DAWN
DRIVING ACCESS TO WEALTH & NETWORKS

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

MAKE STARTUPS

A READINESS FRAMEWORK FOR FOUNDERS IN THE DAWN REGION

READINESS EVALUATION CRITERIA

MARKET AND LAUNCH READY AI

Driving Access to Wealth & Networks (DAWN) is working with Make Startups to bring **Market and Launch Ready AI** to entrepreneurs across northeast Minnesota, northwest Wisconsin, and partnering Tribal Nations. Through the CofounderOS platform, founders work through nine readiness areas, from the elevator pitch to customer retention. AI-assisted scoring paired with human validation gives each founder specific feedback on where the business stands and what evidence would make it market and launch ready.

The criteria in this document are what founders will be asked to demonstrate. We are sharing them with partners so everyone who coaches, lends to, or refers entrepreneurs in the region knows what the program measures and can speak to it consistently.

HOW FOUNDERS ARE EVALUATED

The following criteria describe what entrepreneurs should be prepared to demonstrate. Evaluations emphasize specificity, evidence from completed work, internal consistency, and a clear understanding of the customer. Planned activities are useful, but they do not carry the same weight as completed research and documented results.

HOW PARTNERS CAN PLUG IN

- **Refer founders.** Entrepreneurs who are building, launching, or trying to grow a business and want a clear read on readiness.
- **Use the criteria.** The nine areas work as an intake or coaching checklist long before a founder enters the program.
- **Set shared expectations.** Share this with cohorts, clients, and lenders so readiness means the same thing across the ecosystem.

Questions or referrals: dawnmn.org

THE NINE READINESS AREAS

1	**Elevator Pitch** Can the founder tell the whole story in a minute?	2	**Target Customer** Who exactly buys, and what research says so?	3	**Customer Problem** What pain is real, recurring, and worth paying to fix?
4	**Solution** Does the offering actually solve that problem?	5	**Business Model** Who pays, for what, and can it sustain itself?	6	**Key Advantage** Why this business over every alternative?
7	**Market Traction** What do customers and revenue already show?	8	**Customer Acquisition Strategy** How will the business reach and convert buyers?	9	**Customer Retention Strategy** How will it keep customers and grow their value?

1 ELEVATOR PITCH

Entrepreneurs should be able to communicate:

- A clearly defined target customer or market
- A meaningful problem experienced by that customer
- A clear solution that directly addresses the problem
- A compelling reason the solution is different or better than available alternatives
- A credible explanation of how the business will generate revenue
- Evidence of customer interest, adoption, revenue, partnerships, or other validation
- A plausible vision for growth and scalability
- A specific and appropriate call to action or ask
- A focused, concise, and easily understood narrative

2 TARGET CUSTOMER

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- A specific target customer within a defined market, including the relevant customer role, segment, niche, or characteristics
- An understanding of the difference between a broad market sector and the specific customer most likely to purchase or use the solution
- Completion of multiple forms of primary market research, such as customer interviews, surveys, observations, experiments, or direct sales activity
- Documentation of what was learned through each research method
- Evidence that research findings have informed or refined the target customer definition
- A concise and coherent explanation supported by completed work

Future research plans may demonstrate awareness, but entrepreneurs should be prepared to present findings from research they have already conducted.

3 CUSTOMER PROBLEM

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- A specific understanding of the target customer's motivations, priorities, behaviors, and interests
- Identification of a meaningful and recurring customer pain point, unmet need, or critical flaw in current alternatives
- An explanation of why the problem matters enough for the customer to seek or pay for a solution
- Evidence that assumptions about the problem have been tested through a sufficiently broad and relevant customer discovery process
- Clear alignment between the identified problem and the previously defined target customer

4 SOLUTION

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- A clear solution that directly addresses the validated customer problem
- An explanation of the solution's important features
- A compelling description of the benefits or outcomes those features create for the customer
- Evidence that the proposed solution is technically and operationally feasible
- An understanding of what could make the solution difficult to copy, defensible, or proprietary
- Clear alignment among the target customer, customer problem, and proposed solution

5 BUSINESS MODEL

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- A clear and concise description of how the business operates and creates value
- A believable method for generating revenue
- Identification of who pays, what they pay for, and how transactions occur
- Alignment between the business model, target customer, customer problem, and solution
- Consideration of alternative revenue models and why the selected approach is appropriate
- An understanding of whether the model can become financially sustainable

6 KEY ADVANTAGE

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- Multiple meaningful ways the product, service, or business differs from available alternatives
- An understanding of competitors, substitutes, and how customers currently solve the problem
- A clear explanation of why each differentiator creates a competitive advantage
- Evidence that the identified advantages matter to the target customer
- Alignment between the advantages, customer problem, and business model
- A concise and coherent explanation that avoids unsupported claims such as "we have no competitors"

7 MARKET TRACTION

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- Verifiable evidence that customers or users are adopting or using the product or service
- Verifiable evidence of revenue, paid transactions, contracts, or other commercial activity
- Evidence that customers receive meaningful value or benefit from the solution
- Customer feedback indicating satisfaction, repeat use, referrals, or other signs of delight
- An understanding of the company's current growth stage
- Evidence showing whether adoption or revenue is beginning, accelerating, slowing, or reaching maturity
- Consistency between the traction presented and the stated business model

Entrepreneurs should use specific numbers, dates, trends, and documented outcomes whenever possible.

8 CUSTOMER ACQUISITION STRATEGY

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- A clearly defined strategy for reaching and converting target customers
- Specific acquisition objectives and the tactics that will support them
- Strong alignment between the strategy and the target customer's behaviors, needs, and decision-making process
- Appropriate marketing and sales channels for reaching the intended audience
- A well-reasoned mix of online, offline, direct, partnership, or referral-based channels where appropriate
- A logical path from customer awareness to engagement, conversion, and purchase
- Specific metrics and key performance indicators for measuring results
- An understanding of customer acquisition cost and how it will be calculated
- A process for testing channels, learning from results, and concentrating resources on the most effective approaches
- Consistency among the acquisition strategy, customer problem, solution, and business model

9 CUSTOMER RETENTION STRATEGY

Entrepreneurs should demonstrate:

- A strong understanding of the target customer's needs, preferences, behaviors, and pain points
- Meaningful segmentation of customers, with retention strategies tailored to relevant customer groups
- Clear retention goals and a defined purpose specific to the company and its business model
- A data-driven approach using metrics such as churn rate, repeat purchase rate, renewal rate, retention rate, and customer lifetime value
- An estimated customer lifetime value and an understanding of how it is calculated
- A plan for regular, meaningful customer engagement that provides value beyond the initial purchase
- Systems for collecting, analyzing, and acting on customer feedback
- A process for using customer feedback and retention data to improve the product and customer experience
- Appropriate personalization based on individual customer needs, preferences, or behavior
- Accessible and responsive customer support channels
- Clear alignment among the retention strategy, target customer, customer problem, solution, business model, and acquisition strategy

DAWN DRIVING ACCESS TO WEALTH & NETWORKS

Driving Access to Wealth & Networks (DAWN) is Northspan's central hub for programming across northeast Minnesota, northwest Wisconsin, and partnering Tribal Nations. DAWN enhances economic and community resilience by offering resources that form connections, build capacity, and facilitate access to capital. Fueled by grant funding and support from public and private partners, DAWN works to engage and elevate so communities can thrive. Learn more at dawnmn.org.

MAKE STARTUPS

Make Startups helps entrepreneur support organizations turn local programs into credentialed training supported by documented outcomes. Its CofounderOS platform provides the learning, assessment, and reporting tools that combine AI scoring with human validation, so founders, programs, and funders can trust that a business is ready. Learn more at makestartups.com.

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