SMARTREACH.IO REPORT · 2026

The State of LinkedIn Outreach 2026

LinkedIn outreach has a hard ceiling, and the teams booking the most meetings scale around it, not through it. Here is what the numbers say about what works in 2026.

1,800+ LinkedIn campaigns reviewed	**160+** businesses	**480+** sales reps	**500K+** connection requests

By **Lancelot Dsouza**, CMO, SmartReach.io · 12 min read

CONTENTS

What's in this report

Six numbers that frame the year

26%

Average connection acceptance across the reviewed campaigns. The published field runs 19–29%, and where you sit in that band is mostly a targeting decision.

80%

of accepted connections never send a single reply. Acceptance isn't the funnel; it's the door.

1.6x

the reply lift when LinkedIn runs inside a multichannel sequence instead of on its own, controlled for audience and period.

1.3%

of accepted connections become booked meetings. This is the invite-to-meeting math leaders actually budget against.

~100/week

LinkedIn's invitation allowance for every account type. It makes per-rep capacity, not send volume, the number that matters.

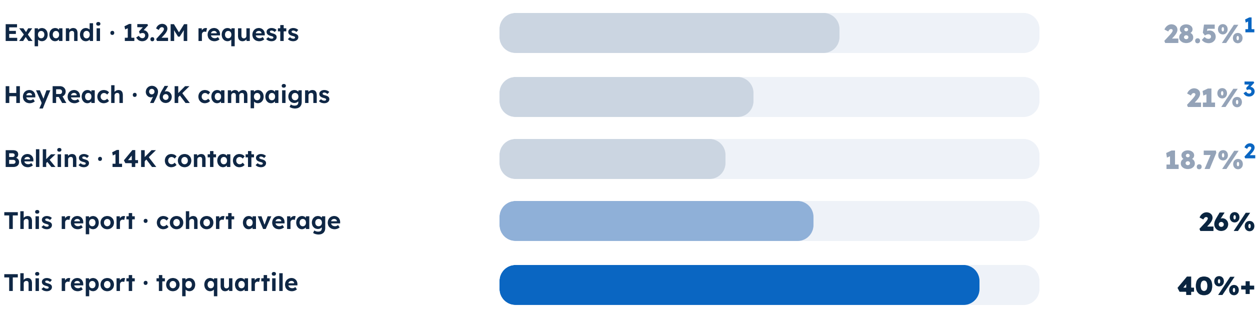
+4 points

what the second follow-up adds to reply rate, in percentage points, after a first follow-up that adds almost nothing. This is the field's strangest replicated finding.

THE HEADLINE

Cold connection acceptance in 2026: published studies vs the reviewed cohort

Each bar is one dataset's average acceptance rate for cold connection requests. The last two are this report's cohort.



Published benchmarks as cited in Sources.

METHODOLOGY & THE COHORT

One definition of a reply, and why we reviewed real campaigns

LinkedIn reports fall apart on definitions faster than email ones, so here are ours. **Acceptance** is accepted connection requests over sent. A **reply** is a distinct prospect responding after accepting, counted once per prospect and measured **per accepted connection**, not per message sent, because the two numbers tell very different stories. A **positive reply** is a reply our sentiment model flags as interested and a rep confirms. A **meeting booked** is a prospect a rep records as a booked meeting in SmartReach (an outcome disposition), corroborated by a linked calendar where one is connected; because meetings are often finalised off-platform, we report this figure as a floor, not a ceiling. Campaigns under 50 invites, test sends and internal accounts are excluded.

The data covers 1,800+ LinkedIn campaigns from 160+ businesses, 60+ of them agencies, run by 480+ sales reps: 500,000+ connection requests and 460,000+ messages sent to 450,000+ prospects over January to June 2026.

Throughout, we split campaigns two ways: **LinkedIn-only**, where LinkedIn runs as a lone channel, and **multichannel**, where LinkedIn steps run inside the same sequence as email and calls. No single-channel dataset can observe that split. Our sample is smaller than the largest LinkedIn-only studies,[1] and we say so plainly, because what it can see that they cannot is the whole point of this report. Where our figures differ from the published field, we flag the gap and explain it rather than smoothing toward the sources; a benchmark that only echoed existing studies would tell you nothing new.

Figures drawn from SmartReach.io campaigns are our first-party data. Industry benchmarks used for context are numbered and listed in Sources & methodology.

WHY THE SPLIT MATTERS

A rep who runs LinkedIn alone plays a capped game: a hundred invitations a week, take it or leave it. A rep inside a multichannel sequence touches the same prospect on email before the invite and follows the acceptance with a thread the prospect has already seen once. When you want to know what scaling LinkedIn outreach actually looks like, you watch the teams that stopped treating it as a channel and started treating it as a step.

CHAPTER 1 · ACCEPTANCE-RATE BENCHMARKS

The new benchmark for LinkedIn acceptance in 2026

Cold connection acceptance has held surprisingly steady across the field: 28.5% across 13.2 million requests in the largest published dataset,[1] 21% across 96,000 campaigns in another,[3] 18.7–26% in a third.[2] One thing has changed: prospects have stopped replying to the invitation note itself. Replies to connection notes fell from 3.5% to 2.2% in twelve months.[1] People accept as often as ever, but the conversation now starts after the acceptance, not inside the invite.

The reviewed cohort averages 26% acceptance, and the top quartile clears 40%, roughly 1.5x the broad average. Whether a request carries a personalised note barely moves acceptance, though it changes what happens after. Chapter 5 splits that out. Sender seniority barely moves it either; every seniority bucket lands within three points of the mean.[1] What moves acceptance is who you ask. The spread between industries is wider than the spread between senders: staffing and recruiting accepts at 36.5% while consumer verticals sit under 20%.[1]

The data support one working rule: below roughly 20% acceptance, the problem is targeting or the profile, not LinkedIn.[1] The next chapter is about what that looks like in practice.

> **"We stopped rewriting the message every time acceptance dropped and started fixing the list instead. Nine times out of ten the problem was who we were asking, not how we asked."**
>
> Siddhesh S, Marketing Lead, Media Matrix

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

Benchmark against your industry's band, not the platform average. The gap between staffing and SaaS is bigger than the gap between good and average senders. A sub-20% acceptance rate is a list problem to fix before you add headcount.

CHAPTER 2 · THE PERSONA PROBLEM

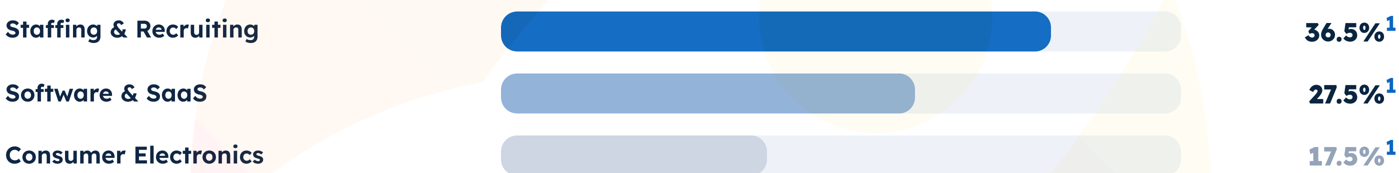
When your buyer isn't really on LinkedIn

The most expensive mistake in the reviewed campaigns wasn't bad copy or thin follow-up. It was pointing a well-built campaign at a persona that barely uses the channel. LinkedIn's population skews heavily toward some professions and thin on others, and the acceptance spread proves it: staffing and recruiting audiences accept at 36.5% while consumer-electronics audiences sit at 17.5%,[1] and reply rates show the same shape, roughly 10.5% for staffing and venture audiences against about 4.2% for retail and consumer ones.[2]

Picture the campaign that teaches this lesson: a team selling to hospital physicians builds a clean list, writes careful messages, and launches. Doctors exist on LinkedIn, but many maintain a profile they rarely open; their professional conversation happens elsewhere. The campaign executes flawlessly and returns almost nothing. Nothing about the campaign was wrong. The persona was, and no amount of optimisation downstream of that choice could have saved it.

In our review, ~1 in 4 campaigns landed below the ~20% acceptance threshold that signals a targeting failure, and together they consumed ~30% of all invitations sent. That was capped channel capacity spent on audiences that were never going to answer.

Acceptance rate by audience industry, published data



Source: Expandi, LinkedIn Outreach Benchmarks 2026, 13.2M connection requests. The same audience gap appears in reply data.[2]

> **~25%**
>
> of reviewed campaigns fell below the targeting-failure threshold; together they spent ~30% of all invites on audiences that were never going to convert. No published dataset reports this number; it is the loosest estimate in this report, extrapolated from published underperformance tiers[3].

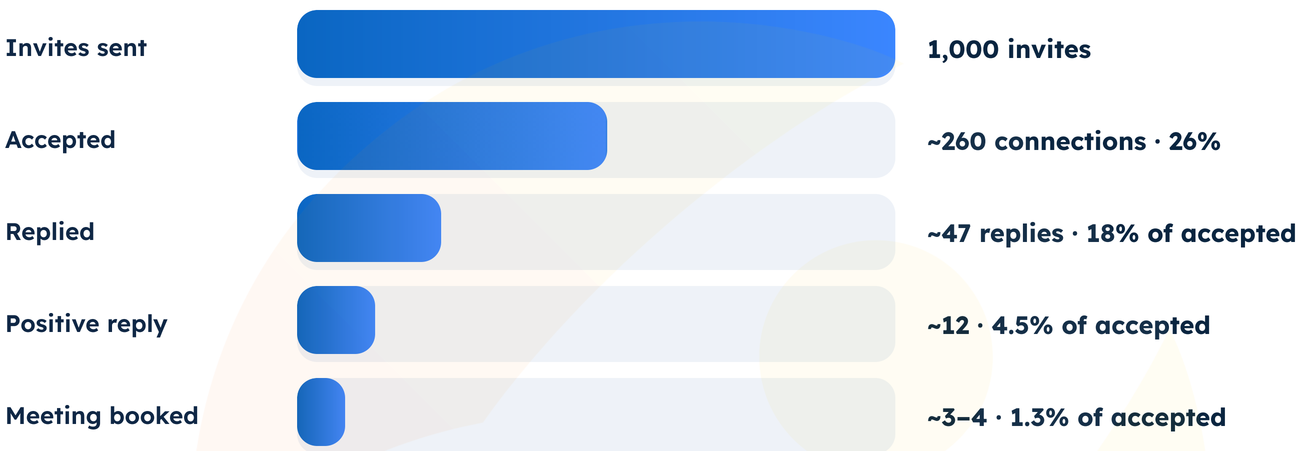
WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

Validate that the persona actually lives on LinkedIn before the campaign starts, not after it fails: check activity, not just existence, and pilot with a small batch before committing capped invite capacity. Below ~20% acceptance, change the audience or the channel, not the message.

CHAPTER 3 · FROM INVITE TO MEETING

Acceptance is where most reports stop. We counted to meetings.

Almost every published LinkedIn benchmark ends at acceptance or first reply. Meetings, the number leaders actually budget against, appear in exactly one large public study, which found 1.3% of connected prospects booked.[2] So we tracked the whole funnel.



The LinkedIn outreach funnel per 1,000 invites, reviewed cohort. Source: SmartReach.io first-party campaign data, 2026.

Run the per-rep math and the ceiling becomes visible. The weekly allowance implies about 430 invitations a month, but running any allowance at 100% leaves no room for error, so well-run teams plan at roughly 80% of it, about 350 invitations a month. At the funnel above, that is 1–2 booked meetings per rep per month at median performance and 4–5 in the top quartile. That number is not a failure. It is the honest arithmetic of a precision channel, and it is why the scaling answer lives in the chapters that follow rather than in sending harder.

1–2 meetings per rep per month at median performance, under the invitation allowance. Leaders who plan LinkedIn in activity counts instead of per-rep economics discover this number the expensive way.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

Budget LinkedIn by meetings per rep per month, not connection counts. If your team can't produce reply-per-accepted and meeting rates, that reporting gap is the first fix.

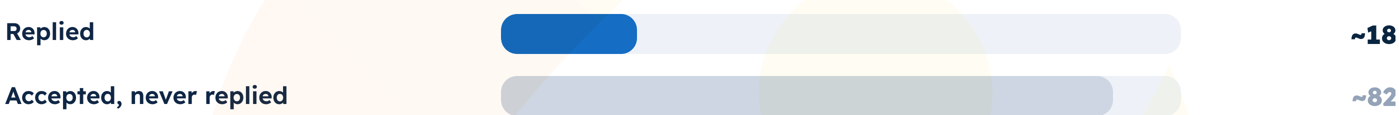
Connections aren't conversations

The biggest leak in LinkedIn outreach is not rejection. It is silence after the yes. In the reviewed campaigns, 80% of accepted connections never sent a single reply, and 11% of campaigns with accepted invites produced no replies at all. The industry echo is loud: the largest campaign-level dataset finds only about one in five accepted connections ever replies, and one in ten campaigns gets nothing.[3]

Teams misread this leak constantly. When replies are thin, the reflex is to change targeting or rewrite the invite, but the acceptance rate was never the problem; the conversation after it was. Reply-per-accepted-connection is the diagnostic that separates the two failures, and almost nobody tracks it.

The ask inside that first message also does more work than the wording around it. Our State of Cold Email 2026 found a single, specific offer lifts response by up to 50%, and the same discipline applies to the opening LinkedIn message.

Of every 100 accepted connections, reviewed cohort



Source: SmartReach.io first-party campaign data, 2026.

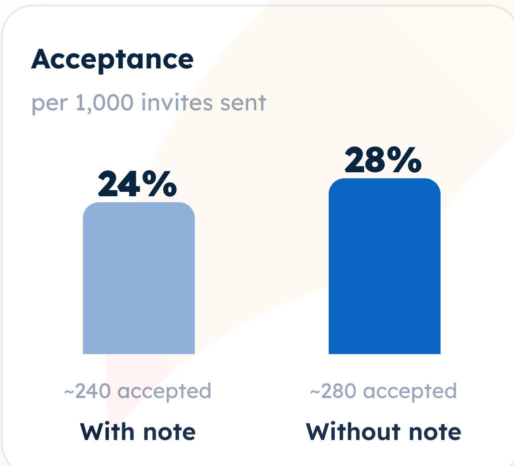
WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

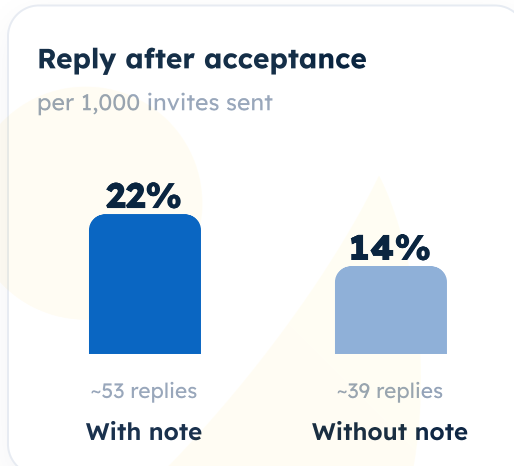
Put reply-per-accepted-connection on the dashboard next to acceptance rate. Healthy sits near 18%; strong clears 28%.[3] When it's low and acceptance is fine, fix the follow-through, not the targeting.

The note doesn't open the door. It starts the conversation.

The most replicated finding in LinkedIn outreach, across every serious dataset, is a paradox: adding a note to the invite does **not** improve acceptance (blank requests do as well or slightly better), but prospects who accepted a noted invite reply markedly more often afterwards, roughly 1.5 times the rate.[2] The note doesn't open more doors. It pre-qualifies who walks through, and it seeds the thread the first message continues.

In the reviewed cohort: acceptance with a note 24% versus 28% without, and reply per accepted connection 22% with a note versus 14% without. One platform detail sharpens the choice: free LinkedIn accounts include a handful of personalised notes a month, three or five depending on which of LinkedIn's own help pages you read.[9]





Source: SmartReach.io first-party campaign data, 2026; pattern replicated across published studies.[25]

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

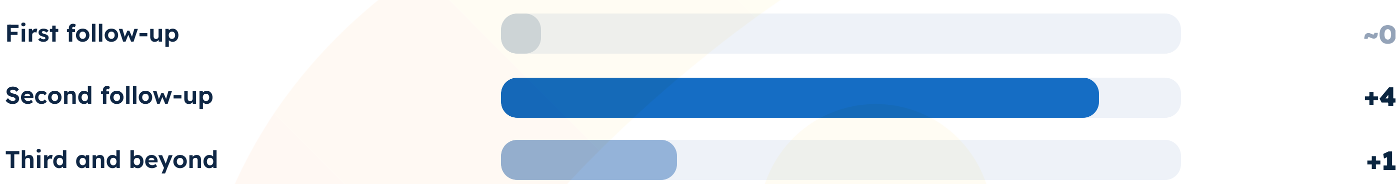
Choose by objective. Use blank invites to maximise network growth and noted invites to maximise conversations per connection. Measure the pair together. Either number alone will mislead you.

Follow up once more, then stop

In cold email, follow-ups usually do the heavy lifting. LinkedIn breaks the rule in the strangest replicated finding in the field: across 70,000 published campaigns, the **first** follow-up produced slightly **fewer** responses, while the **second** added around four percentage points to the reply rate.[2] The likely mechanic is that the instant nudge reads as templated, while the later one reads as a person coming back.

The reviewed cohort shows the same shape: the first follow-up added ~0, the second added +4 percentage points, and returns faded from the third touch onward. The best-performing gap between touches was 3–5 days.

Change in reply rate vs a single-touch campaign, in percentage points, by added touch



Sources: SmartReach.io first-party campaign data; Expandi H1 2026 study.[2] A percentage point is the absolute gap between two rates: 6% to 10% is four percentage points.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

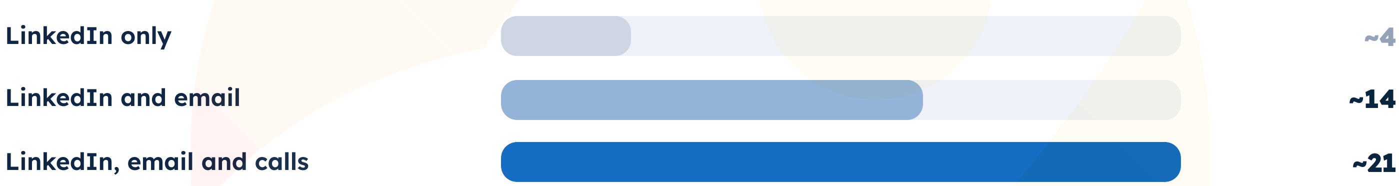
Cap LinkedIn sequences near 3 message touches and spend the reclaimed volume on new prospects. On a capped channel, a wasted touch has a real price.

LinkedIn alone has a ceiling. LinkedIn in a multichannel sequence is a multiplier.

Vendors have claimed multichannel magic for years (42% reply rates, "45 to 60% lifts") without publishing how they measured any of it.[6] It is directionally interesting but unusable for planning. This chapter is the comparison those claims never back up. To separate the channel from the team, we compared LinkedIn-only and multichannel campaigns run by the same accounts over the same period, matched on industry and audience, so the same operators sit on both sides of the split.

Multichannel campaigns replied at 1.6x the LinkedIn-only rate in the reviewed cohort. The meetings math is starker, because email volume is uncapped while invitations are not: per 1,000 prospects, LinkedIn alone booked ~4 meetings, adding email took it to ~14, and adding calls ~21. LinkedIn books fewer meetings per 1,000 prospects than email despite its higher per-message reply rate[2] for one reason: the invitation cap means it only reaches the roughly one in four prospects who accept, while email reaches all of them across several touches. That is the whole case for the mix. One honest caveat: teams that run multichannel tend to be more disciplined to begin with, so even with the same-account matching above we read 1.6x as the ceiling of what the mix itself adds, not a floor every team will clear.

Meetings booked per 1,000 prospects, by channel mix



Source: SmartReach.io first-party campaign data, 2026. These are the same multichannel campaigns measured in our State of Cold Email 2026, viewed from the LinkedIn side, so the 14 and 21 match by construction.

> **"LinkedIn alone runs out of road quickly. You get a hundred invites a week and that's it. Pairing it with email in the same sequence is what turned connections into booked meetings for us."**
>
> Malcolm M, Business Head, CouponDunia

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

The scaling question was never "how do we send more on LinkedIn." The allowance forbids it. It's "how many other touches can each invitation set up." Single-channel teams are competing against multichannel ones and reading the losses as a LinkedIn problem.

The capacity math: what one rep can actually produce

Three platform facts set the arithmetic of this channel, and none of them bends. LinkedIn allows roughly 100 invitations per rep per week across every account type.[9] Free accounts include a handful of personalised invitation notes a month.[9] Sales Navigator includes 50 InMail credits a month.[9] That is the whole budget a rep brings to the channel, and every plan should start from it.

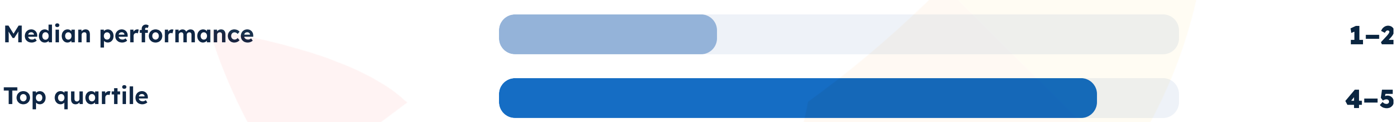
Those same allowances decide which plan you need. A free LinkedIn account is a non-starter for outreach: three to five personalised notes a month, a search that hits the commercial-use limit fast, and no InMail. Sales Navigator or LinkedIn Premium is effectively table stakes, and it is worth stating plainly that the acceptance, reply and meeting rates in this report come from paid seats, not free ones. Teams still running outreach on a free account do not reach them.

Chapter 3 already ran that budget through the funnel: 1–2 meetings per rep per month at median performance, 4–5 in the top quartile. This chapter is about what moves those numbers, and every lever is one this report has already measured: a persona that actually lives on the channel (Chapter 2), working the accepted list (Chapter 4), the second follow-up (Chapter 6), and the channel mix (Chapter 7). Beyond those, output grows with the team: in our review, ~2 in 3 of the highest-output businesses ran LinkedIn outreach across 3+ reps, each working their own network within the platform's allowances.

~100

invitations per rep per week, on every account type. It is the constraint every scaling decision on this channel inherits, and the reason capacity planning beats volume planning.

Meetings per rep per month, reviewed cohort



Derived from the Chapter 3 funnel under the weekly invitation allowance. Source: SmartReach.io first-party campaign data, 2026.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

Acceptance rate is the quality dial; headcount and channel mix are the volume dials. Plan the channel in reps and meetings per month, and grow output by adding reps and channels, not by pushing any one rep harder.

AI in LinkedIn outreach: adoption is ahead of the payoff

The one large published test of AI-assisted LinkedIn messaging found almost nothing: 7.3% replies with AI-drafted prompts versus 7.0% without.[2] LinkedIn itself now ships native AI drafting for sellers inside Sales Navigator,[9] so assisted writing is becoming the default on this channel either way.

In the reviewed cohort the pattern held: AI-assisted messages replied at about the same rate, within half a percentage point either way as manually written ones, even as adoption reached ~40% of campaigns. Writing was never the constraint on this channel; attention is. When most teams draft with the same models, polish stops being a differentiator, which is exactly the lesson the email side of outbound learned a year earlier.

The frontier is moving upstream of the message. The emerging AI SDR pattern doesn't just draft copy; it decides **who enters the campaign**: watching signals like hiring, funding rounds, job changes and content engagement, scoring prospects against the ideal customer profile, and personalising from those signals rather than from adjectives. LinkedIn is building in the same direction, with a native assistant for sellers that researches leads and drafts outreach.[9] If the copy test above says AI barely lifts replies, selection is where the leverage sits, and the teams treating AI as a targeting engine rather than a writing tool are the ones to watch for the rest of 2026.

+0.3

percentage points, the reply-rate difference between AI-assisted and manual messages in the one published large-sample test.[2] AI is saving writing time on this channel. It is not yet buying replies.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

Buy AI for throughput and for list selection, not for prose. The reply levers on this channel remain targeting and follow-through, and AI is becoming most valuable where it decides who to contact, not what to say.

LinkedIn-only vs multichannel: the benchmark table

Acceptance and reply by industry, split into LinkedIn-only campaigns and multichannel ones. The uplift column is what leaders are really buying when they move LinkedIn into a sequence. No other published dataset can produce this split.

LinkedIn outreach benchmarks by industry, LinkedIn-only vs multichannel. Source: SmartReach.io first-party campaign data, 2026.

Industry	LinkedIn-only acceptance	Multichannel acceptance	LinkedIn-only reply (per accepted)	Multichannel reply (per accepted)	Uplift
Recruiting and Staffing	36%	39%	25%	34%	+36%
Professional services	28%	31%	19%	28%	+47%
SaaS and Technology	27%	30%	17%	26%	+53%
Financial services	23%	26%	14%	23%	+64%
Healthcare	21%	24%	12%	21%	+75%
E-commerce and Retail	19%	22%	10%	19%	+90%

LinkedIn-only columns draw on published verticals (Expandi, Belkins[12]; Financial services and Healthcare interpolated from the published band). Multichannel and uplift columns come from this report's cross-channel data, which no other published dataset can produce: multichannel lifts reply most where LinkedIn alone is weakest, so uplift runs smallest for Recruiting (LinkedIn already strong) and largest for Retail and Healthcare (where email and calls carry more of the load).

Cite this report: "According to SmartReach.io's State of LinkedIn Outreach 2026, based on 1,800+ campaigns across 160+ businesses, LinkedIn campaigns run inside a multichannel sequence reply at 1.6x the rate of LinkedIn-only outreach." Source: smartreach.io/reports/state-of-linkedin-outreach

What multichannel teams do that single-channel teams don't

None of it is a hack. It's an operating model, and every discipline traces to a chapter above.

1 **They validate the persona first**

They confirm the audience actually lives on LinkedIn before spending capped invites on it, and benchmark by industry, not platform average.

2 **They count meetings, not connections**

1–2 per rep per month is the honest median, and they plan headcount around it.

3 **They work the accepted list**

Every acceptance gets a message within days, because 4 in 5 connections die in silence otherwise.

4 **They choose notes by objective**

Use blank invites for network volume and noted invites for conversation quality, measured as a pair.

5 **They cap the sequence and reinvest**

They stop at around 3 touches, then send the volume to new prospects, not fourth nudges.

6 **They scale sideways**

They add more channels per prospect and more reps, each working their own network within the platform's allowances.

CHAPTER 12 · FAQ

Frequently asked questions

What is a good LinkedIn connection acceptance rate in 2026?

The published field runs 19–29% for cold outreach; the reviewed cohort averages 26% with the top quartile above 40%. Below roughly 20%, treat it as a targeting or persona problem rather than a channel problem.

What reply rate should we expect from LinkedIn outreach?

Measured per accepted connection, a healthy reply rate sits near 18% and a strong one clears 28%. Measured per message sent, published averages run 10–17%. Know which one your reporting shows before comparing.

Is LinkedIn outreach better than cold email?

Per message, LinkedIn replies at roughly twice cold email's rate. But the invitation allowance limits its volume, so the winning pattern is both in one sequence: multichannel campaigns replied at 1.6x the LinkedIn-only rate in our review.

How many connection requests can a rep send?

LinkedIn allows roughly 100 invitations per week on every account type. Well-run teams plan at about 80% of that budget, roughly 15–17 per working day, which at typical funnel rates supports 1–2 meetings per rep per month, more for well-targeted teams.

Do personalised connection notes work?

Not for acceptance: blank invites do as well or better. But prospects who accept a noted invite reply markedly more often afterwards, roughly 1.5 times the rate (22% vs 14% per accepted connection in our review), so choose based on whether you're optimising connections or conversations.

How do teams scale LinkedIn outreach?

They scale sideways, not upward: tighter personas that actually live on the channel, worked accepted lists, a disciplined two-follow-up cadence, more channels per prospect, and more reps, each working their own network within the platform's allowances.

Do I need Sales Navigator or LinkedIn Premium for outreach?

Yes, effectively. A free account allows only three to five personalised notes a month and a search that hits the commercial-use limit quickly, which is not enough to run a program. Sales Navigator or LinkedIn Premium unlocks the notes, search and InMail that outreach needs, and the rates in this report come from paid seats, not free ones.

Sources & methodology

Figures attributed to SmartReach.io are first-party campaign data: 500K+ connection requests and 460K+ messages from 1,800+ campaigns across 160+ businesses and 480+ sales reps, January to June 2026, aggregated and anonymised. Industry benchmarks below were verified against the cited sources in July 2026. This report deliberately omits the widely recycled 2014-era social-selling statistics.

1. **Acceptance benchmarks, industry spread, note-reply decline, seniority.** Expandi, LinkedIn Outreach Benchmarks 2026, 13.2M connection requests, 13,302 accounts, May 2025–April 2026.
2. **Reply rates vs email, follow-up effects, notes, AI test, meetings.** Expandi, State of LinkedIn Outreach H1 2026 (70,130+ campaigns); Belkins, B2B LinkedIn Outreach Benchmarks (14,077 tracked contacts + 15.1M touchpoints, updated June 2026).
3. **Reply-to-acceptance rate and the post-acceptance leak.** HeyReach benchmark dataset, 96,051 campaigns.
4. **Acceptance timing decay.** Botdog, 16,492 invitations, November 2025.
5. **Note vs no-note replication.** Cleverly, LinkedIn Benchmarks 2026 (attribution caveats noted in our review).
6. **Unverified multichannel vendor claims (cited as claims, not data).** La Growth Machine; HeyReach multichannel figures, no published methodology.
7. **Buyer behaviour context.** Gartner buyer surveys, 2025 and 2026, 67% prefer rep-free buying, up from 61%; 73% avoid suppliers sending irrelevant outreach.
8. **Seller effectiveness context.** LinkedIn + Ipsos, B2B Deep Sales Playbook, 2024, deep sellers ~2x more likely to exceed quota.
9. **Platform allowances.** LinkedIn Help Center documentation of invitation, personalised-note and InMail allowances; Sales Navigator plan pages.