

What Do You Want to Learn?



Go into every customer interview with a prepared list of questions. This list, which we refer to as an interview guide, will keep you organized. You will appear more professional, and it will ensure that you get to your most important questions early.

How do you know your most important questions?

I like to begin by understanding my most important, and most risky, assumptions. Those tend to be the areas where you need to gather insights most urgently. You can uncover your assumptions in a myriad of ways. You can use Alex Osterwalder's business model canvas or Ash Maurya's lean canvas. Personally, I ask these questions (*see the Appendix for a worksheet and tips*):

- My target customer will be?
- The problem my customer wants to solve is?
- My customer's need can be solved with?
- Why can't my customer solve this today?
- The measurable outcome my customer wants to achieve is?
- My primary customer acquisition tactic will be?
- My earliest adopter will be?
- I will make money (revenue) by?
- My primary competition will be?
- I will beat my competitors primarily because of?
- My biggest risk to financial viability is?
- My biggest technical or engineering risk is?
- What assumptions do we have that, if proven wrong, would cause this business to fail? (*Tip: include market size in this list*)

You should be able to look at this list and spot the assumptions that are both highly important and fairly uncertain. Be honest. You want to focus on the most important issues.

In the case of our pillow entrepreneurs, they chose six initial risks which drove their research approach and first set of questions. To give another scenario, in the last chapter we shared the example of an on-call veterinarian service. The founders might identify a set of risks:

1. Pet owners are frustrated having to go to a vet and would rather have someone come to them
2. Customers are willing to pay a big premium to have a vet show up at their door
3. We think busy urbanite pet owners will be our early adopters
4. We think people currently discover their vets either through word of mouth or online searches
5. We can affordably acquire our customers through targeted Google search ads
6. We can recruit enough vets across the country to make this a big enough business
7. With travel baked in, our vets can see enough people in a day to be financially viable

Not every assumption can be tested effectively through qualitative research, but in this case, our founders can probably get some insights on risks 1, 3, 4, and 6 just by talking to people. Risks 1, 3 and 4 would be focused on pet owners, while #6 would be focused on vets.

Get Stories, Not Speculation

When you are contemplating your questions, be careful with speculation. Humans are spectacularly bad at predicting their future behavior. It is tempting to say, “Would you like this idea?” or “Would you buy this product?” Unfortunately, you really have to treat those

answers with a great deal of skepticism.

It is more effective to ask your interview subject to share a story about the past. For example, when our fictional scientists Koshi and Roberta created their interview plan, the questions were focused on getting the interviewee to tell a story about their last pillow buying experience.

Keeping with our second example of an on-call vet service, the team might have a loose interview plan that looks like the following:

- Warm up: concise intro on the purpose of the conversation
- Warm up: basic questions about person and pet (name, age, picture)
- Who is your current vet? Can you tell me about how you found and chose him/her?
- Please describe the last time you had to take your pet to the vet for a checkup
- Walk me through the process of scheduling a time to visit the vet.
- What was frustrating about that experience?
- What did you like about that experience?
- Have you ever had an emergency visit to a vet? if yes, can you describe that experience for me?
- Have you ever thought about changing vets? why / why not?

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Your goal is to talk little and get the other person sharing openly. To that end, it is imperative that you structure open-ended questions, or at minimum follow up yes/no questions with an open-ended question that gets them talking.

One tip is to try to ask questions that start with words like *who*, *what*, *why* and *how*. Avoid questions that start with *is*, *are*, *would*, and *do you*. But remember, if you do get a yes/no answer to a

question, you can always follow up in a way that gets them talking.

An interesting open-ended question, which Steve Blank likes to use to conclude his interviews, is: “What should I have asked you that I didn’t?”

Testing for Price

Two of the hardest questions to answer through qualitative research are: *will people pay?* and *how much will they pay?* Speculative answers on this topic are extremely suspect. You can learn a lot, however, by asking questions like:

- How much do you currently spend to address this problem?
- What budget do you have allocated to this, and who controls it?
- How much would you pay to make this problem go away? (*this can lead to interesting answers as long as you don't take answers too literally*)

My recommendation is to set up a situation where the subject thinks they are actually buying something, even if they know the thing doesn't exist yet. Kickstarter and other crowdfunding platforms are used by a lot of teams to test pre-order demand.

For expensive corporate products, you can also try to get customers to buy in advance or sign a non-binding letter of intent to buy. The key thing to remember is that people don't honestly think about willingness to pay unless they feel like it is a *real* transaction.

Getting Feedback on a Prototype

Sometimes you will want to get reactions to a product solution. You can learn a lot by putting mockups or prototypes in front of people, but, as with all speculation, you should interpret reactions with a degree of skepticism.

If you show your interview subject a proposed solution, you need to separate this step from your questions about their behavior.

Ask your questions about behavior and challenges first, so that the discussion about product features does not poison or take over the conversation. People do love talking features!

The Magic Wand Question

Some people like to ask, “if you could wave a magic wand and have this product do whatever you want, what would it do?” Personally, I avoid questions like this because customers are too constrained by their current reality to design effective solutions. It is the customer’s job to explain their behavior, goals, and challenges. It is the product designer’s job to come up with the best solution.

There is one variation to the magic wand question that I do like, however, because it focuses on problems and not solutions: “*If you could wave a magic wand and solve any problem, what would you want to solve?*” I suspect, however, that you will find many people struggle with such an open question.

Design “Pass/Fail” Tests

Customer discovery is made up of a lot of qualitative research, but it helps to take a quantitative mindset. Set goals for key questions and track results. For example, halfway through their initial research, our scientists Koshi and Roberta already knew stats like:

- 24% of shoppers knew what they wanted when they walked in
- 45% of shoppers purchased a mid-priced or high-priced pillow
- 68% of the shoppers we spoke to indicated that better sleep was a major driver of their choice

Even better would have been if they had set targets ahead of time. For example, they might have set the following goals:

- Because we are a new brand, we are hoping that most shoppers are undecided. We want to see that 40% or fewer shoppers already know what

they want when they walk in

- Because our pillow is expensive, we want to see that at least 40% of the shoppers buy mid or high-end models
- Because we believe that sleep quality is a major differentiator for our product, we want over 60% of shoppers to indicate that this is a major factor in their decision making process

The numerical target you choose can be an educated guess. You do not need to stress over picking the perfect number. It is more important that you set a goal and really track what is happening. Setting a target forces you carefully think through what you are hoping to see, and makes decisions and judgment calls a bit easier as you review your data.

A Guide, Not a Script

An interview guide is not a script. You do not need to read from it like an automaton. You should feel free to veer off of it if the conversation brings up something interesting and new. It will likely evolve as you learn from the market and unearth new questions. But always plan, prioritize and prep your questions before any session.

Observation Can Be As Powerful As Questions

Sometimes the best thing you can do is sit back and watch someone's behavior. You might watch their purchase process, or examine how they go about solving a particular problem. As you think about what you want to learn, also think through how you might gather data through observation rather than direct interviews.

In our story of Koshi and Roberta, the two got some of their most valuable insights by going to linen stores and watching potential customers struggle to buy a pillow. They observed behavior and only then jumped in to ask questions.

This technique cannot always be used. For example, when my

team was trying to validate a weight loss product idea, it did not feel practical to watch people go about their diet. Instead we did interviews and then put a group of customers through a two-week concierge experiment (*see Glossary*) where we manually acted out the diet experience. But, where possible, observing uninfluenced behavior can lead to great insights.