DESIGN THINKING

A Guide to Creative Problem Solving for Everyone

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ROUTLEDGE

DINNER CONVERSATION AS A MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWS

Recognizing that the interviewee paused for a moment, and the way they paused; or changed affect or emotion—the nonverbal expressions need to be acknowledged and investigated to get to the important insight.

Scott Phillips

Interviews provide a means to deeply understand an issue, problem, or even a proposed solution. Gaining insights, or learning anything valuable from an interview for that matter, requires great skill and a plan. Scott Phillips regards interviews, which are a crucial tool for his business SearchLite, as a special kind of design problem. SearchLite is a market discovery and validation platform—the company helps inventors, entrepreneurs, and growth companies to discover which markets to address first, and which key factors will influence their ultimate market success. Their service includes an "iterative process that integrates key findings from phone interviews, secondary research, and on-line engagement." The process description below, which focuses on the interview, is generalizable to many situations that require insights from interviewing.

Scott's customers are usually technology transfer offices at universi-ties. Anytime a professor invents something that may have commer-cial value, it must be disclosed to the university's tech transfer department. The faculty inventor(s) then work with this department to explore the commercial potential of the invention, either by licensing it or building a company around it.

Before the university allocates funds for provisional patenting, patent-ing, or prototyping, which are expensive, they want to know if anyone really cares about the invention, and, if so, why and how much. The professor is married to the idea, has been working on it with a grant for the last twenty years, but they don't know how to get it out of the building or talk to anyone in the real world to see who cares.

Enter Scott's company. For every client or invention, they interview fifteen to twenty people, do secondary research, and report back on

its commercial viability: there is either a product/market fit or there isn't. The intention is to render—very quickly—an objective opinion based on the voice of the market. This is accomplished primarily through phone interviews; they are listening for the problems—not selling the solution.

Design thinking is applied in the way that interviews are conducted. Whereas others might conduct a structured interview using an interview guide, SearchLite has a thirty-minute dinner conversation with people. The interviewers are trained in the art of listening specifically for, or digging deep into, tasks that the interviewee is trying to accomplish, professionally or personally, and why. They listen for an outcome, a metric, and a direction. For example, they are listening for: "I wish my dishwasher could clean two times better in one-third of the time." However, the interviewee will not usually quantify that initially, so the skill is to continue asking probing questions such as, "Could you say more about that?" "What did you mean by that?" or "What quality level and how fast?"

Scott's interview method to probe deeply for best understandings is derived from Steve Blank, who was a forefather of the lean startup movement. The idea is to know when to let a conversation wander a little bit, when to focus it, when to probe more deeply, and when to move on.

Another point is to be alert for (and avoid) confirmation bias. For example, if you invented something and you are conducting the interviews, you are undoubtedly listening for everything that you believe to be an endorsement of your solution. It is difficult to *listen objectively* without recognizing your own mental or behavioral biases. In SearchLite's case, the interviewers are trained to not have an opinion going into any solution that they are evaluating.

SearchLite always has two people on every interview; one conducting it and one taking notes. Both hear and interpret what was said, with

the moderator focusing on talking to the interviewee. Without the appropriate follow-up questions as a function of listening well, there would be a much more superficial set of takeaways from the same thirty-minute phone call.

The raw ingredient of their deliverable is conducting great phone interviews that have deep insights. They don't necessarily cover a scripted list of twenty questions in a structured format because they will miss the "aha" moment or the insight. Their job is to do fifteen of those interviews with relevant people and look for trends and common key takeaways.

Active listening is a noteworthy skill. Scott references Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Franklin Covey Co., 1998) in which listening with the intent to understand instead of only listening with the intent to respond is underscored. For example, recognizing that the interviewee paused for a moment, and the way they paused; or changed affect or emotion—the nonverbal expressions need to be acknowledged and investigated to get to the important insight.

In sum, the best insights from interviews require the art and skill to find the right person to talk to, knowing how to conduct a thirty-minute conversation, knowing what to listen for, and how to synthesize that across multiple interviews.

But there is more. Part of the process occurs in parallel to the primary phone interviews. SearchLite has researchers who examine what transpired in the interviews—what is not clear or what needs validation. So their challenge is uncovering secondary research and background to add clarity to material that is muddled from the interviews. This allows them to accelerate the process. Subsequent interview questions are modified as a function of what is learned in secondary research. Likewise the secondary research challenges are modified when something new is learned in an interview.

The interviews evolve. The fifteenth interview will be very different from the first in two ways. One is that the person they are talking with in the fifteenth interview is spot-on. The reason they are spot-on as a subject matter expert is because at the end of every interview the interviewers inquire about other people with whom they should be talking. The first three people they talk to are not the right people, but they are close enough that they know someone who is better-suited to talk about the subject. Several more interviews later, they have more referrals from the last set of experts, and eventually they will be talking to the person who is at ground zero for the topic. The other thing that is different is that they are five weeks smarter about asking the right questions. The best interviews, therefore, are always at the last moments of the last few interviews.

The information from the beginning interviews is not at all discounted because it is a process of validation, i.e., how frequently a point is made. The last person really places the information or insights in context.

It's hard to discern patterns if the interviews are all different. However, that underscores the importance of another skill set necessary for good interviews: synthesizing the key findings. A symptom of a bad interview occurs when the interviewer does not review notes for a few days after the interview and didn't have a second person taking notes. It becomes stale and it is easy to forget the most impactful insights. Even though there may be copious notes, it still behooves the good interviewer to write down what they just heard—those insights and impressions—immediately following the interview when it is still fresh.

After every interview, all the notes are culled into one document with the top five takeaways highlighted at the beginning. Once a week, the team brainstorms on the three or four interviews from the past week; then compares all the insights from prior weeks. They are placed in three categories: critical, very important, and important—everything

else is background or simply not relevant. So every week they force themselves to have only three insights in each of those categories, which is somewhat arbitrary, but it forces synthesis. At the end of the consultation they want to tell the client that they need to address *three* insights.

Scott equates the reexamination of the interview questions with the iterative process of design thinking. When they check in with the client every week, they summarize what has been learned, and the client can say they know enough about that issue so they can proceed to another one. In that sense it's iterative. Each week the client can direct them to iterate deeper on this topic or pivot to a new one, based on the findings of the previous interviews (Figure 5.6).

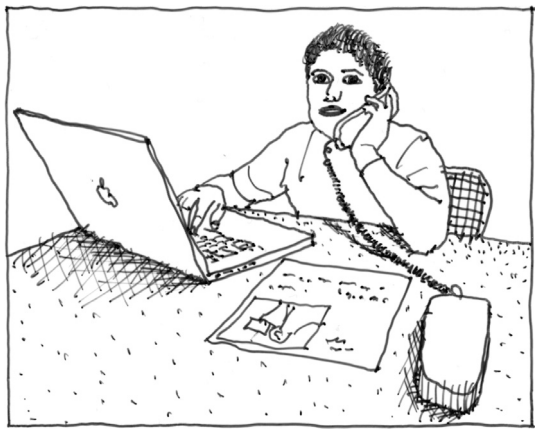

Figure 5.6 Developing new interview questions that probe more deeply or pivot to a different issue based on findings from previous interviews is very much analogous to the iterative process of design thinking.

Source: The author.

It is critical to acknowledge an interviewee's time. With permission of the client, SearchLite provides a summary of key findings to each person who speaks with them as a courtesy (in lieu of an honorarium). They generally limit the interview to thirty minutes. And, as a final note, they are sure to end the interview cordially and ask if the interviewee would mind a follow-up; the usual response is that they will either make more time or respond to further questions via email.

NOTES

1 Francesco Crocenzi, [phone] interview by the author, September 1, 2016.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 James Barker, [phone] interview by the author, March 22, 2016.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Diego Ruzzarin, [phone] interview by the author, October 13, 2016.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.