teams post-slowdown.

Sequence Structure

It's rarely the right strategy to send a single email, about anything, to anyone —

especially as part of your sales process. This means considering your follow-up from the start.

I used to advise a six-step email cadence. That's changed and we now focus on a three-step process with bumps:

Week 1

Email 1: As the example above.   +2 days: Bump ("thoughts?")

Week 2

Email 2: Alternative email.   +2 days: Visual (a simple image of the workflow is a good follow-up mid-sequence).

Week 3

Email 3: Alternative 2 email.   +2 days: Bump ("is this relevant?")

A/B Testing

An important factor in email success is to test everything you do. The most effective way is to split your targets into two groups. For each set you'll use the exact email but include a slightly different approach on one element — subject line, commercial context, the problem, the social proof, the CTA, the offer or the P.S. By tracking and recording your results over time you'll build up a picture of what works. Unless you are constantly testing and refining, you'll limit your results.

Scheduling

It's best to schedule your email campaigns in advance using a tool like Source Whale or Instantly. Look to load up campaigns to be sent to up to four sets of 50 people every three weeks. You're going to be combining this email outreach with phone calls so the number of emails you send has to be equal to the number of dials you can manage in the same period.