

C6W4 · TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2026

CONCEPT VALIDATION

Talking to Real People to Validate your Problem+Solution

| QUICK CHECK-IN

- Any floaters still without teams? Find them today.
- Everyone should have their top 2 concepts from Thursday's divergent thinking exercise.

 If you're not on a team yet, today is the deadline. You need a team to do interviews this week.

WHY VALIDATE?

35% OF STARTUPS FAIL BECAUSE NOBODY WANTED WHAT THEY BUILT.

Another 38% fail because of "Failed to raise new capital/ran out of cash," the root cause of which, in many cases, is building something nobody wanted.

Source: [CB Insights analysis of startup post-mortems](#)

| VALIDATION DONE RIGHT



ZAPPOS

Photographed shoes at the mall.
Shipped manually when orders
came in.
Acquired for \$1.2B.



BUFFER

2-page website with pricing. 3
paying customers before writing
code.
Tested willingness to pay, not just
interest.



DROPBOX

3-min explainer video on Hacker
News. Waitlist: 5K → 75K
overnight.
Validated demand with a video,
not code.



GROUPON

WordPress blog. Manually
negotiated deals, emailed
coupons from FileMaker.
No platform, no app, no
marketplace tech.



FOOD ON THE TABLE

CEO visited customers, made
meal plans by hand. Charged
\$9.95 for the manual service.
"Code should only remove
bottlenecks."

| VALIDATION SKIPPED

✖ QUIBI – \$1.75B

Raised \$1.75B for premium short-form mobile content. Never had a single user before launch. Shut down in 6 months.

✖ SEGWAY – \$100M+

Projected 50K units/month. Sold 30K in six years. Nobody asked if short-distance travel was painful enough to justify \$5,000.

✖ GOOGLE GLASS

Built AR smart glasses as tech research, then tried to find a consumer market. Intentionally didn't define the problem Glass was solving.

| "BUT I WANT TO BUILD COOL TECH!"



RESEARCH LABS & ACADEMIA

Tech for the sake of tech. Funded to remove market pressure and allow broad thinking.

Bell Labs, MIT Media Lab, DARPA — they produce breakthroughs. Sometimes those become products, sometimes they advance science. Both are valuable.



STARTUPS

Subject to some of the **harshest market conditions**. You must solve a problem someone will pay for.

The technology is the how, not the why. Start with why.

KILL YOUR DARLINGS.

*Don't fall in love with your idea. Fall in love with the **problem**.*

HOW TO VALIDATE

| THE VALIDATION SEQUENCE

1

PROBLEM

Is this a real, painful
problem?

2

SOLUTION

Does our solution
resonate?

3

DEMAND

Will strangers sign up?

4

BUILD

Ship the real product



Steps 1 + 2 this week. Steps 2+3 next week. Builds really start week 6

| THE MOM TEST: 3 RULES



THEIR LIFE, NOT YOUR IDEA

If you're pitching, you've already failed. They'll just nod politely.



THE PAST, NOT THE FUTURE

"Would you use X?" is worthless. "Have you tried X?" is gold.



LISTEN MORE THAN YOU TALK

80/20 rule — they talk 80%. If you're talking more, you're selling.

Your mom will lie to be polite (*ok, not ALL of our moms...*). So will strangers. Find ways to get out of polite comfort.

QUESTIONS

DON'T ASK

- › "Do you think this is a good idea?"
- › "Would you buy this?"
- › "How much would you pay?"
- › "Would you use this?"
- › "What features do you want?"

QUESTIONS

ASK INSTEAD

- › "What's your biggest challenge with [area]?"
- › "What have you spent money on to solve this?"
- › "What's the most expensive solution you've tried?"
- › "How often do you encounter this problem?"
- › "Walk me through the last time this happened."
- › "I can take payment from my phone. Would you pay \$N for this right now?"

| 3 TYPES OF BAD DATA



COMPLIMENTS

"That's so cool!" / "I love it!"
The fool's gold of customer learning. Deflect and return to their life.



FLUFF

"I usually..." / "I would definitely..."
Generic, hypothetical, non-binding. Ask: "When's the last time?"



IDEAS

"You should add X" / "It would be cool if..."
Customers are good with their problems, iffy at solutions. "That's great. Why do you want that?"



Your defense: redirect every compliment, fluff, or idea back to a **specific past experience**.

| WHERE TO FIND PEOPLE



IN PERSON

- › Campus: dorms, libraries, dining halls
- › NYC: coffee shops, parks, gyms
- › Coworking spaces
- › Wherever your target users go



ONLINE

- › Reddit communities
- › Discord servers
- › Facebook groups
- › LinkedIn (for professionals)



Find your target audience. If someone has never had your problem and never will, their feedback isn't useful signal. Seek out people who *should* have this pain.



Snowball recruiting: Ask each interviewee "Do you know 1-2 other people with this problem?" They might be able to lead you to more people in your target audience.

**WRITE DOWN EXACTLY WHAT PEOPLE SAY.
THEIR WORDS, NOT YOURS.**

Next week, those words become your website.

| THE INTERVIEW-TO-VAPORWARE PIPELINE

WHAT YOU HEAR IN INTERVIEWS

The phrases they use to complain

"What don't you love about current solutions?"

Their objections and concerns

"I just wish I could..."

Most compelling quote

Problem description in their words

Reaction to your solution pitch

"I'd use it if..."

WHAT IT BECOMES ON YOUR LANDING PAGE

Headlines / hero text

Feature bullets

FAQ section

Value proposition / subheadline

Social proof / testimonial

Ad copy (Week 6)

Brand positioning (Week 5)

Key features to highlight

THE INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

| INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

1

OPENING

2 min

Frame the conversation. Do NOT pitch your idea.

2

WHO ARE THEY?

2-3 min

Capture persona data for pattern-spotting later.

3

PROBLEM EXPLORATION

5-7 min

The core. Their reality, not your idea.

4

CURRENT SOLUTIONS

3-4 min

Past behavior = truth. The money question.

5

SOLUTION SIGNAL

3-4 min

NOW pitch briefly. Observe their reaction.

6

WRAP-UP

2 min

Seek commitments: referrals, follow-ups.

| PARTS 1-2: OPENING + PERSONA

"Hi, I'm [name] — I'm working on a class project at Columbia where we're exploring how people deal with [problem area]. I'm not selling anything — I just want to understand your experience. Would you mind chatting for about 25 minutes? Great, by the way, it's ok to be brutally honest with me. You can't hurt my feelings. That's how we improve our ideas."

Then capture who they are:

- "What do you do?" (student, job, field)
- "Do you encounter [problem area]?"

 The persona question is a natural on-ramp to problem exploration: "How often do you cook?" → "What's the hardest part about cooking regularly?"

| PART 3: PROBLEM EXPLORATION

Q1: "What's the **hardest part** about [problem context]?"

Q2: "Can you tell me about the **last time** that happened?"

Q3: "**Why** was that hard?"

Keep asking "why". It can take 5 Whys to get to root causes.

Follow-ups and drill-downs: "How often does this come up?" / "How did that make you feel?"

 **Listen for emotion:** cursing, sighing, eye rolls, detailed rants. If they shrug, the problem might not be real enough.

| PART 4: CURRENT SOLUTIONS

Q4: "What, if anything, have you **done to solve** that problem?"

Q5: "What don't you **love** about the solutions you've tried?"

Past behavior = truth. This is your strongest signal.

\$ THE MONEY QUESTION

"Have you ever **spent money** trying to solve this? How much?"

Even \$5 on an app counts. If they've spent money, the problem is real.

| PART 5: SOLUTION SIGNAL

 Now VAGUELY describe your solution. Let them fill in the gaps themselves.

"So based on what you've told me — we're actually exploring building [one-sentence description]. The idea is [how it works, briefly]."

Then ask:

- › "Have you tried anything like this before? (If yes, why aren't they using that now?)"
- › "What's your initial reaction to that?"
- › "Would this solve the problem we're discussing?"
- › "What are some concerns you have with this?"

Politely positive is NOT signal. "Oh, I'd use that TODAY" or "Wait, can I sign up?" = signal.

| PART 6: WRAP-UP

Close strong. Look for commitment signals.

- › "If you could wave a **magic wand** and change one thing about this, what would it be?"
- › "Is there anything about [problem] I should have asked but didn't?"
- › "Do you know 1-2 other people who deal with this? Would you connect me?"
- › "Would you be open to a 10-minute follow-up in a couple weeks?"
- › "If I gave you the opportunity to pre-purchase this right now for \$10, would you?"

Currencies of commitment — each stronger than the last:



TIME

Follow-up meeting



REPUTATION

Referral to friends



MONEY

Pre-order or deposit

| SIGNAL CHEAT SHEET



STRONG SIGNAL (GREEN)

- › "I HATE dealing with this" + has spent money
- › Offers to introduce you to friends
- › "Wait, can I sign up right now?"
- › Names a specific price they'd pay
- › "That would save me so much time with [specific task]"



WEAK SIGNAL (RED)

- › Only agrees when YOU describe the problem
- › "Yeah, that's kind of annoying" + shrug
- › "Let me know when it launches!" (compliment, not commitment)
- › "That's interesting" + polite nod
- › Has never tried to solve it or Googled it

| HOW DO I KNOW WHEN I'M DONE?

THE 3-OF-5 RULE

Interview in batches of 5.

If **3 of 5** describe the same problem the same way — **move forward**.

If patterns aren't emerging by interview 5 — **find your audience, narrow your customer segment, or find adjacent problems**.

THE \$100 BET TEST

Before your next interview, **predict exactly** what they'll say about the problem.

Would you bet **\$100** you're right?

If yes — you understand the problem. If not — keep interviewing.

NO SIGNAL? THERE IS PROBABLY AN ADJACENT PROBLEM.

You're probably in the right neighborhood.

I FINDING ADJACENT PROBLEMS

1

ZOOM OUT

"Forget [specific problem] — what's the MOST frustrating thing about [broader area]?"

2

FOLLOW THE ENERGY

When they mention something that lights them up — go there. Ask all the same deep questions.

3

WALK THEIR WORKFLOW

"Walk me through your typical [day/week/process]. Where do things break down?"



Getting shrugs? Don't push harder, **explore the neighborhood.**

| THE ADJACENT PROBLEM: AN EXAMPLE

ORIGINAL HYPOTHESIS

"Is meal planning hard for busy students?"

"Eh, not really. I just order Seamless."

 Shrugged. No energy. Weak signal.

AFTER ZOOMING OUT

"What IS the most frustrating part about feeding yourself as a student?"

"Honestly? The money. I spend \$200/week on delivery and I know I can't sustain this."

 Animated. Detailed. Strong signal.



Same domain, different pain point. The adjacent problem was **financial stress from food spending**, not meal planning difficulty. You found it by letting *them* tell you where the real pain is.

DEMO INTERVIEW

Watch how it works

 **WATCH FOR:**

When do I ask about **their life** vs. mention **my idea**?

When do I go **deeper** vs. move on?

How do I handle **silence**?

If signal is weak — how do I **find the adjacent problem**?

YOUR TURN: PRACTICE

I INTERVIEW PRACTICE – KEY QUESTIONS

Pair up with someone from a **different team**. 7 min each direction. Interview about a **real problem** they have.

- 1 "What's the **hardest part** about [problem context]?"
- 2 "Can you tell me about the **last time** that happened?"
- 3 "**Why** was that hard?"
- 4 "What, if anything, have you **done to solve** that problem?"
- 5 "What don't you **love** about the solutions you've tried?"



Listen for emotion. Shrugs = weak signal. Rants, specifics, money spent = strong signal.

HOMEWORK

| THIS WEEK: 8-12 INTERVIEWS

8-12

INTERVIEWS TOTAL

5

PER PROBLEM SPACE

How to split it:

- › Pairs: each pair owns one problem space
- › Each person does 2-3 interviews (target 5 per pair total)
- › Fill out the post-interview snapshot for EACH one (within 1 hour!)

| INTERVIEW SNAPSHOT

Fill out after each interview. It's important to do this immediately. Complete within **1 hour** of each interview. Your memory fades fast.

WHAT YOU LEARNED

- › **Who:** Name / description
- › **Problem confirmed?** Did they describe it unprompted?
- › **Key quote:** Most revealing thing — exact words
- › **Emotional intensity:** 1–10
- › **Current solution:** What are they doing now?
- › **Money spent?** Have they paid for anything related?

REACTION + COMMITMENTS

- › **Solution reaction:** What did they say/do?
- › **Biggest concern:** What made them hesitate?
- › **Referral?** Offered to connect you with others?
- › **Follow-up?** Agreed to talk again?
- › **Surprise:** What contradicted your assumptions?
- › **Signal:** ● GREEN / ○ YELLOW / ● RED



A template document will be shared — one snapshot per interview.



All interview notes and snapshots must be submitted by Tuesday of next week.



QUESTIONS?

END OF CLASS 6

Next: Define Your Target Audience

GARAGE

| EVIDENCE HIERARCHY

1

SAY

(weakest) "I love it!" / "I'd
totally use that" —
interviews, surveys

2

DO

(moderate) Sign up, click,
try, download — landing
pages, waitlists

3

PAY

(strongest) Pre-order,
deposit, actual purchase —
real money

"People stop lying when you ask them for money." — Rob Fitzpatrick