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Salary Negotiation Power Pack: Scripts That Get Results

Most compensation conversations end before they start because candidates either don't know their market rate or don't have a script for the counteroffer moment. This guide fixes both problems. You'll learn how to anchor high using real market data from five sources, deliver a counteroffer that sounds confident instead of desperate, negotiate equity term by term (cliff, vesting schedule, acceleration triggers, double-trigger protection), and plan a multi-year compensation strategy that compounds every raise into the next one. The scripts, worksheets, and frameworks here work for new-hire negotiations, internal raises, post-promotion reanchoring, and competing-offer leverage used ethically.

1. Foundation

Salary negotiation is not a single conversation — it is a system that starts before you apply and runs through your first performance review. The foundational insight is that compensation is set by anchors. Whoever names a number first creates a psychological reference point that is extremely difficult to dislodge. That is why experienced negotiators delay disclosing their current salary (illegal to ask in over 20 US states), avoid naming a number before receiving an offer, and when they do anchor, anchor above their true target so movement still lands where they want. The ZOPA — Zone of Possible Agreement — is the range between the employer's walk-away point and yours. Your job is to expand your side of that zone by demonstrating market value before the negotiation begins, not during it.

Market rate research is the foundation that turns a gut-feel ask into an evidence-backed position. Five sources triangulate a defensible range: (1) Levels.fyi for total compensation data at specific companies, particularly valuable for tech and finance roles; (2) LinkedIn Salary for role + geography + years of experience filters; (3) Glassdoor salary reports, filtered to the current year and your metro area; (4) Payscale's

role-specific surveys, which include skills-based granularity; and (5) BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OES) for nationally representative benchmark data by occupation code. Pull the 50th and 75th percentile from each source. Your target anchor is the 75th percentile of the range, not the median — because employers almost always push back, and negotiating down from the 75th percentile typically lands you between the 50th and 65th, which is exactly where you want to be. Document every source with a date stamp; you may need to cite it.

Total compensation extends far beyond base salary, and every component is negotiable. For any offer above roughly \$100,000 base, equity, bonus, and benefits can represent 30% to 80% of total value. A \$130,000 base offer with a \$20,000 annual bonus, 4,000 RSUs vesting over four years at a \$50 share price (representing \$200,000 total), and fully paid family health insurance worth \$18,000 per year is actually a \$168,000 total annual package in year one — and more in years two through four as RSU vesting accelerates. Comparing offers or negotiating without modeling total comp leads to systematically bad decisions. Build the total comp table for every offer before responding to any of them.

2. Step-by-Step System

1

Build your market rate range before any conversation

Open a spreadsheet and create one row per data source: Levels.fyi, LinkedIn Salary, Glassdoor, Payscale, and BLS OES. For each source, record the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentile for your exact title, metro area, and years of experience. Then calculate the average 50th and average 75th across sources. Your walk-away floor is the average 25th percentile minus 10% — below that, the market is undervaluing your skills and accepting probably reinforces that. Your target anchor is the average 75th percentile plus 5% to 10%. Example: a mid-level software engineer in Austin with 5 years of experience might find a 50th percentile across sources of \$142,000 and a 75th of \$168,000. The target anchor to state in a counteroffer is \$175,000 to \$182,000. That gives the employer room to "win" the negotiation by coming down to \$162,000 to \$168,000 — exactly where the candidate wanted to land. Never disclose your current salary before you have an offer in hand. In states where asking is legal, respond with: "I'd rather focus on the market rate for this role, which I've researched carefully. I'm targeting \$X."

2

Respond to the initial offer with one of three scripts

The moment an offer arrives, your response sets the entire negotiation tone. You have three scenarios. **Scenario A — Offer is close to your target:** "Thank you — I'm genuinely excited about this role. Before I make a final decision, I'd like to discuss the base. Based on my research across Levels.fyi, LinkedIn Salary, and Glassdoor for this title in [city], the range for someone with my background is \$X to \$Y. Can we get the base to \$X?" Name the top of your researched range as the ask. **Scenario B — Offer is significantly below target:** "I appreciate the offer and want to be transparent. The base is below what I need to move forward. Based on market data and my experience with [specific skill 1] and [specific skill 2], I was targeting \$X. Is there flexibility there?" Do not apologize. Do not say "I was hoping for." State a number. **Scenario C — You need 24 to 48 hours:** "This is exciting. I want to review the full package carefully and come back to you within 24 hours with any questions. Is that timeline okay?" Never accept on the call. Even a great offer benefits from a night to think through what you will ask for.

3

Counter with a specific anchor and hold through silence

Your written counteroffer is more powerful than a verbal one because it forces the employer to respond in writing, creating a paper trail and slowing the emotional pressure. The email format: paragraph 1 — express genuine enthusiasm for the role and the team. Paragraph 2 — state your specific counter: "Based on my research and experience, I'm targeting a base of \$X, which reflects the [75th percentile] market rate for this title and level in [metro]." Paragraph 3 — hold the door open: "I'm confident we can find a structure that works, and I'm committed to this role." Then stop. Do not pre-negotiate against yourself by adding "but I understand if that's not possible." After sending, expect a 24 to 72 hour response window. Do not follow up within 48 hours. Silence is not rejection; it is the recruiter checking with the hiring manager and often finance. The candidate who panics and emails again within hours signals desperation and often gets a lower counter back. If the employer says the base is fixed, pivot to non-base levers immediately: signing bonus, equity grant, earlier performance review, additional PTO, remote work stipend, or professional development budget.

4

Negotiate equity term by term

Equity negotiation is where most candidates leave the most money on the table because they don't know what to ask about beyond the grant size. Four terms matter at least as much as the number of shares or options. **Vesting schedule:** standard is a 4-year vest, but ask if accelerated vesting to 3 years is possible, particularly at mature startups or pre-IPO companies. **Cliff:** the standard 1-year cliff means you receive zero equity if you leave in month 11. If you are leaving unvested equity at your current employer, try to negotiate the cliff down to 6 months or ask for a signing bonus large enough to offset what you are forfeiting. **Single-trigger acceleration:** some grants accelerate 25% to 50% upon acquisition. Ask whether the current grant has any acceleration provision. **Double-trigger acceleration:** this means full accelerated vesting if the company is acquired AND you are terminated within 12 to 18 months of the transaction. This protects against acqui-hire situations where employees lose unvested equity. If none of these terms exist, they are often negotiable at the offer stage, especially for senior roles, even when base salary is "firm." When evaluating equity at a private company, ask for the 409A valuation date, preferred stock overhang percentage, and total shares outstanding. Without those numbers, the share count alone is meaningless.

5

Use competing offers ethically and negotiate remote and flexibility

A competing offer is the single most powerful negotiation tool available, but it must be used honestly. Never fabricate an offer. Never use a low competing offer as leverage — it will backfire. The ethical formula: if you have a real competing offer that you would genuinely consider accepting, it is fair to say: "I want to be transparent. I have an offer from [Company X] for [base or total comp range]. I'd prefer this role, but I need to be able to make a responsible comparison. Can you revisit the package?" That statement is factual, not manipulative, and most employers respect it. For remote and schedule flexibility, frame the ask in total comp terms: "I've seen research suggesting a fully remote arrangement has roughly \$10,000 to \$15,000 in annual value when accounting for commuting, parking, meals, and time. If the base is firm, could we add a remote work stipend of \$X per month to reflect that?" For schedule flexibility (compressed week, flexible start times), ask during the offer stage, not after accepting. Once you are inside, the leverage disappears. Get any flexibility agreement confirmed in the written offer letter or a follow-up email, not just verbally.

6

Build a raise strategy that starts 90 days before review and plan multi-year comp

The performance review is not where you make the case for a raise — it is where you collect the result of the case you built over the prior 90 days. Starting 90 days before your review cycle: document three to five wins that are quantified in dollars, percentage improvements, or time saved. Schedule a casual conversation with your manager in month two to ask: "I want to make sure I'm aligned with what you need from me before year-end. Am I on track for a strong review?" That conversation surfaces any concerns while there is still time to address them, and it plants the expectation that you are thinking about performance trajectories. At the review itself, present your wins list before asking for a number. Then anchor: "Based on my contributions and the market for this role, I'm targeting a raise to \$X, which reflects roughly [X%] and keeps me at market." If they counter below your target, ask: "What would need to be true for me to reach \$X at the next review?" That converts a refusal into a performance contract with specific criteria. For multi-year comp planning, model your total compensation at current employer versus external market every 18 months. Most employers give 3% to 5% annual increases; the external job market often pays 15% to 30% more for the same level. The math is why strategic job changes every 3 to 4 years are one of the most reliable ways to grow lifetime earnings.

3. Key Worksheets & Checklists

Use these worksheets with real numbers from your research before every negotiation conversation. The market rate table prevents you from anchoring too low. The total comp model prevents you from comparing offers on base salary alone. The checklist ensures you do not skip the equity terms that are often more valuable than a \$5,000 base difference.

Market Rate Research Worksheet

Levels.fyi (50th / 75th percentile)	Filter to your exact role, company tier, metro area, and years of experience. Record total compensation, not just base.
LinkedIn Salary (50th / 75th)	Use the "role + location + experience" filter. Note the sample size — smaller samples are less reliable.
Glassdoor (50th / 75th)	Filter by employer and current year only. Older data underestimates current market rates.
Payscale (50th / 75th)	Add skill tags relevant to your role (e.g., Python, project management, SQL) to increase specificity.
BLS OES (50th / 75th)	Use the SOC code for your occupation. This is the most nationally representative source and works well for baseline anchoring.
Average 50th percentile	Sum of all 50th percentiles \div 5. This is your likely midpoint for the role.
Average 75th percentile	Sum of all 75th percentiles \div 5. This is your target anchor in the negotiation.
Your target counter number	Average 75th percentile + 5% to 10% to allow for negotiation movement. Write a specific dollar figure.

Total Compensation Comparison Table

Component	Offer A	Offer B
Base salary	Annual pre-tax base	Annual pre-tax base
Annual bonus (target %)	Base × target %; note whether discretionary or formula-based	Same
Equity grant (annualized)	Total grant value ÷ vest years; use 409A for private, market price for public	Same
Employer health premium	Annual employer-paid premium for your elected plan level	Same
401(k) match (annual)	Match formula × your expected contribution; typical is 50% up to 6% of salary	Same
Remote / commute value	Commute days × (daily cost + time value); fully remote ≈ \$10,000 to \$15,000/yr for urban workers	Same
Signing bonus	One-time; divide by 2 to reflect typical repayment cliff of 12 months	Same
Total comp (year 1)	Sum all rows	Sum all rows

Equity Term Checklist

- Confirm the total number of shares or RSUs in the grant and the vesting schedule (most common: 4-year with 25% at 1-year cliff, then monthly or quarterly thereafter).
- For stock options: confirm strike price, current 409A valuation, and expiration window after termination (standard is 90 days; push for 5 years if possible at startup).
- Ask whether any single-trigger acceleration exists on acquisition — this is rare but worth requesting at senior levels.
- Ask whether double-trigger acceleration (acquisition + termination within 18 months) can be added to the grant agreement.
- For private company equity: ask for total authorized shares outstanding and preferred stock liquidation preferences to estimate your payout in different exit scenarios.
- Confirm cliff date in writing — note that if you leave one day before the cliff, you receive zero. Adjust your transition timeline accordingly.
- Negotiate for a refresher grant cadence in writing if possible: "What does the refresh equity grant look like at year 2 and year 3 for strong performers?"

4. Common Mistakes

Disclosing your current salary before receiving an offer

Once you say "I'm making \$85,000," the employer anchors to that number and works upward in small increments rather than assessing what the role is worth at market. In over 20 states it is illegal for employers to ask — but even where it is legal, you are not required to answer. Redirect with: "I'd rather focus on the market rate for this role. I'm targeting \$X based on my research." If they push, repeat it once. If they push a third time, it is usually a red flag about the employer's negotiation culture.

Accepting the verbal offer on the same call

Accepting immediately signals that the offer exceeded your expectations, which confirms to the employer they left money on the table and can anchor lower next time. Even a strong offer deserves 24 hours. Taking time is professional and expected. Saying "I'd like to review the full package carefully and get back to you by tomorrow" has never cost anyone a job offer, and it gives you time to prepare a specific, evidence-backed counter.

Ignoring equity terms and negotiating only base

At a Series A startup offering \$130,000 base and 0.3% equity, the equity could be worth nothing or it could be worth \$1.5M at a \$500M exit. At a large public company offering \$145,000 base and \$80,000 in RSUs over 4 years, the equity is \$20,000 per year of predictable additional income. Ignoring cliff date, acceleration provisions, and expiration windows is how people inadvertently give back tens of thousands of dollars by leaving one week before a cliff or missing the 90-day option exercise window after departure.

Negotiating after promotion instead of before

If your title changes, your salary should reflect the new market rate for that title immediately — not as a delayed adjustment 12 months later. When a promotion is offered verbally, respond with: "I'm excited to step into [new title]. Before I formally accept, can we also align on comp that reflects the market rate for this level?" Promotions without market-rate reanchoring are often the source of long-term underpayment because raises get calculated as percentages of an already-below-market base.

5. Next Steps

Pull salary data from all five sources before your next negotiation conversation and fill in the market rate worksheet above. If you are not currently in an active search, use the data to benchmark your current compensation — if your base is more than 10% below the 50th percentile for your role and geography, it is time to have an internal conversation or start exploring. For equity vesting math, build a simple spreadsheet tracking cliff date, quarterly vest dates, and cumulative vested value at different exit scenarios. Review it before every year-end decision. For performance review preparation, block 90 minutes in your calendar 90 days before your review cycle closes to begin documenting your wins. Check your state's salary history ban law at [HR Dive's state tracker](#) before your next recruiter call. Model your 3-year comp trajectory at your current employer versus external market using Levels.fyi to decide whether a strategic move in the next 12 to 18 months makes financial sense.

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