

2026 SUMMIT

Thursday, November 5 | Noon-6pm
Skyline Club, Indianapolis, Indiana

STARTUP
LADIES



INVEST IN WOMEN FOUNDERS

PRESS RELEASE

Applications Open for the 2026 Top 9 Investor Readiness Accelerator and 5th Annual #InvestInWomenFounders Summit

The Startup Ladies open applications for women founders preparing for investment and scalable growth through the 2026 accelerator and Summit

Indianapolis, Indiana – MAY 20, 2026: has officially opened applications for the 2026 Top 9 Investor Readiness Accelerator and the 5th Annual #InvestInWomenFounders Summit, taking place Thursday, November 5, 2026, at the Skyline Club in downtown Indianapolis.

Applications are also now open for investors, successfully exited founders, and senior-level executives interested in serving as official Summit Interviewers.

The Top 9 Investor Readiness Accelerator is a multi-month program designed to prepare women-owned scalable businesses for investment opportunities, strategic growth, and high-level founder visibility. The accelerator culminates at the annual #InvestInWomenFounders Summit, where the Top 9 founders are interviewed live on stage in front of investors, executives, entrepreneurs, and community leaders.

The total value of the Top 9 accelerator experience is estimated at more than \$20,000 per founder. There is no cost to apply or participate.

Applications Open: Wednesday, May 20, 2026

Applications Close: Wednesday, June 17, 2026 at 11:59 p.m. ET

- **WOMEN FOUNDERS APPLY HERE:** <https://forms.gle/ATSE47296pHrBmq9>
- **Application Criteria:** [INSERT LINK]
- **Summit Website:** [The Startup Ladies Summit Page](#)
- **Interviewer Application:** <https://forms.gle/EdohxkC965BWocbB8>

Unlike traditional pitch competitions, the Summit uses an interview-based format intentionally designed to reduce pattern matching and create more meaningful founder evaluations. Rather than relying on rapid-fire pitches and surface-level assumptions, the interview format allows audiences to better understand how founders think, lead, solve problems, navigate growth, respond to challenges, and communicate vision over time.

The Summit focuses specifically on **women-owned** companies where women maintain meaningful equity, decision-making power, and the opportunity to build long-term wealth through growth and future liquidity events.

This year's accelerator places a stronger emphasis on investor readiness. Applicants are expected to have already completed customer discovery work, including surveys and customer interviews, before applying. By requiring customer validation work upfront, the accelerator can focus more deeply on investor communication, financial storytelling, diligence preparation, growth strategy, founder visibility, and investment readiness throughout the program.

Selected founders will participate in:

- Live virtual training sessions
- Investor readiness education
- Interview preparation and practice
- One-on-one mentorship
- Asynchronous learning through The Startup Ladies eLearning platform
- Founder networking and executive engagement opportunities
- Preparation of investor-facing materials and communication tools

“Women founders are building innovative companies in emerging, underserved, and rapidly growing markets,” said Kristen Cooper, CEO and founder of The Startup Ladies. “This accelerator and Summit are designed to help investors, executives, and community leaders discover new business opportunities while helping move more money into the hands of women founders building scalable companies.”

In 2025, more than \$330 billion was invested into U.S. startups through venture capital, yet women-only founding teams continued to receive less than 2% of total funding, while Black women founders received a fraction of that amount despite growing research showing women founders frequently outperform expectations on capital efficiency and business performance.

Through its accelerator, investor education programming, and annual #InvestInWomenFounders Summit, Startup Ladies LLC has emerged as the leading Midwest platform connecting women founders to investor visibility, executive networks, strategic relationships, and the capital required to scale high-growth companies.

“I’d love to see more smart and connected Black women founders apply,” said Anita Williams, co-founder of the Indy Black Chamber of Commerce, who is serving on the Top 9 selection committee again this year. “There are incredible women building scalable companies with deep market insight, valuable networks, and significant growth potential that deserve greater visibility and access to capital.”

“We are looking for diverse women founders tackling meaningful problems and overlooked markets,” said Sara Norris, Startup Ladies Board member and communications expert. “Pitch competitions are only one small part of fundraising. Founders also need to be prepared for sophisticated one-on-one conversations with investors, executives, and strategic partners. This accelerator helps women strengthen the communication, leadership, and presentation skills necessary to secure funding and lead growing companies.”

For the first time, The Startup Ladies is accepting applications for official Summit Interviewers. Selected interviewers will be matched with founders ahead of the Summit and participate in training, founder preparation, and interview practice sessions throughout the accelerator. Interviewers will be selected based on their industry expertise, leadership experience, and interest or experience in supporting and investing in women-owned scalable businesses.

Ideal interviewers include:

- Investors and aspiring investors
- Successfully exited founders
- Senior-level executives
- Innovation leaders

Interviewers will be selected based on their ability to facilitate thoughtful founder conversations and contribute to a founder-centered experience.

Interviewer Application: <https://forms.gle/EdohxkC965BWocbB8>

“The interview format creates a much deeper understanding of founders than a traditional pitch competition,” said Jon Gilman, exited founder, Clear Software. “As a past Summit interviewer and investor in several Top 9 companies, I’ve seen firsthand how these conversations help reveal the founder’s leadership style, strategic thinking, communication skills, and growth potential. It creates a much more meaningful environment for relationship-building, mentorship, and investment conversations.”

The Summit will include:

- Interviews with the 2026 Top 9 founders
- Lunch and a panel discussion featuring past founder success stories
- Networking with investors, executives, and entrepreneurs
- “Fund the Founder!” breakout sessions
- Sponsor and ecosystem engagement opportunities
- Cocktail reception and networking

The #InvestInWomenFounders Summit is open to the public and welcomes entrepreneurs, investors, executives, corporations, universities, and community leaders interested in supporting innovation and scalable women-owned businesses.

To learn more about the Summit, sponsorship opportunities, applications, or tickets, visit:

[The Startup Ladies Summit Page](#)

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#**About The Startup Ladies**

The Startup Ladies is a professional membership organization for entrepreneurs, investors, and executives. The organization educates, connects, and increases investment in women-owned businesses starting up and scaling companies.

Through in-person programming, live virtual education, mentorship, networking, and eLearning, founders move from idea to market to growth. The organization also educates individuals interested in startup investing and connects them to investor-ready women-owned companies.