

## How To Talk To Users | Startup School



Video URL

### Introduction

#### Reference

foreign my name is Gustav and I work here at y combinator as a group partner I've been here since 2017. before YC I was a practically to Airbnb and actually a YC founder back in 2007. today I'm going to

### Outline

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to cover today why the best Founders talk to the users throughout the lifetime of the company two how to find your users and how to talk to them three what questions to ask them and what not

### Best founders learn from their users

#### Reference

the world have the idea on how new startups to form completely wrong they think ideas of new products is something the financials come up with on a lazy Sunday or a late night coding session you probably know it doesn't work this way this scene as you can see here here is a scene from The Social Network movie it's a great movie but they got a lot of things wrong on how Facebook actually got started this is Brian chesky Brian is the co-founder and CEO of Airbnb on the left side of the photo is Amal Amal was the very first guest on

Airbnb they actually spent a weekend together in San Francisco when they'd be kind of watched you notice the difference between this photo and the previous photo well this photo actually is a real photo it includes a two-way conversation with a real customer great Founders talk to Future customers before they even have a product in fact the very best Founders in the world learn directly from their users throughout the life of their company but that's again if you have correctly identified who your users are you should learn from them throughout the lifetime of your company why you might ask users and customers will keep you honest they are the only stakeholders actually paying you anything if anyone will tell you the truth it will be them so my talk today is about how to do this well so let's talk about another m b story in 2010 um and I remember this uh myself Brian Chesky the CEO of Airbnb he'll decide to launch an experiment he was going to give up his apartment and live in 50 different airbnbs over the next couple of months you might ask yourself why would anyone do that so much hassle most people read the articles about this experiment because he did announce it they missed a point um I personally remember this being kind of crazy by doing this Brian will literally get a chance to talk to every one of these 50 hosts each single day on this trip and one incredible source of honest feedback on your product without the Airbnb hosts MB would not exist exist today what Brian Joe and Nate did so early is deeply understand the motivations um and the feedback from their hosts still today Brian and Joe gets calls from hosts on their personal cell phone numbers I remember them telling me that that on their first day of adworks at Airbnb why do they do that well it's the number that they put on the website and share with all of their hosts early on they weren't hiding behind Anonymous email they wanted to hear from the customers at the time this seemed almost radical most Founders would spend their time in front of the computers trying to find scalable growth channels like Google ads unfortunately most Founders still don't build personal connections with their users today behind behind info at emails or don't do not reply emails you don't believe me you should just do a search

## Who should I talk to?

### Reference

to their customers so let's start by trying to figure out who I should talk to it's always easy to interview people that you know or people who are on your network they're simply the most likely to respond but perhaps can be less honest in their answers to not offend you don't be afraid of reaching out to them and don't be afraid of rejection the second group here is co-workers or former co-workers they can be a really great source they might know the topic really well and if you're building software for startups you can easily and easily navigate yourself to someone who's a potential User it's also very common that the early users you speak to are outside of your personal circuits or your co-workers circles when asking YC Founders how they found their early users some of the most common answers were LinkedIn red forms slack or Discord communities and sometimes

in-person events so to illustrate this process um a little better I'm going to start a new mock startup this is not a real company I'm just making it up but I'm going to go through the process as I would have if this was a real company and first I want to understand if the problem is real my hypothesis that I have here or kind of like the idea space that we sometimes call as NYC is that companies want to reduce their carbon emissions but for whatever reasons don't do that so my plan is very simple I want to first interview some potential customers to learn about the problems and motivations around carbon emissions and three try to understand what an MVP will look like MVP is a minimal viable product to do this research I plan to start by reaching out to Founders CEOs CFOs at startups or bigger companies I'm also going to be shocked to people on LinkedIn that have titles like carbon or climate or sustainability basically Wars that gives me hint that they might be relevant people to talk to so what am I looking to learn well first I'm trying to understand do the company that they work for care about their carbon emissions and two why do they care and why do they not care if they don't care and three who in that company might be the one who cares the most about this uh and why all right so so here are two examples of Outreach messages so the first one is a LinkedIn message to a CFO who I used to work with at Airbnb the message will go something like this first I introduce myself I mentioned something about our time at Airbnb then I say I'm starting a new project briefly describe it but not too much in detail and I just asked for 20 minute phone call or video call that's it and here's another example of a message to someone I don't know it's also on LinkedIn to the same group that I mentioned earlier it's similar but geared towards people I don't know so

## How to interview potential customers

### Reference

get on the phone or once again on the video call let's talk about uh how to actually interview potential customers so first you want to make sure that these interviews are over video calls phone calls or in person you can learn a lot more from a five minute video interview than 500 or 5 000 sugar responses secondly you want to build some Rapport with interviewee they're going to give you answers to questions that maybe no one have asked them before so you need to make sure that they can trust you and feel comfortable in this situation next uh the most important thing here the most most important thing here is to not introduce your idea until maybe at the end of the call or maybe not at all doing this too early can bias them in their answers your role here in this interview is to listen not to talk there are some great techniques to get people to open up and talk about their problems and one good one is to ask follow-up questions that are open-ended for example tell me about that if you're not recording the interview you should at least take notes as much as you can you need to translate the recordings to notes anyway so you might as well take notes in the in the actual interview I'm going to play an example video here on uh how a potential customer for my carbon emission company and how that conversation will go like

Hi how are you um it's been a long time since we worked together Airbnb yeah great to see you so I don't know if I told her this but I'm thinking about starting another company and I have a couple questions I wanted to ask you about this era that I'm interested in uh does your company montevue Inc do you care about your carbon emissions we do actually care and we use a consultant who creates these PDF reports once a year interesting uh what do you do with a report I mean right now I don't think we really take much action on it unfortunately well why not it's just really hard to know what to do with the information um the information is really dense and um uses words we don't really understand tell me more about that well we hired this consultant um they asked us to fill out this word doc with information but most of the data that goes into it uh seems inaccurate and I just feel like we need another expert to figure out what to do with the data got it got it um but why is it important for your company at all to track carbon emission well our um and I think there's some regulations coming up too you notice here how I never introduced a product or a solution I only ask questions to learn about the problem that Amy's having I don't even say what I'm going to build that's how you want to do it here are some very specific questions that you can use in your interviews one tell me how you do X today by X of course I'm referring to a specific problem a task or goal that you are trying to solve two what is the hardest thing you are doing about x three why is it hard four how often do you have to do x five why is it important for your company to do X make sure you dive deep into this question like understanding that motivation is going to be critical here and six what do you do to solve this problem for yourself today it's really important to understand what they're doing now if you can watch them do this that's even better if they can screen share during the video call or show you their laptop as you're doing the interview and show you how they actually get the PDF report what they do with it um how it looks like that's the ideal State you want to deeply understand their behavior not just what they're saying but what

## **Follow ups Don't ask these questions**

### **Reference**

follow-up questions and please learn how to make use of these ones it's very hard to get someone to say everything in just one answer to one question get comfortable with asking questions like what do you mean by that or can you tell me more about that or why is that important to you here are some questions that you should not ask like there are ways you can kind of derail this interview will you use our product they're probably going to say yes but they're not going to mean anything to you the answer two which features would make product X better remember their job is to tell you about the problem your job is to think about what features to solve that problem so asking them about your job isn't really going to help you yes and no questions it's not really that helpful for you you want them to explain and give you as many concrete and real examples as possible so just simply asking yes no questions is not ideal here and four

um how would would a better product X look like to you how would a better Carbon emission counting software look like to you uh many of the people aren't product developers they're not software Engineers they're not designers they're not product managers this is not their job their job is to do a different job and you are the one trying to understand what is the challenging part about their job and finally um asking two questions at the same time that's going to confuse them it's going to confuse your answers so this is when you're eager to get um get answers it's very easy to do this this thing but try to avoid it but I want to highlight one of the things I mentioned here there's one big danger during interviews and that is to focus on features instead of problems it's very natural for you to do that your brain your brain is thinking through all the ways you're going to solve this problem but really what you're here for during this interview is to deeply understand the problems not actually come up with Solutions that's for for us for a separate event so users generally have good problems but also generally bad Solutions so I'll give you two specific examples so early days of Gmail users were asking um Paul Buchheit the founder of Gmail to view both the Inbox and the actual email that they were reading on the same screen now why would they ask for that well the reason was simply that Gmail is too slow and people did not want to wait to load each of the emails in the inbox they want to see everything at the same time similarly in early Airbnb a lot of guests want to have the phone numbers of the host so they can call them we're like why do you need that it just turned out that they didn't fully trust the platform like we had not displayed enough trust in Airbnb so they needed to feel comfortable uh with getting to know the host before it actually um making the booking secondly um users don't have incentive to say no to really any additional features if you ask for this feature or this feature this feature they'll probably say yes to everything right you however are in charge of the projectations and you have a lot more incentives than they have to figure out which are the most important of the features so let's talk about next steps so you've done your um five or ten of these user interviews you've written down your notes let's let's talk about what you do then one you want to make sure you have notes from all each of the interviews you can use sticky notes or some similar software to organize these learnings you can bucket them in different buckets that kind of describes different problems and see which one is actually the thing that matters the most and then you want to write down your conclusions what are you learning from all of this you want to use all of this information to create a hypothesis or what the solution to this problem might be don't over intellectualize this process really you just want to start assigning MVP as fast as you can but you want to make sure you have accurate information when you decide the MEP and then you'll want to test it with the same users it's also important to know if the problem you're solving is actually valuable what I mean by this is that people will value the solution to the problem enough to pay for it or the problem itself solving the problem is valuable so here's some good tips to determine if it is one are people paying money for other Solutions in the space today are the people that make the PDF reports for carbon emissions accounting are they getting paid well if they are getting paid that's a good sign that this is probably a valuable

thing do people already have solutions to this problem they are very happy with even though it might appear Basics to you for example like Excel or Google spreadsheets is actually competitors to many many many hundreds of startups actually quite a formidable one to move someone off Excel a Google spreadsheet you need to make the experience of your solution dramatically better they're not going to pay you hundreds of dollars a month for something they can almost as easily do in Google spreadsheet or Excel and three you want to evaluate how easy it is to sell to this audience and this is one thing that I like to do a lot with the companies I work with for example selling to Plumbers or contractors is notoriously difficult compared to selling to startups the first two groups just don't change their tools or the software very often versus startups are open to trying new things all the time so if you are solving a problem is valuable you still have to think about whether it's going to be

## **MVP prototype session interviews**

### **Reference**

start by showing it to users even if it's just a design prototype in Envision or something like that you can just click through we used to do this at MB all the time we would go downstairs in our in our office and we would find some people that were waiting for an interview or waiting for getting a coffee or something and we just show them the latest version of the app this would be a Envision prototype on our phone it would be Spike hand them our phone and and show it to them this is stuff that we haven't even built yet the key thing but if you're doing this tactic is to not tell them what to do do not tell them what to do just watch them play around with it you can tell them a specific goal like try to make a book in Airbnb or try to do a search with dates and even b or something like that but do not tell them exactly how to solve each screen remember if this was a real product you wouldn't you wouldn't be standing there next to them to give them advice another good trick when you're doing this either when you're listening or having them or recording them is to have them speak their mind while they're doing it have them describe exactly what they're thinking on each of the steps maybe the words that they're reading maybe that will give you hints of what words that they understand and which words they don't understand or maybe what specific screen means or what purpose is and after you've done a bunch of these interviews and then maybe MVP protest sessions it's a great idea to keep these interviewees involved throughout the process one common idea that a lot of wasting companies are using is to create a slack instance or a WhatsApp group for with their customers now you want to make them feel special right you want to make them feel like they have exclusive active access to the Future world changing product so think about how you're wording or or how you communicate this WhatsApp group that you adding them to it's a great idea to keep showing them your product as they are progressing like kind of give them this exclusive feeling that I'm the first one to see this product assets progressing and also as you are reacting to things that they're saying you can

ship a new a new screen with a new version of the product um and that builds trust with it with them they now know that you react to their feedback very fast finally some of them will love connecting with other people doing the same thing as they are they don't get to do this very often and um you are the one enabling that if you do all these steps you will collect the right information um from your future users you will keep them involved and transfer the information uh and that allow you to

## **Summary**

### **Reference**

transfer the information into your first prototype and MVP so to summarize here's what I covered today why the best Founders talk to their users throughout the lifetime of the company how to find your users and how to talk to them what questions to ask them and what not to ask them and finally how to turn some of those conclusions into an MVP thank you everyone

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