QUINCE AI × INFINET CODE

A SIXTEEN-PAGE FIELD GUIDE

Real Value

vs.

Hype

Test an idea in one afternoon.

BY

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How to use this guide

Sixteen pages. One hour. One idea you actually care about. Read the three short chapters, then run your idea through the worksheet at the back. Every section closes with a single worksheet prompt, in a cyan callout, that tells you exactly what to write down. That is the whole structure.

I wrote this for two readers. The founder deciding whether an idea is worth a year of their life. And the service business, an agency, a consultancy, a studio, looking at a new offering and wondering whether to commit the team. The method does not change. Wherever the text says “your idea,” the service business reads “your next offering.”

One worked example runs throughout. A fictional product called A11yReview, niched three levels deep to accessibility compliance tooling for Swedish public-sector web teams. The product is invented. The regulations, the deadlines, the numbers, all real.

Part One: Real Value vs. Hype

Something changed in the last few years, and most of us are still catching up. Building software got cheap. Really cheap. The same tools that sit on your laptop sit on everyone else's, which means a polished demo is no longer how you stand out. It is how you blend in.

So what did not get cheap? Knowing one specific customer so well that you can predict their week. Owning a channel that puts you in front of them. Proving, in numbers a CFO actually believes, that you moved the outcome. None of that got easier. If anything, it got harder, because the noise around it tripled.

And that is the shift. Value migrated from the question “can you build it?” to the question “whose problem is this, and what is it costing them right now?”

The thirty-second test

Try this. Describe your product out loud right now, without naming a single piece of technology. No “AI,” no model names, no “powered by.” Just what changes for a human being. Thirty seconds. Go.

Watch what happens. The capability-first idea collapses in real time. The pain-first idea barely notices the constraint, because the human was always the point. “Property managers stop retyping inspection reports; an evening of work becomes ten minutes.” That sentence is complete. The technology is in there, doing its work invisibly, exactly where it belongs.

Here is the cleanest version of pain-first I have seen lately. A founder, an ML engineer, whose wife is a doctor in a Swedish hospital. A patient arrived one day who had been beaten by her husband. She refused a translator, because the community was small enough that anyone in the room might know him. So he built an on-prem translation app for hospitals. No big-tech dependencies. Not as a roadmap line item. Because the human in front of him needed it. The product later took off in the United States for the opposite regulatory reason, where hospitals will not let big tech anywhere near patient conversations. Same pain. Different law. He had no marketing and an outdated WordPress site. He had the right hundred people, and they knew him.

A founder who has real value can name four things. Who actually pays, which is often different from who benefits. What they do today instead. What that current way costs in hours or money or risk. And what measurably changes after thirty days. If any one of those four stays blank, you do not yet have a product. You have a demo. And the market is not kind to demos.

> **On the worksheet →** *Write your idea in one sentence with no technology in it. Then list the four things above. If any blank stays blank, that is your next conversation.*

Value is a number, or it is not value

Vague value is indistinguishable from hype. The discipline that fixes this is one equation:

> ***Value per customer per year = (cost of the problem today) − (cost of your solution)***

Cost of the problem: hours per week × hourly cost × 52, plus the annual cost of errors, fines, rework, and lost revenue. Cost of your solution: what the customer pays plus their adoption effort. Healthy businesses capture 10 to 25 percent of the value created, leaving the customer a 4-to-10x return.

The worked example: a public-sector web team loses about 12 hours a month wrestling with accessibility compliance at roughly €80 per hour, plus around €10,000 a year in audit findings and rework. That is €21,500 of problem per organization per year. Price the solution at €400 per month, 22 percent of value created, and the customer keeps the rest as upside.

> **On the worksheet →** *Fill in the equation for your idea with rough numbers. If you cannot, write three past-focused questions you could ask a real customer this week.*

Three kinds of value, ranked by ease of sale

Here is something I had to learn the hard way. Not all value sells equally. There are three kinds, and they are not equal.

Time saved is the first kind. Easiest to count. Hardest to sell. Why? Because saved time lands in no one's budget. The person is relieved, the salary stays the same, no line on a spreadsheet moves. Money saved, or earned, is the second kind. That one lands directly in a spreadsheet the buyer already maintains, which is why finance signs without a leap of faith. Then there is the third kind. Risk. Compliance, legal exposure, security. Risk carries something the other two cannot match. It has a deadline. And it has an enforcer. Someone with authority is telling your buyer to act by a certain date, which is how a nice-to-have becomes a must-buy.

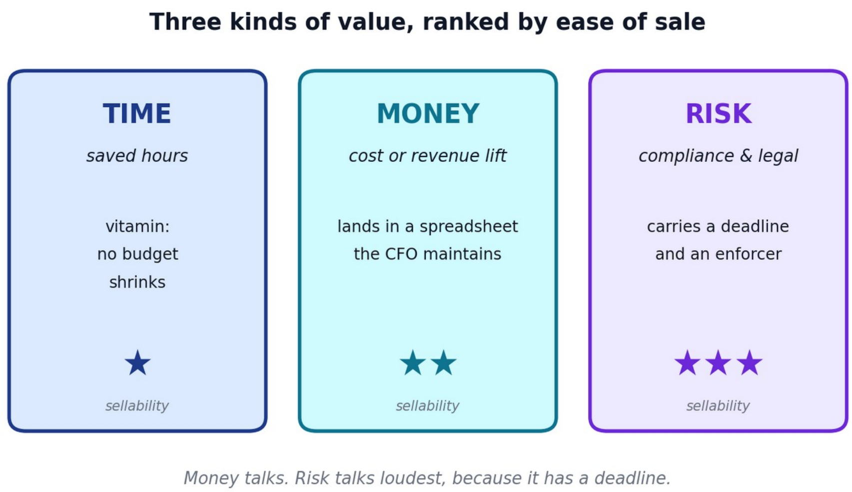

Figure 1. Three kinds of value, ranked by ease of sale. Risk is the quiet champion because it carries a deadline.

This is the entire reason the worked example is built on accessibility law rather than convenience. The law supplies the urgency.

> **On the worksheet →** *Which kind of value is your idea selling? If the honest answer is time, find the money or risk version of the same pain.*

The value-versus-effort map

Two axes: value up, effort right. Four quadrants: quick win, strategic bet, filler, hype trap. The mistake almost everyone makes is scoring only the effort to build, which got cheap. The honest formula is:

> ***Effort = build + sell + support + compliance***

When building is cheap for you, it is cheap for every competitor too. That floods the market and inflates your sell effort. A flawless weekend prototype ends up stranded in the hype trap. The map only tells the truth when you score all four components.

And here is the useful turn. The map is not just for judging an idea. It is for steering one. Niching pushes the dot up and to the left. Value rises because the product fits exactly. Effort drops because the feature surface, the integrations, the channel, and the customer list all shrink at once.

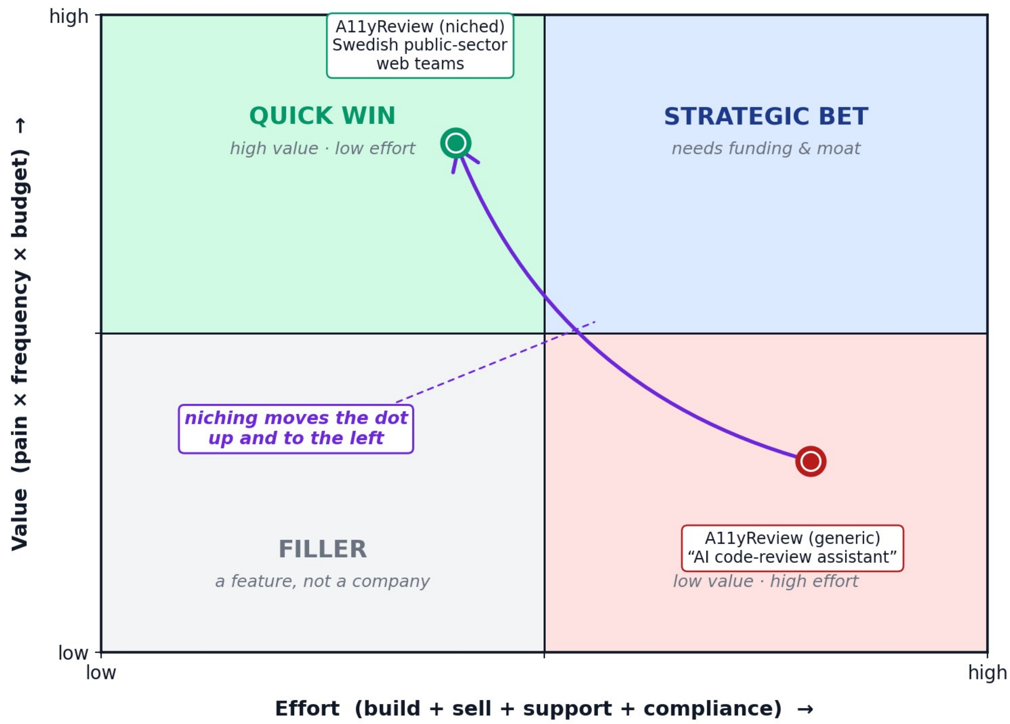

Figure 2. The value-versus-effort map. A11yReview moves from hype trap (generic “AI code-review assistant”) to quick win (niched to Swedish public-sector web teams) without changing the underlying technology.

> **On the worksheet →** *Score your idea on the map twice: once as you imagine it now (generic), and once after Part Two (niched). Watch the dot move.*

Part Two: Niche three levels deep

Your idea already exists, and that is good news

Go ahead. Search a startup directory or a product-discovery site for your idea. You will find it. Probably funded several times over. Now, two reactions are tempting here, and both are wrong. The first is despair. The second is denial. Neither will help you.

Here is the reframe. A crowded market is purchased proof of demand. Other people have already spent millions answering the most uncertain question in any business: will anyone pay for this at all? Your job is not to answer that question again. Your job is to find the underserved slice.

The mechanism: an incumbent with eight million customers cannot possibly serve any specific group well. Genericness at scale is structural, not an oversight. That means every giant incumbent is constantly manufacturing niches it cannot serve properly. The useful question was never “is someone already building this.” It is “which underserved slice can I, specifically, own.”

Why the incumbent will not crush you. Your niche is a rounding error on their revenue. Serving it properly would mean removing the generality their other millions depend on. By the time you matter to them, you already own the community, the trust, and the exact-fit product. The exception is foundation-model platforms. They absorb thin wrappers with every release. The defense is the same medicine in a stronger dose. A niche so deep in specific data, workflow, and compliance that a general tool cannot follow without becoming a specialist.

Two ways the thin-wrapper trap shows up. A startup ships a charming AI digital-wardrobe app; Google Photos ships the same feature natively, and the startup is redundant overnight. A founder spends a year on an elegant data layer; the customer takes one look and asks, “why don’t I just use ChatGPT for this?” That question lands like a slap, and it is a fair one. The honest answer is that depth produces things a general tool cannot: specific workflows, specific data, specific evidence an auditor can sign off on. If the work is a 70 percent problem, the general tool wins. If it has to be right, or has to be proven, the specialist wins. The defense is depth, not delight.

The niching ladder

Let me tell you a story. An email-marketing company. Generic “email marketing software,” head-on against the established giant of the category. Two years, basically flat. Why? Because generic against generic, the larger player wins. Every time.

Then the first narrowing. Email marketing for authors. The founder's own peers. He wrote down their names. He changed the homepage to speak only to them. First real traction. The second narrowing. Professional bloggers, with the migrations from the incumbent done by hand, for free, by the team. Growth ignited. Then the third level, which was not really a step. It was a doctrine. A niche of a million people is not a niche at all. The target is a group of roughly a hundred people you can name.

Figure 3. The niching ladder. Each rung narrows the audience by an order of magnitude until the bottom is a community you can name by hand.

The outcome was tens of millions in revenue, after which the company expanded back up the ladder it had climbed down. The niche was the wedge; never the ceiling.

The test for whether you have niched deeply enough: could you write down a hundred specific customers by name in a single afternoon? If not, one more level. Expect to descend three or more times. Niching is cheap to undo. Only a headline and an outreach list. Staying generic is the expensive mistake. It teaches you nothing you can act on.

Check one more thing: that the narrow group has money and authority to buy. A pain without a budget is a charity, not a business.

> **On the worksheet →** *Build your niching ladder. Start broad, descend three times, stop when you could name a hundred customers in one afternoon.*

The go-to-market recipe

Six blocks, in order. Market insight: a clear read of the need, current behavior, trends, competitors. Target group: separate the person who pays from the person who uses, because they are usually different. Positioning, compressed into one sentence:

> ***For [specific niche] who [specific pain], [your product] is the [category] that [specific benefit], unlike [the current alternative].***

Offer and price, anchored to 10–25 percent of value created. Channel: the one or two places your hundred people gather, plus an unfair trick, host the meetup they attend, give the talk they come to hear, write the guide they cite. First ten customers, named individually or described precisely enough to find.

Companies do not usually die from bad code. They die in blocks one, three, and five, insight, positioning, and channel, which are precisely the blocks technical founders skip because none of them are building. The discomfort you feel at the non-technical blocks is a signal that those are the ones demanding your attention.

> **On the worksheet →** *Write your positioning sentence. List the one or two places your hundred people already gather, and the unfair trick you could use.*

Part Three: Market analysis in an hour

TAM, SAM, SOM, LAM

Get the vocabulary straight before the numbers, because mixing these up is the fastest way to lose credibility in a room that has heard a pitch before. Four nested market sizes. They fit inside each other like dolls.

TAM, the total addressable market, is everyone who could conceivably buy. SAM, the serviceable addressable, is what your product and your channel can actually reach. SOM, the serviceable obtainable, is what you can realistically win in about two years. And LAM, the launch addressable, is who you can reach right now. This week. Investors love the TAM. You, this week, live inside the LAM.

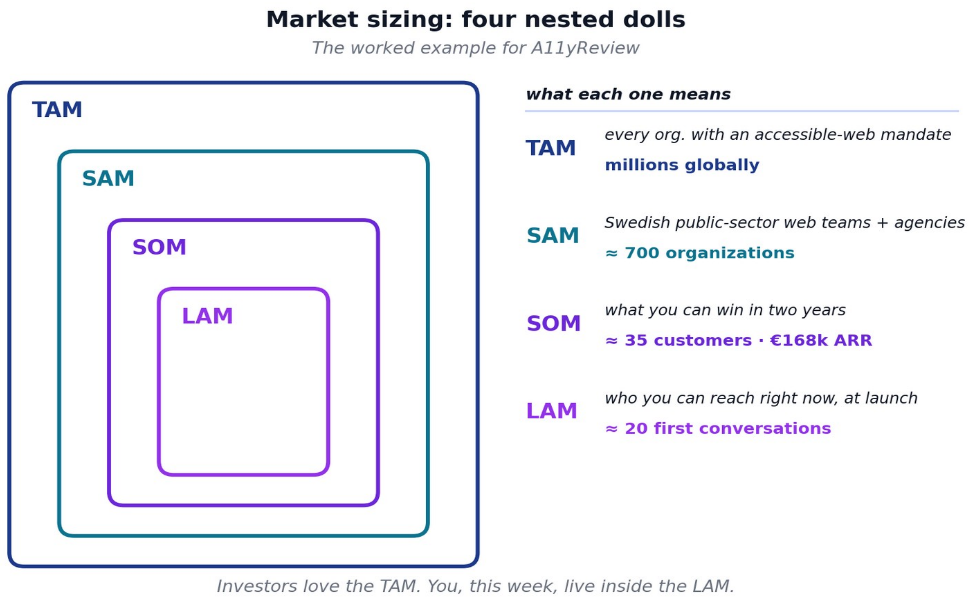

Figure 4. The four nested market sizes, with worked numbers for A11yReview. TAM is the conversation with investors; LAM is the conversation on Monday morning.

Size it from the bottom up, or not at all

Top-down sizing, “the global market is fifty billion and we will capture one percent”, tells you nothing about who pays or whether you can reach them. Experienced investors discount it to zero. The bottom-up version forces three honest inputs:

> ***SOM = (customers in the niche you can actually reach) × (realistic price) × (realistic two-year win rate)***

For A11yReview: roughly 700 reachable organizations × €4,800 per year × 5 percent win rate ≈ €168,000 of annual recurring revenue. It is small. The smallness is the honest, useful result. A modest number with a credible expansion ladder beats an enormous number with hand-waving every time. The ladder here: Swedish public sector → Nordic public sector → EU under the European Accessibility Act → general accessibility tooling.

Two sanity checks. Does the number feed you? A solo founder needs €100–150k a year. A venture team needs a path to ten million. Same idea can be a great small business and a failed venture-backed one. Know which game you are playing. Is the win rate defensible? Five percent of a named, reachable niche is plausible. Five percent of “all small businesses everywhere” is fantasy.

> **On the worksheet →** *Compute your SOM with your three numbers. Write the expansion ladder. Settle your launch number, how many real conversations you can start this month.*

Proving demand without writing a line of code

The cheapest evidence costs nothing but conversations. Three rules from Rob Fitzpatrick's The Mom Test. First, talk about their life, not your idea. Second, ask about specific things that happened in the past, not opinions about the future. Third, talk less.

Worthless questions: “Do you think this is a good idea?”, “Would you buy this?”, “How much would you pay?” Everyone says yes to be kind. Valuable questions: “What did you do the last time this problem came up?”, “What did that cost?”, “What else have you tried, and why did you stop?”

A compliment is a polite form of failure. A meeting only truly succeeded if the other person gave up something they value, their time (a scheduled pilot), their reputation (an introduction to their boss), or their money (a prepayment, a letter of intent). “Sounds great, keep me in the loop” is not a yes; it is a rejection wearing a smile.

A note for anyone selling in Sweden specifically. The polite-form-of-failure problem is worse here than almost anywhere. Swedes are polite by default. “Yeah, it’s good” often means “I will never pay for this,” and you will not find out until the renewal does not arrive. Compare the US market, where a customer will tell you on the first call that this is, in their words, BS, and you know exactly what to fix. Both are useful signals. One requires twice the work to extract. If you sell to Swedish buyers, plan for that work. Ask past-focused questions twice. Push for the specific cost the last incident incurred. Watch what they do, not what they say.

And one further trap that hides inside the compliment problem. Demand is what gets you the first payment. Stickiness is what tells you whether the problem was real. A customer can love the demo, sign up, even pay for the first month, and then quietly let it die at renewal. The product was not bad. The pain just was not deep enough to defend a recurring line item. Measure stickiness, not signups. A cancellation is the most honest customer interview you will ever get.

Never forget the most dangerous competitor: the status quo. The spreadsheet, the intern, the once-a-year consultant. The status quo has 100 percent of the market and asks for no money up front. Unless something has made the pain newly intolerable, a deadline, a new law, a sudden cost increase, the status quo usually wins. If you cannot articulate why now, you do not yet have a reason for the customer to act.

> **On the worksheet →** *List the five people you will talk to this week. Decide the one commitment you will ask each of them for.*

The one-hour worksheet

One hour, one idea, one page of decisions. Write numbers where it asks for numbers and names where it asks for names. “Many” and “companies” are not answers.

Part A: Value or hype (20 minutes)

1. Your idea, in one sentence, with no technology in it: __________________

2. Who hurts (role + industry): __________________ Who pays (if different): __________________

3. What they do today instead: __________________

4. Problem cost per customer per year: ___ hours/week × ___ €/hour × 52 + ___ €/year in errors, fines, rework ≈ ___ €/customer/year

5. Kind of value: ☐ time ☐ money ☐ risk (deadline + enforcer)

6. Score on the map: value ___ /10, effort (build + sell + support + compliance) ___ /10. Quadrant: __________________

7. Kill question: if this fails in 12 months, the most likely cause is __________________

Part B: Niche three levels deep (20 minutes)

8. Three existing competitors, who they target, what they charge: 1) __________________ 2) __________________ 3) __________________

9. Niching ladder. Top: __________________ → __________________ → __________________ → bottom (≈100 people you could name): __________________

10. Positioning sentence: For __________________ who __________________ , [your product] is the __________________ that __________________ , unlike __________________ .

11. Channel: where your hundred people already gather: __________________ Unfair trick: __________________

12. First ten customers (named, or described precisely): __________________

13. Re-score on the map after niching: value ___ /10, effort ___ /10. Quadrant: __________________

Part C: Market analysis (15 minutes)

14. SOM = ___ reachable customers × ___ €/year × ___ % win rate over 2 years ≈ ___ €/year

15. Does that number feed you? ☐ yes (small business) ☐ no (needs VC path)

16. Expansion ladder: __________________ → __________________ → __________________

17. Launch number: ___ conversations you can start in the first weeks → roughly ___ first customers

18. Why now (the deadline / law / cost spike making the status quo unbearable): __________________

19. Five people you will interview this week: __________________

20. The one commitment you will ask for: ☐ a pilot ☐ an introduction ☐ a letter of intent ☐ a prepayment

The three-minute pitch

Deliver the whole thing aloud, in three minutes, as a connected story. My idea was this generic thing. My niche is now this specific group. The value is this many euros per customer per year, and I would charge this. My first ten customers are these named people. My biggest risk is this. If any sentence in that pitch needs an adjective to do a number's job, “huge,” “seamless,” “revolutionary”, the worksheet is not finished.

Where to go next

So. The worksheet is done. The dot moved, or it did not.

If it moved, your next step is conversations. Five this week. Ten next week. Send the worksheet to a peer and ask them to break it. The faster someone tells you what you are wrong about, the cheaper that lesson costs.

If the dot did not move, here is what almost always turns out to be true. The niche is still too broad. Drop one more level and run Part A again. Niching is cheap to undo. It is only a headline and a list of names. Staying generic is the expensive mistake. That one keeps charging you for years.

> ***Hype describes a technology. Value describes a specific customer's saved hours, recovered money, or reduced risk. And it always carries a number.***

This guide is the short version. The longer one, a book in progress called The Regulatory Edge, takes the same method and applies it to wedges built specifically on regulatory deadlines. Accessibility. GDPR. The EU AI Act. Markets that did not exist five years ago. Markets that will be fully claimed within five more. If you want to be on the early-reader list, reach out.

About the author. Andrija Ilić is CTO and IT strategist. He is co-founder of Quince AI and friend of InFiNet Code. He works with founders and service businesses on translating AI and regulatory complexity into concrete, sellable products, and delivers guest lectures and workshops on go to market strategy at bootcamps.

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