

Early Customer Research

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Objectives of Early Customer Research

- Confirm you have identified a ***problem worth solving, before*** overinvesting in building and marketing a product no one wants. This entails:
 - Generating and validating hypotheses about ***strong, unmet customer needs***
 - Understanding ***buying process*** and potential ***adoption barriers***
 - Proving that the target ***market is big enough*** to warrant development
- Gain insight on ***potential solutions***

Dimensions of Unmet Customer Need

(M. Skok, [Startup Secrets](#))

- **Improvement Opportunity:** How big is the gap between optimal performance and performance of existing solutions?
- **Importance:** How valuable would satisfying the need be to customers?
 - Is there a mandate for performance improvement, e.g., compliance requirement? regulation?
- **Purpose:** Is the need *utilitarian* (i.e., addressing practical problems) or *aspirational* (i.e., addressing desires)?
- **Awareness:** Is the need *blatant* (i.e., obvious to customer) or *latent* (i.e., unacknowledged by customer) and thus potentially requiring costly education?
 - Examples of products that met latent needs: Post-It Notes; Roller Blades; shower gel; Activia Yogurt; L’Oreal Men Excell 5-minute hair dye (Ipsos Marketing, “[Discovering What People Want Before They Do](#)”)

Potential Adoption Barriers

- *Switching costs*: out-of-pocket costs and inconveniences incurred when substituting solutions, including:
 - *Account termination and setup costs*, e.g., contract severance; forfeiting tenure/usage based benefits; new account registration and configuration; learning new system
 - *Redundant investments*, net of any salvage value, e.g., buying new software when moving from PC to Mac
 - *Risk of disrupting operations* if unproven solution doesn't meet promises
- *Lack of vendor reputation*: more acute with a startup
- *Abandonment risk*: concern that product support will disappear if vendor fails—more acute with a startup

Customer Problem Hypothesis

(Alvarez, [Lean Customer Development](#), p. 22)

- Format: “I believe [customer segment] experience [problem] when [doing task] AND/OR because [of constraint]”
- Examples
 - I believe *new parents* experience *fear about infant health* when *putting infants to sleep*
 - I believe *professional men* experience *potential embarrassment* because they *lack time to purchase new underwear when old ones wear out*

Attributes of a Validated Hypothesis (Alvarez, [*Lean Customer Development*](#), p. 117)

- Customer confirms there is a problem
- Customer has already invested time/money trying to solve the problem
- Customer does not face circumstances beyond her control that prevent her from trying to solve the problem
- NOTE: The attributes above apply for **blatant** needs (i.e., those that customer is aware of), **not latent** needs, of which customer is not yet aware
 - Latent needs can still be explored through interviews and ethnographic research aimed at understanding customers' goals and the shortcomings of current solutions

Beware of False Positive Risks

- We are all wired, psychologically, to see what we want /expect to see
- People will often tell you what they think you want to hear, so that you like them more
- False positive risk is most acute when you research only the views “foaming-at-the-mouth” enthusiasts, but business model viability depends on mainstream adoption

Choosing Research Subjects

- Should you focus on potential **early adopters**?
 - Almost certainly, since you must sell to them initially
 - But be wary when: 1) business model viability hinges on mainstream adoption; and 2) early adopters have different needs than mainstream customers, as with tech-savvy “power users” or enthusiasts who like to try new products
- Beware of over reliance on ***convenience sampling***, i.e., interviewing or surveying people you know. They may not be in your true target market, and they may be more likely to tell you what they think you want to hear
- Be sure to study the entire **decision making unit** involved in procurement (see below)
- If you will serve a **two-sided market**, you must research users on both sides

Decision Making Unit

(Cespedes et al., [Customer Discovery & Validation](#))

- **Users'** typical concerns: product performance, reliability, productivity impact, ease of use
- **Gatekeepers**, e.g., purchasing managers, keep track of vendors' offers; may control flow of information and access to deciders
- **Deciders** have authority/budget to purchase
 - Typical concerns: total cost of ownership, fit with budget, ROI, productivity impact
- **Influencers** have sway over purchase (e.g., IT department staff); may have veto power
 - Typical concerns: vendor reputation, ease of implementation

Recruiting Research Participants

(Goodman et al., [*Observing the User Experience*](#), Ch. 6)

- Target subjects via personal referrals, social networks, store intercepts, landing page signups, etc.
- Craft request with care: best practice can have a big impact on response rates (see below)
- Expect to hear “no” a lot
- Incentives for subjects may be appropriate – often in the range of \$1.50/minute for consumers; \$2 for B2B
- Commercial services can be cost effective if your budget allows. Expect to pay about \$100-150 per subject, excluding any incentives paid directly to subjects

Crafting Requests for Help

(Fitzpatrick, [*The Mom Test*](#), pp. 95-96)

- Use the format, Vision/Framing/Weakness/Pedestal/Ask (mnemonic: “Very Few Wizards Properly Ask”)
 - **Vision:** you’re an entrepreneur trying to solve horrible problem X [Do NOT mention your specific solution]
 - **Framing:** set expectations by mentioning you are at a very early stage [so, you won’t be selling something]
 - **Weakness:** say why you need help [to show you won’t be a time waster, and to pose a challenge – people like to fix things]
 - **Pedestal:** say why the target can help [people like to be helpful and to show they are smart; also, if you’ve been referred to them by someone, mention this]
 - **Ask:** explicitly ask for their help [in doing so, address potential concerns about time commitment and privacy]

More Advice on Recruiting Interviewees

- For cold e-mails:
 - LinkedIn messages rarely work; one HBS project team got a 16% response. Instead, look people up on LinkedIn, then guess at their email address — most companies use one of just a few formats, e.g., jsmith@, john.smith@ or john@s — an test your guess through a email verification website like: <http://verify-email.org/>
 - Email from your HBS account and say you're a student
- An intro is always better than a cold email, so look for shared connections via LinkedIn, alumni directories, etc.
- According to sales guru [Aaron Ross](#), when cold calling, you'll get a better response to a “short, sweet” email that simply asks for a referral to the best person in the recipient's company than to a “salesy” email that asks “Do you face challenges X,Y, and Z?”

Research Methods

Qualitative

- Customer interviews
- Focus groups
- Day-in-life observation
- Personas
- Competitor feature matrix
- Competitor user testing
- Customer service feedback

Quantitative

- Customer surveys
- Conjoint analysis
- Landing page test
- Beta test/market trial
- A/B test
- Net Promoter Score
- Funnel/cohort analysis

Qualitative vs. Quantitative: When, Why?

- Qualitative research generates hypotheses by exploring “Why?”
- Quantitative research tests hypotheses by asking “How many?” and “How often?”
- Qualitative and quantitative research tend to follow each other in **iterative cycles**, especially after quantitative testing yields surprises that spur “Why?” questions that should be addressed through a new round of qualitative research

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Customer Interviews

- **Purpose:** generate hypotheses regarding the topics below and, when multiple interviewees give the same response, validate hypotheses
 - Potential customer segments; their goals and unmet needs
 - Current solutions and their shortcomings
 - Decision making unit and its purchasing process
 - Potential barriers to adoption
- **Limitations of interviews**
 - They are not good for collecting feature lists or getting design advice; rather, ask interviewee how a better solution might help with a specific task
 - They are not good for pricing research due to self-interested behavior or lack of buying authority
 - With radical innovation, potential users may not be able to express preferences, but they can still describe problems with current solutions
- **Number of interviews:** Fitzpatrick says you can often get good results from just 3-5 customer discovery interviews. If, after 10+ interviews, findings have not converged, your customer segment may be too fuzzy. ([The Mom Test](#), p. 101)
 - [Alvarez](#) (p. 116) says you should keep interviewing until you no longer hear things that surprise you, which often takes 15-20 interviews

Fitzpatrick, *The Mom Test*

- “Bad customer conversations aren’t just useless. Worse, they convince you that you are on the right path. They give you a false positive that causes you to over-invest” (p. 7)
- “You shouldn’t ask anyone whether your business is a good idea. At least not in those words. Your mom will lie to you the most (just ‘cuz she loves you), but it’s a bad question and invites everyone to lie to you a least a little” (p. 11)

Guidelines for Conducting Customer Interviews

- Set 2-3 explicit research objectives; develop discussion guide
- Select sample
- Decide who/how many colleagues will join you.
 - Who needs input: engineers, sales?
 - 2 or more interviewers is typically better:
 - 2+ allows for moderator and note taker roles; also, one interviewer can formulate the next round of questions while the other delivers the current round
 - 2+ interviewers also can yield rich debriefing because colleagues may interpret points differently
 - However, you risk disjointed jumps in the conversation with too many interviewers
- Conduct 45-60 minute interview
 - Decide whether to interview face-to-face or by phone/video call. Calls may be more time efficient, but they can forfeit emotional richness and opportunities to observe customers in their natural setting
 - Decide if you'll record interviews. Pros: you can listen better if you are less reliant on note taking. Cons: request to tape is an awkward opening; taping increases analysis time; taping can make some interviewees less open
 - Choose your 1st questions to warm up interviewee, and don't overdo small talk("e.g., Nice weather today..."). Make interviewee confident she'll be helpful; set expectations (e.g., "I'll mostly be listening" "It's important to be honest – don't worry about criticizing potential solutions I propose"); get interviewee talking by being quiet yourself after posing your first substantive question ([Alvarez](#), p, 88-89)
 - Define terms if necessary
 - Frame/pose questions carefully (see next slide)
 - At the end of the interview, request introductions to others who might be helpful and ask if you can follow up later to clarify points
- Debrief ASAP, focusing on: key insights regarding research objectives; comparison to other interviews; any surprises; implications for future interviews (e.g., should you revise opening? Any bland answers? Any new Qs that worked well?)

Framing/Posing Questions

(Alvarez, [*Lean Customer Development*](#), Ch. 4)

- Use mostly **open-ended questions**; listen WAY more than you talk
 - Consider using “[Five Whys](#)” technique from Toyota Production System, but be wary of annoying interviewee
- **Restate answers** to confirm understanding
- Make sure you understand subject’s **goals**
- Questions should probe all dimensions of unmet need, i.e., improvement opportunity, importance, purpose, and awareness
- Listen for **emotion** and **frustration**
- Probe for **constraints** and **adoption barriers**: limited resources, social/political acceptability of change
- **Focus on specific behavior in the past or present, not opinions and future plans.** People are too optimistic and they want to please you—especially if you ask if they’ll buy your product
 - Not: “How likely would you be to do XYZ?” Rather: “Tell me about the last time you did XYZ?”
 - Not: “How much would it cost your company if XYZ happened?” Rather: “How much did it cost last time XYZ happened?”
 - Not: “How often does XYZ occur?” Rather: “In the past month, how often did XYZ occur?”
 - Not: “How would your family react if you did XYZ?” Rather: “How did your family react the last time you did XYZ?”
- **Avoid leading questions**, e.g., “Don’t you think XYZ?” “Would you like it if XYZ?” “Do you agree most people would say XYZ?” “Would it cause a problem if XYZ?”
- **Avoid judgmental language** and never say the interviewee is wrong, even if their understanding of product is seriously flawed

Customer Discovery Questions

- Some basic questions ([Alvarez](#), p. 60)
 - Tell me how you do [task] today
 - Do you use any [tools/tricks/apps] to do the task?
 - In completing the task, if you could wave a **magic wand** and do anything you can't do today, what would it be?
 - Last time you did the task, what were you doing right before and right after?
 - Should I have asked anything else?
- Another set of questions from Justin Wilcox
 - What's the hardest part about [problem context]?
 - Can you tell me about the last time that happened? [Stories can be vivid]
 - Why was that task hard?
 - What, if anything, have you done to solve that problem? [If they aren't looking for a solution already, you may not have a problem worth solving!]
 - What don't you love about the solutions you've tried?
- More questions
 - How often do you experience this problem?
 - How much are you spending to solve this problem now?
 - Where do you find information about [problem context]?

More Customer Discovery Questions

(Fitzpatrick, [*The Mom Test*](#), pp. 40-41)

- Questions for probing feature requests
 - Why do you want to do that?
 - What would that let you do?
 - How are you coping without it?
 - Should we push back our launch to add that feature, or could we add it later?
 - How would that fit into your day?
- Questions for probing emotional signals
 - Tell me more about that
 - That really seems to bug you—I'll bet there's a story here
 - What makes it so awful?
 - Why haven't you been able to fix this?
 - You seem excited about that—It's a big deal?

Focus Groups

(Goodman et al., [Observing the User Experience](#), Ch. 7)

- **Purpose:** explore customers' current usage patterns and attitudes in a *group setting*, which can be effective for eliciting reactions to products with emotional, status, and life-style associations
 - Group interaction, well managed, can make participants more comfortable discussing desires, motivations, values and memories
 - Best for exploring attitudes toward specific products with which participants have direct experience
- **Guidelines:** 6-8 users with similar backgrounds (to reduce fears of being judged); 60-90 minutes; often compensated
 - Introduce objectives & ground rules (e.g., anonymity); participant intros; how/when they use/bought product; discussion of likes/dislikes
 - To avoid groupthink, ask subjects to jot down ideas first
 - Use whiteboard to guide discussion; *never* disagree or take sides (“How do others feel about that...”)
 - Moderating a focus group takes skill. If your budget allows, consider hiring a professional researcher

Ethnography

- Designers often observe **extreme users**, e.g., heavy users; customers who use products in unusual ways (e.g., 80-year old arthritic struggling with a can opener)
- Ask subjects to **demonstrate things** they interact with (“Show me” or “Draw it”); ask them to think aloud as they complete a task
- To identify unmet needs, designers look for **workarounds** (“hacks”), e.g., Post-It note on a monitor that lists steps for using software
- With the goal of identifying pain points/unmet needs, a **journey map** depicts all of the steps—even small ones—that a customer undertakes in solving a problem/completing a task, arrayed in a timeline, “with special attention to emotional highs and lows and the meaning that the experience holds for the customer” (Liedtke, [Ten Tools for Design Thinking](#))
- Synthesize observations using an **empathy map** with four quadrants capturing things that subjects DO (lower left), SAY (upper left), THINK (upper right), FEEL (lower right). Then, look for new/surprising/contradictory patterns to gain insight on latent needs (Kelley & Kelley, [Creative Confidence](#), p. 223)

Customer Surveys

- **Purpose:** assess 1) usage patterns; 2) purchase behavior; 3) satisfaction with existing solutions; 4) strength of needs; 5) feature preferences; 6) purchase intent; 7) correlation of above with demographic/behavioral/psychographic attributes (for segmentation)
- **Limitations:**
 - Must understand problem well enough to frame meaningful Qs
 - Survey responses regarding purchase intent for radically new products are rarely reliable
- **Common errors**
 - Leading questions
 - Questions that ask respondents to predict future behavior (vs. describing past behavior—especially regarding an aspirational product (e.g., “Would you like to go to the gym more often?”))
 - No pilot testing for question clarity; excessive length
 - Sample is too small for statistical reliability; convenience sampling; self-selection bias (“Click here to take our survey”) – opt-in surveys tend to attract respondents with strong opinions and specialized interests

Attributes of Good Survey Questions

(Goodman et al., [*Observing the User Experience*](#), Ch. 12)

- **Specific:** avoid words with multiple or fuzzy meaning, e.g., “sometimes,” “roughly”)
- **Focused:** no more than one concept per question (e.g., NOT: “Are you frustrated with the site’s performance because it is slow to load”)
- Multiple choice options that are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (“**MECE**”)
 - “Other” category can be helpful for ensuring MECE options
- **Avoid negative wording**, which can be difficult to understand (e.g., NOT: “Which of the following features are you not interested in?”)
- Avoid asking for predictions of future behavior; ask about **past behavior** instead
- Always provide **an option that applies** (e.g., NOT: “What do you love most about CNN.com?”); “none of the above” option can be helpful
- **Consistency:** ask questions the same way each time
- Use **Likert scales** (e.g., 1-5 or 1-7)

Survey Structure

(Goodman et al., [*Observing the User Experience*](#), Ch. 12)

- **Introduction:** survey's purpose; instructions; confidentiality assurance; reward (if any); how long survey is open; contact info for survey administrator
- **Beginning** with teaser questions that capture subject's interest and avoid questions that might be deemed boring or too intrusive (e.g., income)
- **Middle**, alternating interesting and less interesting questions
- **End**, with demographic questions; open-ended fields for general response; contact info reiterated

Comparative Analysis of Rivals' Positioning, Features, and Performance

- Comparative analysis can reflect:
 - Positioning and target customer segments
 - Key performance dimensions from users' perspective, e.g., price, quality, reliability, delivery speed, ease of use, ability to customize, etc.
 - Product features
- Typically presented as a matrix
 - Scores can reflect better or worse performance (e.g., 1-5; full/half moons)
 - Performance dimensions and features can be prioritized as more or less important to customers

Example of Competitor Analysis

(Perigree Consulting, [Agile Tool Selection](#))

Team Size (Assumption)		10																	
Feature	Product	Backlog (Story/Epic) Mgmt	Story - Task Breakdown with Hour Estimating & Tracking	Sprint Burn Down Chart (At Hour Level)	Sprint Burndown (At Story Level)	Release Burndown (At Story Level)	Hosted Solution Option	Integration with Jira	Integration with CI Tools	Integration with SVN	Integration with quality center test management	Ease of Use (1 worst - 5 best)	Reporting Options (1 worst - 5 best)	Cost Per License	License Term	Total Cost	Team License Term	Notes	
		Pivotal Tracker	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5	1	\$ 5	Month	\$ 50	Month
RallyDev	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4	5	\$ 35	Month	\$ 350	Month	Robust solution, but many of the features are over-kill and can get in the way if you let them.	
VersionOne	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4	5	\$ 29	Month	\$ 290	Month	New version is much clearer, has many features - some that can get in the way if you let them.	
Collabnet:Scrumworks	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3	4	\$ 25	Month	\$ 250	Month	(I don't have any hands on experice with this tool, but looks pretty complete.)	
JIRA:Greenhopper	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2	3	\$ 5	Month	\$ 50	Month	UI is pretty clunky - and is limited in some features, but it is usable and integrates well with Jira	
Target Process (On Demand)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3	4	\$ 25	Month	\$ 250	Month	Looks like a promising tool, but doesn't offer anything the market leading products don't have.	
TFS (Scrum for TeamSystem)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3	4	?	Site	?	Site	TFS is a full solution with source code replacement and can be quite expensive. Not considered as an option	
AxoSoft OnTime	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3	3	\$ 16	Month	\$ 160	Month		
HP Quality Center (Agile Accelerator)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1	2	ALM 11	Site	?	Site	Base Implementation - Requires ALM 11 (Free Version is limited, Fully Customized version is \$30-\$50 k) - As I understand it, the UI is folder based and very clunky.	
ScrumPad	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4	3	\$ 18	Month	\$ 180	Month	Looks like a promising tool, but doesn't offer anything the market leading products don't have.	

Legend	
●	Feature Supported
◐	Feature Partially Supported
●	Feature Not Supported

Competitor User Testing

- Goal: understand which aspects of current solutions do/do not satisfy customers
- Ask users to complete a task, and to “think out loud” while doing so
- Do NOT coach users or comment on their performance
- See PM101 [assignment readings](#) for more “how-to” guidance; in particular, read [*Rocket Surgery Made Easy*](#)

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Personas vs. Customer Segments

- **Personas** are profiles of fictional, archetypal customers that describe their personal stories/goals/motivations, based on a synthesis of findings from interviews, ethnography, and other customer research
 - Personas are used to focus teams designing products and crafting marketing messages on real customers' needs
- **Customer segments** typically reflect shared demographic, behavioral and or attitudinal characteristics of customer groups, as revealed through large sample quantitative research. They are used for:
 - Estimating market size
 - Targeting marketing efforts (where/when/how much to spend)
 - Tracking market share, customer satisfaction, and LTV/CAC by cohort
- You need both!!

Personas: Key Elements

(Cooper, [*The Inmates Are Running the Asylum*](#), Ch. 9)

- Typical elements
 - Name and image
 - Job description, if B2B
 - Key demographic and behavioral information (e.g., when/where/why/how often they use product)
 - Key goals, needs, worries, motivations
 - Quotes can help illustrate these
 - Implications of goals/needs/etc. for solution
- 3-7 personas are typical; 1-3 of these should be “primary”
 - Having too many suggests a product that’s too diffuse
 - Cooper, 135: Consider creating personas of potential users you are NOT designing for
 - Can have personas for decision influencers/economic buyers, but you would not design UI for them

Customer Needs to Consider in Developing Personas

(Alvarez, [*Lean Customer Development*](#), p. 25-26)

- Preference regarding **time vs. money** tradeoffs
- Preference for **predictability vs. novelty**; risk aversion
- **Decision maker or taker?** (i.e., role in decision making unit)
- Degree of **independence** vs. reliance on others' opinions
- How **tech savvy?**

Example Persona

Persona

Name: Tracy

Type: TV traditionalist

Quote: "I can't see why I'd want to watch TV shows on a computer"

What might he/she say?



About *Who are they? What is their background? What is their age? Where does he/she live? What is their job?*

- Lives in Leicester with husband and two kids (both currently in middle school)
- Works as legal secretary at a local law firm
- Usually watches television in lounge with the rest of family – they also have a TV in their bedroom (but not the kids rooms)
- Has favourite shows she watches – likes to check the TV guide to see what's recommended
- Likes to keep an eye on what the kids watch – she doesn't want them watching video nasties
- Has just started using Facebook and is loving it!

Goals/tasks *What is he/she trying to accomplish? What is important to them? What is their motivation for using the product?*

- Catch up on shows that she might have missed
- Restrict the kind of shows that her kids can watch (and possibly see what they have watched)
- Find out what good shows are on e.g. stuff people have recommended

Needs/implications *What does he/she need to be able to do? What are the implications for the product?*

- Would like to be able to watch shows on the big TV (in the lounge) so that the whole family can watch stuff together
- Needs to be able to restrict the kind of shows that her kids can watch
- It would be nice for Tracy to find out about shows that she and the family might enjoy
- Needs something that is relatively easy to use – she's still not properly figured out how her new mobile phone works!

Fears and frustrations *What does he/she find annoying at the moment? What are their pain points and frustrations?*

- Doesn't want her kids being able to watch stuff that she deems inappropriate for them
- Is nervous about giving away lots of personal details online (she has recently changed her Facebook security settings as a friend told her that the site can be used for identity fraud)

Why is he/she a challenge? *Why is designing for him/her difficult? Why is he/she likely to be a tough customer?*

- Can we persuade Tracy to actually use Re – run.com?
- Can we design something easy enough for Tracy to use (with out having to ask the kids for help!)

Designing With Personas

(Cooper, [*The Inmates Are Running the Asylum*](#), Ch. 9)

- During the product specification phase, user stories should be drafted and a unique UI should be designed for each of 1-3 primary personas
- If you design for the largest number of potential users, you get a mushy product that meets no one's needs well
 - According to Cooper (p. 125), 80% in Dodge Ram focus groups hated it, but 20% *loved* it. The vehicle, designed for the 20%, was very successful.
- Throughout the product design and development process, personas serve as a communication tool for the team
- In Cooper's approach, SCENARIOS—akin to “use cases”—entail PERSONAS completing TASKS in order to fulfill GOALS

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Additional Readings

- Books
 - [*The Mom Test*](#), Fitzpatrick – a superb, short how to guide to customer discovery interviewing
 - [*Observing the User Experience*](#), Goodman et al. – comprehensive and practical guide to all early customer research techniques
 - [*Lean Customer Discovery*](#), Alvarez – links customer discovery research to the lean startup method
- Terrific [collection](#) of “how to/why to” articles about UX research from Google Ventures’ John Zeratsky
- Prof. Eisenmann’s reading list on [product design](#) has links to many other relevant books, blog posts and articles