

**AIBuilder Marketplace**

# The Honest SaaS Buyer's Handbook

Every pricing trick, defined and counted. The statistics vendors would rather you didn't have. The 101 genuinely free tools. And the checklist that keeps your software bill honest.

Edition: July 2026 · built from 248 hand-researched pricing dossiers · no invented numbers

Free forever at <https://aibuildermarketplace.com/handbook/> — subscribers get every new edition automatically.

# 1 · The six pricing tricks — and how often they occur

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Counted across 248 hand-researched dossiers; every count is backed by an evidence sentence in the public dataset (CC BY 4.0).

## **Usage-based (metered) pricing** [70 van 248 tools](#)

Credits, message counts, overage fees or percentage cuts on top of the plan. Fair when the meter is public; dangerous when it's buried. Always model your real volume before trusting the sticker.

## **Per-seat pricing** [66 van 248 tools](#)

The bill scales with every user you add — a quiet tax on growth. Ask: does value really scale with headcount here? Flat-fee alternatives exist in most categories.

## **Paid add-ons** [44 van 248 tools](#)

Key features sold separately: payroll on top of bookkeeping, verification on top of email. Price the bundle you actually need, never the base plan.

## **Annual lock-in** [23 van 248 tools](#)

The advertised price only exists with a yearly commitment. You carry the risk: a year paid before you know if the tool sticks. Compute the monthly-billing premium before deciding.

## **Quote-only (hidden) pricing** [20 van 248 tools](#)

No public price list — a sales call required. Enables per-customer pricing and makes comparison impossible. Budget serious evaluation time, and never enter that call without an anchor.

## **Renewal jump** [7 van 248 tools](#)

The intro price is not the renewal price — standing practice in hosting and security. The only number that matters is year two. Put the renewal date in your calendar with a cancel window.

## 2 · The numbers (July 2026)

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Tools with $\geq 1$ documented cost caveat	67%
Meters usage on top of the subscription	28%
Charges per seat	27%
Sells key features as paid add-ons	18%
Requires annual commitment for the advertised price	9%
Publishes no usable price at all	8%
Has a genuinely free tier	41%

Only **33%** of tools have a sticker price that is also the whole story. Full methodology & live data:  
<https://aibuildermarketplace.com/research/>

## 3 · The honest buyer's checklist

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1. Find the real price: your volume, your seat count, the add-ons you need — not the sticker.
2. Check the meter: what happens at 2x your current usage? At 10x?
3. Read the renewal terms before the intro price seduces you. Year two is the real price.
4. Genuinely free tier? Test the actual workflow on it before paying anything.
5. Cancel-test: how many clicks to leave? If you can't find out, that's your answer.
6. One tool per job: name the job each subscription owns. Two tools, one job = one candidate to kill.
7. Calendar every renewal date with a 2-week cancel window (our free Renewal Radar generates the reminders).
8. Verify claims against evidence — ours or anyone's. A review without receipts is an ad.

**The cancel-first test:** unsure about a subscription? Cancel it. Re-subscribe if you genuinely miss it within a month. Most people never do — that silence is the honest verdict.

## 4 · The 101 genuinely free tools

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Real free tiers you can run on indefinitely — not trials in a costume. Live links & dossiers:  
<https://aibuildermarketplace.com/atlas/> (filter: Free tier).

### Communication & Voice

CloudTalk, CometChat, CrankWheel, Fireflies.ai, Freshchat, Readymode, Salesmessage, ZenZap

### Financial Operations

Aspire, Bill.com, Melio, Payoneer, Tax1099, Zeffy

### Growth & Revenue

AWeber, ActiveCampaign, Apollo, Beefree, Bookyourdata, Brevo, CallRail, Capsule, Clay, ExpertSender, Gelato, GetResponse, Hello Bar, Iconosquare, Keap, Kit, Later, Leadfeeder, LearnWorlds, LettrLabs, Livestorm, ManyChat, Notify Me, Printify, PushOwl, Rank Math, Restream, Riverside, Seamless.ai, Sellfy, Shorby, Stamped, Stampezee, Streak, SurveySparrow, TicketTailor, VidPal, WhatConverts, ZoomInfo, iContact, lemlist

### IT & Productivity

Airia, Blinq, Bright Data, Claude, Consensus, Devs.ai, Emergent, Expertise AI, Getscreen, Hopp, MindStudio, QuickSigner, RunPod, SMTP.com, SMTP2GO, Softr, WebCatalog

### Operations & Workflow

Assembly, Bokun, Breezy HR, ClickUp, Contractor Foreman, Databox, Descript, FlexiQuiz, Gamma, Hive, InVideo, Katana MRP, Lindy.ai, Miro, Mومence, Murf, Pangram, QuillBot, Reclaim.ai, Sendcloud, Shippo, SmartSuite, SurveyMonkey, Survicate, Switcher Studio, Todoist, Toggl, TurboTic, Wrike

## 5 · The Honest Software Awards 2026

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No entry, no fees, no pay-to-play — winners drawn from the research corpus, each with its evidence:

**Aisdr, Aisq, Beautiful Ai, Clickup, Contractor Foreman, Flocksy, Gamma, Jubilee, Kit, Landingi, Lindy Ai, Printify, Rank Math, Reclaim Ai, Signnow, Tax1099, Toggl**

Categories & receipts: <https://aibuildermarketplace.com/awards/>

## 6 · Keep it honest, automatically

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Everything in this handbook updates itself on the site: the [Atlas](#) (dossiers), [Price Watch](#) (documented hikes with archived receipts), [the statistics](#), and [Stack X-Ray](#) (audit what you already pay — in your browser).

**One honest email a week** — new dossiers, price-hike alerts and each new handbook edition:  
<https://aibuildermarketplace.com> (newsletter box on every page).