



INVEST IN WOMEN FOUNDERS

2026 SUMMIT


SKYLINE CLUB
INDY
November 5 | Noon-6pm
Indianapolis, Indiana

2026 Applicant Criteria for the Top 9

The 2026 **5th Annual #InvestInWomenFounders Summit** is a half-day event designed to empower women entrepreneurs and accelerate their access to capital. More than 200 entrepreneurs, investors, executives, and business leaders will participate throughout the day as nine women founders are interviewed on stage, giving them the opportunity to secure funding for their companies.

Unlike traditional pitch competitions, the Summit uses an **interview-based format** to create a fairer, more inclusive investment process and **avoid [pattern matching](#)**, ensuring each founder is evaluated on their unique vision and potential. Founders receive intensive training and mentorship to become investor-ready and positioned for long-term success. Since its inception, Startup Ladies Investor Members have invested more than **\$1,000,000 directly into women-owned companies**.

Women entrepreneurs bring insights, solutions, and perspectives often absent from traditional investment pipelines. The problems they are solving live in untapped markets.

Welcome!

The Startup Ladies Board, Ambassadors, and staff invite women founders from across the United States to apply to be in the Top 9, a highly selective group of founders featured at the 5th annual #InvestInWomenFounders Summit on Thursday, November 5, 2026 in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Each year, the Top 9 represents a curated cohort of women founders building scalable companies grounded in real customer demand and preparing to raise capital.

Selection into the Top 9 signals that a founder has done the work, understands her market, and is ready to engage in meaningful conversations with investors, executives, and decision-makers.

The Accelerator and Summit are designed for women founders building scalable companies with real customer demand.

Top 9 Startup Ladies Accelerator

The Invest In Women Founders Accelerator is designed to prepare nine women founders for investor conversations, increase visibility, strengthen positioning, and help companies become more investment ready. Over the course of several months, founders work closely with experienced executives, exited founders, investors, and ecosystem leaders to refine how they communicate their business, strengthen investor readiness materials, and prepare for meaningful engagement with investors before, during, and after the Summit. This experience is designed to support founders beyond a single day on stage.

Training focuses on:

- Investor readiness and due diligence preparation
- Clear communication and storytelling
- One-sentence company explanations and elevator pitches
- Slide deck refinement
- Interview preparation and practice
- Understanding how to engage with investors professionally
- Relationship building and follow-up after the Summit

The Summit itself is only one part of the process. We believe meaningful relationships are one of the most important parts of building scalable companies. The real value comes from the preparation, mentorship, relationships, visibility, and long-term connections developed throughout the accelerator experience.

Each Top 9 founder receives direct support from dozens of experienced volunteers, including senior executives, exited founders, investors, mentors, and the full Startup Ladies Board. Many of these individuals contribute significant time, expertise, introductions, and coaching because they believe deeply in helping women founders access capital and grow scalable businesses.

The estimated fair market value of this experience exceeds \$20,000 per founder and includes investor readiness training, executive mentorship, visibility, strategic introductions, and Summit participation. Selection into the Top 9 reflects not only potential, but readiness to engage in meaningful growth opportunities.

How the Accelerator Works

The Top 9 accelerator combines live training, asynchronous learning, mentorship, and practical application to help founders prepare for investor engagement before, during, and after the Summit.

The experience includes:

- Live virtual training sessions
- Asynchronous learning through The Startup Ladies eLearning platform
- Office hours and founder support sessions
- One-on-one preparation and practice with assigned interviewers
- Interview preparation and practice
- Independent assignments and implementation work between sessions
- Direct engagement with executives, mentors, and ecosystem leaders

Training is intentionally structured to help founders strengthen communication, improve investor readiness, refine fundraising materials, and build confidence in high-stakes business conversations.

This is not passive programming. Founders are expected to actively participate, complete assignments, apply feedback, and continue refining their company throughout the accelerator experience. Many founders describe the preparation process itself as one of the most valuable aspects of the Top 9 experience.

Lessons Learned

Over the past four years, we have worked closely with founders, investors, executives, and partners to better understand what leads to meaningful outcomes.

One thing has become very clear. The founders who benefit most from this experience are those who have already done the work to understand their customers, validate their market, and prepare for growth. This guide is meant to clearly communicate who we are seeking, what we expect, and how we will identify, support, and connect the Top 9 founders.

This Is NOT a Competition

The #InvestInWomenFounders Summit is not a pitch competition. It is a **curated experience** designed to connect founders with investors, executives, and partners through meaningful conversation.

The focus is on demonstrating how you think, how you operate, and how you are building a company grounded in real customer demand.

At the Summit, founders participate in interview-based sessions led by senior executives and exited founders. These conversations are designed to surface deeper insights about the founder, the business, and the opportunity.

The interview format is intentionally designed to move beyond memorized pitches and help investors better understand how founders think, solve problems, communicate, and lead.

Prestige and Positioning

Each year, nine women founders are chosen from a national pool based on their readiness, execution, and potential to engage with investors. As the Summit has grown, the Top 9 has become a recognized platform for founders preparing to raise capital and expand their network at a higher level.

Selection signals that a founder:

- Has done the work to validate her business (completed surveys and stakeholder interviews)
- Is preparing to raise capital
- Is ready to engage in investor-level conversations

Values Alignment

Our community is diverse, inclusive, and LGBTQ+ affirming. We recognize that women founders, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, often face additional barriers in accessing capital. We expect **all** participants to engage with respect, professionalism, and a willingness to learn.

Goals Alignment

Your experience in the Top 9 will depend on how you show up. Investment is not guaranteed. Founders who engage fully in the process consistently:

- Strengthen investor readiness
- Improve communication and clarity
- Build confidence in conversations with investors
- Expand their network
- Form meaningful relationships with investors and partners
- Refine positioning and fundraising strategy

Top 9 Benefits

- Access to The Startup Ladies investor network
- Training from senior executives and exited founders (*valued at \$7,500+*)
- Executive mentorship and coaching (*valued at \$4,000+*)
- Investor access and strategic introductions (*valued at \$5,000+*)
- Media, marketing, and founder visibility (*valued at \$3,000+*)
- Summit participation and founder showcase (*valued at \$750+*)
- One-on-one mentoring and interview preparation
- Display table at the Summit (*valued at \$2,500*)
- 1 ticket to the Summit (*valued at \$250*)
- Community support and ongoing network access
- #InvestInWomenFounders Summit Certification from The Startup Ladies

Founder Cost = \$0

There is no cost for founders selected into the Top 9.

The estimated **fair market value of this experience exceeds \$20,000 per founder** and reflects the depth of training, mentorship, investor preparation, visibility, and strategic relationship-building provided throughout the accelerator experience.

Unlike many traditional accelerators that focus primarily on pitch delivery, the Top 9 accelerator is intentionally designed to help founders strengthen investor readiness before, during, and after the Summit.

Founders work closely with experienced executives, exited founders, mentors, investors, and ecosystem leaders to refine how they communicate their business, prepare investor materials, strengthen fundraising strategy, and build meaningful relationships with investors and decision-makers.

This is a high-touch, highly curated experience supported by dozens of experienced volunteers, including the entire Startup Ladies Board, who collectively invest hundreds of hours into helping founders prepare for long-term growth and investment opportunities.

The Summit itself is only one part of the value. The preparation, mentorship, coaching, visibility, executive access, investor engagement, and long-term relationship development are what make this experience unique.

What This Includes

This experience is made possible through sponsorship support and the generosity of experienced volunteers who believe deeply in helping women founders build scalable companies and access capital.

The Top 9 accelerator includes:

- Investor readiness and due diligence preparation
- One-sentence company explanation and elevator pitch refinement
- Slide deck review and improvement
- Interview preparation and practice
- Strategic communication coaching
- Executive mentorship and founder support
- Exposure to investors, executives, and ecosystem leaders
- Founder visibility through media and marketing
- Relationship-building and investor follow-up guidance after the Summit

A Higher Bar in Year Five

We are not looking for perfect founders. We are looking for founders who have done the work and are ready to grow. The Top 9 is for founders who are preparing to raise capital now. We are looking for founders who have done the work and are ready to refine, strengthen, and position their company for investor engagement.

Customer Discovery Is Required

Applicants must have completed customer discovery prior to applying. This includes:

- Stakeholder and customer surveys used to identify patterns and validate assumptions
- Formal stakeholder and customer interviews informed by survey findings
- Dozens of customer and stakeholder conversations
- A validated understanding of the problem and customer needs
- Evidence that customers are willing to pay

—> **If this work has not been completed, this is NOT the right time to apply.**

If you are beyond the customer discovery stage and have additional traction data, we encourage you to include it in your application. This may include:

- Revenue or sales
- Contracts
- Letters of intent
- Current users or beta testers
- Partnerships
- Audience growth or engaged followers

While traction data is not required, this information helps demonstrate traction and becomes an important part of the story founders will communicate throughout the accelerator and Summit experience.

Capital Readiness Matters

Applicants must be able to clearly articulate:

- How much capital they are raising
- What the capital will be used for
- What milestones it will achieve
- How the funding will help move the business forward

You do not need perfect materials, but you must be prepared to engage in the process.

Startups Are Encouraged to Apply

Women Founders who have not yet raised capital are encouraged to apply if they:

- Have validated the problem and solution
- Have completed customer discovery
- Understand their competition
- Can clearly explain what they are selling
- Demonstrate evidence of demand
- Are preparing to raise capital to scale

→ We are searching for founders who are building scalable companies and are committed to growth.

Again, if you are still exploring your idea or have not yet validated your market through stakeholder surveys and interviews, this is likely not the right time to apply. However, we encourage you to participate in Startup Study Hall and other Startup Ladies programming as you continue building. We would love to get to know you and your company!

Scaleups Are Encouraged to Apply

Women founders who have already raised capital and are continuing to grow are also encouraged to apply. If you are a woman founder or co-founder with equity in the company and are preparing for your next stage of growth, we encourage you to apply.

The Startup Ladies Are Industry Agnostic

We are industry agnostic. We care about scalable business models, evidence of demand, and founders who are serious about growth.

Women Founders from ANY State Are Welcome to Apply

We welcome founders from across the United States as training is virtual. However, all Top 9 founders must attend the Summit in person on November 5, 2026.

Applications Are Open to the Public

You do not need to be a current member of The Startup Ladies to apply.

Previous Top 9 Candidates May Apply If...

- You are a current member of The Startup Ladies
- You received a positive evaluation from prior participation
- You have made marked progressions since the last summit and are ready for additional support

Evaluation Process and Judging Criteria

A diverse subcommittee of The Startup Ladies Board, Ambassadors, and ecosystem leaders will review all applications. We evaluate founders based on evidence, clarity, and readiness, not pattern recognition. Strong applicants demonstrate:

- Clear problem and customer understanding
- Evidence of customer demand
- Strong customer discovery insights
- Real traction and progress
- Clear business model and path to revenue
- Thoughtful go-to-market strategy
- Defined capital raise and use of funds

Applicants will be evaluated using a structured scoring rubric focused on:

- Data gleaned from customer discovery
- Evidence of demand
- Traction (sales, letters of commitment, followers etc.)
- Business model and scalability
- Experience and education in your chosen industry
- How well you write in your application

Attendance Is MANDATORY at ALL Training Sessions

Participation includes a rigorous structured accelerator running from August through November leading up to the Summit. **Attendance is mandatory - there are no exceptions.**

- All training sessions must be attended
- Assignments must be completed on time
- Preparation between sessions is expected
- Founders must participate fully in the process

Missing sessions or failing to complete required preparation may result in forfeiture of your position in the Top 9. This year up to two alternates will be chosen.

2026 Top 9 Accelerator and Training Schedule

Participation in the Top 9 includes a structured accelerator experience running from August through November designed to help founders strengthen investor readiness, improve communication, refine fundraising materials, and prepare for meaningful investor conversations before, during, and after the Summit. Again, attendance and participation are mandatory. The accelerator combines:

- Live virtual training sessions
- Asynchronous learning
- Office hours and support sessions
- Independent assignments between trainings
- One-on-one practice with assigned interviewers
- Repeated interview preparation and feedback

Training Dates

Training	Date	Time
AUGUST		
Orientation	Tuesday, August 18	11am - 12:30pm ET
Asynchronous	Week of August 24	--
SEPTEMBER		
Training 1	Tuesday, September 1	4pm - 6pm ET
Asynchronous	Week of September 7	--
Office Hours	Friday, September 11	4pm - 5pm ET
Training 2	Tuesday, September 15	4pm - 6pm ET
Asynchronous	Week of September 22	--
Office Hours	Friday, September 25	4pm - 5pm ET
Asynchronous	Week of September 28	--
OCTOBER		
Training 4	Tuesday, October 6	4pm - 7pm ET
Training 5	Tuesday, October 13	4pm - 7pm ET
Asynchronous	Week of October 19	--
Due: FINAL deck, exec summary, industry tags	Tuesday, October 20	Noon ET
Training 6	Tuesday, October 27	4pm - 7pm ET
NOVEMBER		
Summit Week!	Thursday, November 5	Noon - 6pm ET
Feedback Session	Thursday, November 12	11am-Noon ET

Preparation Between Training Sessions

Assignments will be provided between sessions. These assignments are designed not only to prepare founders for the Summit, but to strengthen their readiness for investor conversations beyond the event. Founders should expect to spend:

- 2–4 hours between sessions for earlier-stage companies
- 1–2 hours between sessions for later-stage companies

Executive Presence Is Expected

Founders are expected to:

- Show up prepared and on time
- Meet deadlines
- Practice outside of training sessions
- Engage fully in conversations and activities
- Be coachable and open to feedback
- Support fellow founders professionally
- Communicate with professionalism and respect
- Demonstrate reliability and follow-through
- Support fellow Top 9 founders

We take commitment seriously because it reflects how founders operate when preparing to raise capital.

Summit Agenda

10:00 am	Founders and vendors arrive to set up display tables
11:30 am	Group and interview pair photos
11:45 am	Founders at display tables for networking
12:00 pm	Guests arrive, lunch and networking
12:30 pm	Welcome remarks
12:40 pm	Table conversations
1:10 pm	Panel intro
1:15 pm	Panel discussion with past founders
1:45 pm	Transition to sessions
2:00 pm	Fund the Founder Session 1
2:45 pm	Break
3:00 pm	Fund the Founder Session 2
3:45 pm	Break
4:00 pm	Fund the Founder Session 3
4:45 pm	Break
5:00 pm	Cocktail reception with an incredible view of the city!
6:00 pm	Close

Special Opportunity for 2026!

If you would like to stay for dinner at the Skyline Club after the Summit, we can help you make arrangements ahead of time. It is the perfect spot to take in views of the city and decompress. You will be responsible for the cost of your dinner and drinks.

Important Dates and Timeline

APPLICATION

- **Wednesday, May 20, 2026** - Applications open (*4 weeks*)
- **Wednesday, June 17, 2026 at 11:59 pm ET** - Applications close
- **Tuesday, June 30, 2026** - Top 9 founders notified
- **Thursday, July 2, 2026** - Top 9 participation confirmation due

TOP 9 PRESS RELEASE

- **Wednesday, September 9, 2026** - Public announcement of the Top 9

SUMMIT

- **Thursday, November 5, 2026 from noon to 6pm** – #InvestInWomenFounders Summit at The Skyline Club in Indianapolis, Indiana (Founders arrive no later than 10am day of event.)

Nonprofits Are NOT Eligible to Apply

The Top 9 is reserved for founders building for-profit, scalable companies. We value the important work nonprofits do and encourage continued engagement with The Startup Ladies community through other opportunities.

Risk Is Rewarded!

Many founders enter the Top 9 focused primarily on preparing for a single event. They leave with stronger positioning, clearer communication, expanded networks, deeper confidence, and a far better understanding of how to engage with investors and strategic partners long after the Summit ends.

The goal is not simply to help founders perform well on stage. The goal is to help founders grow into leaders capable of navigating the next stage of building and scaling their company.

This experience is designed for founders who are serious about building scalable companies and preparing to raise capital. If you have done the work, understand your market, and are preparing for growth, we encourage you to apply.

Application Link

→ [CLICK HERE](#) to apply.

The application closes on Wednesday, June 17 at 11:59 pm ET.

Still Have Questions?

If you still have questions about the application process, evaluation criteria, or Summit experience, you may do one of the following:

EMAIL

Please introduce yourself and your company and send questions to: Info@TheStartupLadies.org

OFFICE HOURS WITH KRISTEN COOPER

Kristen Cooper, Founder & CEO of The Startup Ladies, will host three live Q&A sessions via Zoom to answer questions about the application process, evaluation criteria, and Summit experience. Registration for the Q&As is required. Once registered, you will receive the Zoom link.

- Friday, May 29 at 10:00 am ET - [CLICK HERE](#) to register
- Friday, June 5 at 10:00 am ET - [CLICK HERE](#) to register
- Friday, June 12 at 2:00 pm ET - [CLICK HERE](#) to register

The application closes on Wednesday, June 17 at 11:59 pm ET.

Good Luck!