

Lessons Learned: 4 Tips to Make Customer Development Surveys Suck Less

[Sensory Percussion](#) is creating a next-generation electronic drum that captures the true expressive nature of drumming. Used with any acoustic drum, it allows for intricate and natural mappings to any sound desired, from samples to analog and software drum synthesizers.

As Steve Blank preaches in his book [The Startup Owner's Manual](#), you need to get out of the building for customer discovery interviews and see your customers' pupils dilate when they see your product. Nothing beats meeting face-to-face with a customer. Yet, asking the same questions of potential customers over and over again is tough. It's tempting to try to automate this process. After all, a founder's time is so incredibly valuable.

However, online surveys are usually a bad idea for early stage startups. Let's face it: it's hard to write a balanced and unbiased survey, get the right people to take it, and extract meaningful insights from the process. You have to be well versed in statistics, human psychology and behavior to avoid survey-taker's biases (and your own), and user experience to ensure survey completion. Surveys take a lot of time and effort, and a few simple mistakes can ruin your results.

That being said, there are some situations in which surveys may be more appropriate than interviews: first, when you have completed customer development interviews and are ready to validate your ideas at scale, and second, when you need to gather specific information about your target market.

In our case, we needed to get a better sense of the electronic equipment drummers own, i.e. what the installed base was for our product. So we went

to the web and created a survey.

This is what we learned:

1. Use surveys to validate what you've learned from customer development interviews: When interviewing drummers, we asked about the equipment they use and how often they buy new gear. We had a “pretty good” idea of what was out there, so when the survey responses started flowing in, we weren’t completely taken by surprise. Beware of confirmation biases, though. One common way this may occur is by limiting answer choices to only what you think is relevant. Make sure you are asking questions that allow for a wide range of responses.

2. Keep it simple: Avoid asking open-ended opinion questions, e.g. “What do you think of Roland V-Drums?” Save those questions for your customer interviews! It's much easier to interpret answers to these kind of questions when you can read body language and ask followup questions. In your survey, focus on asking questions with factual answers that are easy to interpret. For us, we needed to know whether drummers owned an audio interface, its form factor, and how many mic preamps it has. These questions are easy to ask, and more importantly, easy to answer.

3. Know who is answering your survey: You can’t predict who will see your survey, so including basic demographic questions are a must. Ask their age range, city, and other relevant factual information so you know you are getting responses from people in your target market. For us, it was important to gauge how much drumming experience our respondents had, so we asked if they saw themselves as “Professional,” “Amateur,” or “Other please specify” (we got a lot of “Semi-pro” responses there). This helped us filter and interpret our results.

4. Keep it impersonal: Also, keep in mind that people generally don't enjoy filling out surveys. So, *absolutely do not* try to pitch or sell your product during the survey. *Huge turnoff*. Also, don't ask for personal information you

don't need such as mailing addresses, phone numbers, etc. You'll see a much better response rate if you keep the survey impersonal and focused.

Surveys are a powerful tool for startups—just keep in mind they shouldn't be the primary way you are getting information from your customers. So get out of the building and talk to some customers!

This post is part of the [Lessons Learned](#) series featuring NYU entrepreneurs' first-hand accounts of challenges faced in starting a business and the lessons learned along the way.