



Figma

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Design research

Research is the stage of the design process when you are discovering problems that need solutions and customers that need helping. Your primary goal is to get an understanding of a group or groups of people's problems. You will be investigating to understand your customers and the context of their situation, especially as it relates to their problems that you are attempting to solve or offer solutions for.

Based on those findings, you'll be able to distill some basic information about the product you intend to design into a [design brief](#). From there, you'll be ready to start establishing goals for yourself, your team, and your product. It's important to set goals for your product as well as targets for the research phase itself.

While you should focus on conducting research and understanding potential customers and problems before designing, research is not a one-time process. Research should continue before, during, and after the launch of a product. Running tests and researching the behavior of your audience after a product launch is a great way to learn from your mistakes.

Understanding your customers allows you to be an advocate for them, and to create informed and inspired design solutions that best meet their needs. Your research can be an attempt to see the world through their eyes to better understand the behaviors and environments of your current and potential customers. It also aids in avoiding your own [biases](#), as you design for people who aren't like you.

To begin the research phase of designing, identify what understand and don't know about your customers and their problems. It's from here that you'll be able to base

questions to uncover insights, generate new hypotheses, and validate or invalidate your assumptions.

If you identify anything that you don't know about your customers, make sure to determine how you're going to learn it. Follow up later and confirm that you've filled as many gaps in your knowledge of your customers as you are able to.

Your research goals are to answer: Who are the target customers? Why do they or will they use your product? What are their motivations? What do they expect from your product? How do they currently solve the problems you are targeting to solve? And any questions you think are relevant to you and your product development. Ask open-ended questions of your interviewees. You're trying to gain insights from them, to get them to open up to you, and potentially share ideas you didn't know to look for.

Identifying themes will allow you to not only bucket your customer groups but your product and feature offerings as well. For example, if you have the time or resources to develop three features for your product before launch, having identified key themes of customer needs may be crucial to prioritize what gets built and shipped first.

Designers and User Researchers may create [prototypes](#) of what a final product may function or look like to test potential solutions without committing the designs to an extended development process that may be required for the product when it's eventually built.

Creating these prototypes, via paper, prototyping software, or even coded applications is an excellent strategy for testing and iterating on ideas earlier in the design process. This is often the process within [design sprints](#).

There are many methods to learn about your customers and potential customers firsthand. From customer studies, one-on-one interviews, and surveys. Additionally, there are secondary sources including everything from research firms like [Pew Research Center](#) to understandings gained from competitors.

Firsthand Research

As you explore solutions to your customer's problems, you will interview your customers, and likely want to test your proposed solutions to see if they solve their problems. It doesn't even have to be a lot of them. Any amount of individuals to gain some insight and learn things that you don't or can't know yourself. You are not your only customer.

This interviewing can happen face-to-face, in your office or where your customers are — which is always preferred. If you are building a product for grocery store shoppers, you will want to go to a grocery store and talk to individuals shopping there that are willing. Luke Wroblewski, reminds us, "Stop looking at what other companies are doing. Start spending more time with existing/potential customers."

Customer interviews

Connecting with your existing and potential customers can be extremely helpful in focusing your design efforts and informing your decisions. Interviewing customers individually and in focus groups for gathering insights, in many companies, is the role of not just the designer, but also a User Researcher or team focused on User Research.

When conducting research consider what people want from your product. You have to ask questions that give you an understanding of their past behavior. Asking them directly what they want from your product often doesn't deliver helpful insights. Focus on how they have dealt with or confronted their problems previously.

Not all research requires access to your customers directly, you can send them a survey, schedule phone calls, and even write them a letter. Be creative on how to best contact your customers. As you better understand them, you will hopefully better understand how to contact and learn from them.

If you are struggling to find customers to interview, start with your own network of friends and colleagues that may fit the profile of your potential customers. Also, consider an immersive trip to where your customers are.

Secondhand Research

An excellent secondary source of information is to look toward other successful products in your field or industry. Create a [mood board](#) to get inspired by products that solve problems parallel to the issues you're addressing. Ask yourself, "What makes this design solution successful?"

Comparing your product to a competitor's product can be helpful, but be sure not to copy their designs. It is great to gain inspiration, but you don't want to steal, nor do you want to take a solution that may not be as successful as a solution you can come up with on your own.

Examine the content from your competitors to understand what tone they use to communicate with their customers. Look for limited feature areas where your product may excel. This is a great beginning for identifying what you would change about it.

Many research organizations publish their findings, and they may have already done research on your customers or similar products.

Beyond researching externally, there is also the examination of your own products as they are used. You can monitor your products analytics and test different solutions to a problem through experimentation or trial and error. In digital products, this is called [A/B testing](#), where subsets of your customers are presented with different experiences and metrics on their usage are compared.

Research goes beyond understanding just your customers and their problems. You also need to understand the organization you are serving, be it in-house or a client. The better you conceptualize how they get work done, what the business goals are, and even how the business makes money, then you'll be in a better position to innovate.

Your teammates may have experience working with or even being your customer. Uncovering their goals and intentions will help you guide the project, serve your customer, and collaborate together.

Don't forget to share your research across your team and ensure that they are doing the same. The shared understanding of what your goals and audience are will help drive a unified product within your organization. Even if your team may be just you and one developer.

Research Tips

- Start with the questions you want to be answered.
- Get feedback from your current and potential customers early and often.
- When interviewing customers, explain why you are conducting research and what you are hoping to learn.
- If possible, talk to your customers in their own environment rather than bringing them to your workspace.
- Get consent from any participants of your research.
- If possible, offer interview participants compensation for their time, even a gift card or some other recognition of their time and thoughtfulness.
- Try to avoid your own biases.

Further reading

Google Design's [Beyond Desktop Research](#)

Leah Buly's [The User Experience Team of One](#)

Quintin Carlson's [User Experience Research Field Guide](#)

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