

EVERYONE IS LYING TO YOU

They say you shouldn't ask your mom whether your business is a good idea, because she loves you and will lie to you.

This is technically true, but it misses the point. You shouldn't ask **anyone** if your business is a good idea. It's a bad question and everyone will lie to you at least a little. It's not their responsibility to tell you the truth. It's your responsibility to find it.

IT'S WORTH DOING RIGHT

Talking to customers is one of the foundational skills of both Customer Development and Lean Startup. We all know we're supposed to do it, but nobody seems willing to admit that it's hard to do right and easy to screw up.

This book is going to show you how customer conversations go wrong and how you can do better. It's a quick, practical guide that will save you time, money, and heartbreak.



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Previously a shy techie and official winner of the World's Worst Salesperson award, he picked up quite a few bumps & bruises learning to talk to customers. The lessons are here, boiled down into practical, actionable tips based on extensive work with early stage companies through foundercentric.com.

THE MOM TEST

Rob Fitzpatrick



THE MOM TEST

How to talk to customers & learn if your business is a good idea when everyone is lying to you.

Rob Fitzpatrick
a foundercentric.com book

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Introduction

Trying to learn from customer conversations is like excavating a delicate archaeological site. The truth is down there somewhere, but it's fragile. While each blow with your shovel gets you closer to the truth, you're liable to smash it into a million little pieces if you use too blunt an instrument.

I see a lot of teams using a bulldozer and crate of dynamite for their excavation. They are, in one way or another, forcing people to say something nice about their business. They use heavy-handed questions like “do you think it's a good idea” and shatter their prize.

At the other end of the spectrum, some founders are using a toothbrush to unearth a city, flinching away from digging deep and finding out whether anything of value is actually buried down there.

We want to find the truth of how to make our business succeed. We need to dig for it—and dig deep—but every question we ask carries the very real possibility of biasing the person we're talking to and rendering the whole exercise pointless. It happens more than you'd ever imagine.

The truth is our goal and questions are our tools. But we must learn to wield them. It's delicate work. And well worth learning. There's treasure below.

Is this book for you?

Hello,

You've read about Customer Development or Lean Startup and aren't sure how to actually go about having your first customer conversation.

You're a traditional business or sales person aiming to be more effective within a young company which hasn't yet found its business model.

You mentor, support, or invest in startups and want to help them have more useful customer conversations.

You've fallen in love with a new business idea and want to figure out if it has legs before quitting your job.

You're raising funding and the investors want to see more evidence that you're solving a real problem.

You find this whole process incredibly awkward and really wish there was an easier way to do it.

You've got a vague sense of an opportunity and want to figure out exactly what it is.

You've always wanted to build your own company and want to start making real progress today.

This book is for you.

Talking to customers is hard

We know we *ought* to talk to customers. Many of us even *do* talk to customers. But we still end up building stuff nobody buys. Isn't that exactly what talking to people is meant to prevent?

It turns out almost all of us are doing it wrong. I've made these mistakes myself and seen them happen a hundred times over with other founders. Despite the recent explosion of startup knowledge, the process of figuring out what customers want too often unfolds as it did at my first company, Habit.

We were building social advertising tech and I was distraught. We'd spent 3 years working our hearts out. We'd nearly run out of investor money and it didn't look like we'd be getting more. We'd relocated internationally to be closer to our market and had survived a co-founder being deported. I'd been talking to customers full-time for months. And then, after innumerable days of slog and an exhausted team, I learned I'd been doing it wrong. I may as well not have bothered.

The advice that you ought to be talking to your customers is well-intentioned, but ultimately a bit unhelpful. It's like the popular kid advising his nerdy friend to "just be cooler." They forget to mention that it's hard.

These conversations take time, are easy to screw up and go wrong in a nefarious way. Bad customer conversations aren't just useless. Worse, they convince you that you're on the right path. They give you a false positive which causes you to over-invest your cash, your time, and your team. Even when you're not actively screwing something up, those pesky customers seem hellbent on lying to you.

This book is a practical how-to. The approach and tools within are gathered from a wide range of communities including Customer Development, Design Thinking, Lean Startup, User Experience, traditional sales and more. It's based on working with a bunch of founders and from my experiences both failing and succeeding at customer learning, as well as from the support of innumerable peers and mentors.

It's a casual approach to conversation, based on chipping away the formality and awkwardness of talking to people and taking responsibility for asking good questions.

Why another book on talking and selling?

Does your shelf really need another book on selling and talking? And does it need one written by me in particular?

Well... yes. Yes it does.

Here's why:

Firstly, I'm a techie, not a sales guy. I'm introverted and naturally bad in meetings. Every other sales book I've read is written by and for folks who are already pretty good at dealing with people. They know the unspoken rules of the meeting. I fumbled through from scratch. You know that line, "Don't call me, I'll call you"? People have actually said that to me (and I believed them). With much help from peers and advisors, I eventually started figuring it out and we closed deals with companies like Sony and MTV. But I learned that there's a big gap between textbooks and check books.

Secondly, before we can start doing things correctly, we need to understand how we're doing them wrong. Through my own projects and my work with new founders, I've built up an exhaustive list of how it can go wrong. Throughout the book, I'll try to help you figure out where you might be messing stuff up in unnoticed ways.

Finally, this is a practical handbook, not a theoretical tome. For example, how do you find people to talk to and set up the meetings? How do you take notes while still being polite and paying attention? It's all in here.

I can't teach you how to make your business huge. That's up to you. But I *can* give you the tools to talk to customers, navigate the noise, and learn what they really want. The saddest thing that can happen to a startup is for nobody to care when it disappears. We're going to make sure that doesn't happen.

A note on scope & terminology

This book isn't a summary or description or re-interpretation of the process of Customer Development. That's a bigger concept and something Steve Blank has covered comprehensively in *4 Steps to the E.piphany* and *The Startup Owner's Manual*.

This book is specifically about how to properly talk to customers and learn from them. Talking is one of the big aspects of Customer Development, but shouldn't be confused with the whole process. To keep the distinction clear, I'm going to refer to chatting with people as “customer conversation” (lowercase) instead of “Customer Development” (uppercase).

For the most part, I'm assuming you already agree that talking to customers is a good idea. I'm not trying to convince you again, so this book is more “how” than “why”.

Let's get involved.

CHAPTER ONE

The Mom Test

People say you shouldn't ask your mom whether your business is a good idea. That's technically true, but it misses the point. 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 at least a little.

It's not anyone else's responsibility to show us the truth. It's our responsibility to find it. We do that by asking good questions.

The Mom Test is a set of simple rules for crafting good questions that even your mom can't lie to you about.

Before we get there, let's look at two conversations with mom and see what we can learn about our business idea: digital cookbooks for the iPad.

Failing the mom test

Son: “Mom, mom, I have an idea for a business — can I run it by you?” *I am about to expose my ego — please don't hurt my feelings.*

Mom: “Of course, dear.” *You are my only son and I am ready to lie to protect you.*

Son: “You like your iPad, right? You use it a lot?”

Mom: “Yes.” *You led me to this answer, so here you go.*

Son: “Okay, so would you ever buy an app which was like a cookbook for your iPad?” *I am optimistically asking a hypothetical question and you know what I want you to say.*

Mom: “Hmmm.” *As if I need another cookbook at my age.*

Son: “And it only costs \$40 — that’s cheaper than those hardcovers on your shelf.” *I’m going to skip that lukewarm signal and tell you more about my great idea.*

Mom: “Well...” *Aren’t apps supposed to cost a dollar?*

Son: “And you can share recipes with your friends, and there’s an iPhone app which is your shopping list. And videos of that celebrity chef you love.” *Please just say “yes.” I will not leave you alone until you do.*

Mom: “Oh, well yes honey, that sounds amazing. And you’re right, \$40 is a good deal. Will it have pictures of the recipes?” *I have rationalised the price outside of a real purchase decision, made a non-committal compliment, and offered a feature request to appear engaged.*

Son: “Yes, definitely. Thanks mom — love you!” *I have completely misinterpreted this conversation and taken it as validation.*

Mom: “Won’t you have some lasagna?” *I am concerned that you won’t be able to afford food soon. Please eat something.*

Our misguided entrepreneur has a few more conversations like this, becomes increasingly convinced he’s right, quits his job, and sinks his savings into the app. Then he wonders why nobody (even his mom) buys the app, especially since he had been so *rigorous*.

Doing it wrong is worse than doing nothing at all. When you know you're clueless, you tend to be careful. But collecting a fistful of false positives is like convincing a drunk he's sober: not an improvement.

Let's fix the conversation and show that if we do it right, even mom can help us figure out whether our business is a good idea.

Passing the mom test

Son: "Hey mom, how's that new iPad treating you?"

Mom: "Oh - I love it! I use it every day."

Son: "What do you usually do on it?" *Whoops — we asked a generic question, so answer to this probably won't be terribly valuable.*

Mom: "Oh, you know. Read the news, play sudoku, catch up with my friends. The usual."

Son: "What's the last thing you did on it?" *Get specific about examples in the past to get real, concrete data.*

Mom: "You know your father and I are planning that trip? I was figuring out where we could stay. " *She uses it for both entertainment and utility, which didn't come up during the "usually" answer.*

Son: "Did you use an app for that?" *A slightly leading question, but sometimes we need to nudge to get to the topic we're interested in.*

Mom: "No, I just used Google. I didn't know there was an app. What's it called?" *Younger folks use the App Store as a search engine, whereas your mom waits for a specific recommendation. If that's true more broadly, finding a reliable*

marketing channel outside the App Store is going to be crucial.

Son: “Where did you find out about the other ones you use?” *Dig into interesting and unexpected answers to understand the behaviours and motivations behind them.*

Mom: “The Sunday paper has a section on the apps of the week.” *You can’t remember the last time you cracked open a paper, but it sounds like traditional PR might be a viable option for reaching customers like your mom.*

Son: “Makes sense. Hey, by the way, I saw a couple new cookbooks on the shelf — where did those come from?” *Business ideas usually have several failure points. Here it’s both the medium of an iPad app and the content of a cookbook.*

Mom: “They’re one of those things you just end up getting at Christmas. I think Marcy gave me that one. Haven’t even opened it. As if I need another lasagna recipe at my age!” *Aha! This answer is gold dust for 3 reasons: 1. Old people don’t need another generic set of recipes. 2. The gift market may be strong. 3. Younger cooks may be a better customer segment since they don’t yet know the basics.*

Son: “What’s the last cookbook you did buy for yourself?” *Attack generic answers like “I don’t buy cookbooks” by asking for specific examples.*

Mom: “Now that you mention it, I bought a vegan cookbook about 3 months ago. Your father is trying to eat healthier and thought my veggies could benefit from a pinch more zazz.” *More gold: experienced chefs may still buy specialised or niche cookbooks.*

The conversation continues. If it’s going well, I would raise the topics of whether she ever thought to look for recipes on the iPad or for cooking videos on YouTube.

Overall, your mom can’t remember the last time she had such an enjoyable conversation with you. You were so *interested* in her life for once! You thank her

for the lasagna, pet the dog, and head home. You've learned that building an app and waiting for people to find it on the App Store probably isn't a good plan. But you've got some good insight about your customer segment and a few promising leads to look into. That was a useful conversation.

A useful conversation

The measure of usefulness of an early customer conversation is whether it gives us concrete facts about our customers' lives and world views. These facts, in turn, allow us to improve our business.

Our original idea looked like this: old people like cookbooks and iPads. Therefore, we will build a cookbook for the iPad. It's generic. There are a thousand possible variations of this premise.

With an idea this vague, we can't answer any of the difficult questions like which recipes to include or how people will hear about it. Until we get specific, it always seems like a good idea.

After just one conversation (with our mom, of all people), we have a higher fidelity vision. We now see that there are at least 2 specific customer segments we might serve, each of which needs a slightly different product. We've also identified some major risks to address before we commit too heavily.

1. We could offer niche recipes (ethnic, diets) which experienced cooks may not already know. Our biggest question is how to reach them when they don't search for apps. We have a possible lead with newspaper and magazine PR.
2. Alternately, we might make generic recipes for younger cooks who are easier to reach via the App Store and who haven't memorised all their favourites yet. We haven't talked to any, so we have loads of questions, but one big one is whether a customer segment who isn't already in the habit of buying expensive cookbooks will pay a premium for ours.

The first conversation gave us rope to hang ourselves. The second gave us actionable insight. Why? What was different about the second conversation?

Mom was unable to lie to us because we never talked about our idea.

That's kind of weird, right? We find out if people care about what we're doing by never mentioning it. Instead, we talk about them and their lives.

The point is a bit more subtle than this. Eventually you do need to mention what you're building and take people's money for it. However, the big mistake is almost always to mention your idea too soon rather than too late.

If you just avoid mentioning your idea, you automatically start asking better questions. Doing this is the easiest (and biggest) improvement you can make to your customer conversations.

Here are 3 simple rules to help you. They are collectively called (drumroll) The Mom Test:

The Mom Test:

1. Talk about their life instead of your idea
2. Ask about specifics in the past instead of generics or opinions about the future
3. Talk less and listen more

It's called The Mom Test because it leads to questions that even your mom can't lie to you about. When you do it right, they won't even know you have an idea. There are some other important tools and tricks that we'll introduce throughout the rest of the book. But first, let's put The Mom Test to work on some questions.

Rule of thumb: Customer conversations are bad by default. It's your job to fix them.

Good question / bad question

Let's play a game. Are the following questions good or bad? Do they pass or fail The Mom Test? If they fail it, why? And how could we improve them? Work your way through the list and then read on for some discussion.

“Do you think it's a good idea?”

“Would you buy a product which did X?”

“How much would you pay for X?”

“What would your dream product do?”

“Why do you bother?”

“What are the implications of that?”

“Talk me through the last time that happened.”

“Talk me through your workflow.”

“What else have you tried?”

“Would you pay X for a product which did Y?”

“How are you dealing with it now?”

“Where does the money come from?”

“Who else should I talk to?”

“Is there anything else I should have asked?”

"Do you think it's a good idea?"

Awful question! Here's the thing: only the market can tell if your idea is good. Everything else is just opinion. Unless you're talking to a deep industry expert, this is self-indulgent noise with a high risk of false positives.

Let's fix it: Say you're building an app to help construction companies manage their suppliers. You might ask them to show you how they currently do it. Talk about which parts they love and hate. Ask which other tools and processes they tried before settling on this one. Are they actively searching for a replacement? If so, what's the sticking point? If not, why not? Where are they losing money with their current tools? Is there a budget for better ones? Now, take all that information and decide for yourself whether it's a good idea.

Rule of thumb: Opinions are worthless.

"Would you buy a product which did X?"

Bad question. You're asking for opinions and hypotheticals from overly optimistic people who want to make you happy. The answer to a question like this is almost always "yes", which makes it worthless.

Let's fix it: Ask how they currently solve X and how much it costs them to do so. And how much time it takes. Ask them to talk you through what happened the last time X came up. If they haven't solved the problem, ask why not. Have they tried searching for solutions and found them wanting? Or do they not even care enough to have Googled for it?

Rule of thumb: Anything involving the future is an over-optimistic lie.

"How much would you pay for X?"

Bad question. This is exactly as bad as the last one, except it's more likely to trick you because the number makes it feel rigorous and truthful.

How to fix it: Just like the others, fix it by asking about their life *as it already is*. How much does the problem cost them? How much do they currently pay to solve it? How big is the budget they've allocated? I hope you're noticing a trend here.

Rule of thumb: People will lie to you if they think it's what you want to hear.

"What would your dream product do?"

Sort-of-okay question, but only if you ask good follow-ups. Otherwise it's a bad question. A question like this is like the "set" before the spike in a volleyball game: not too helpful on its own, but it puts you in a good position as long as you're ready to exploit it.

Let's improve it: The value comes from understanding why they want these features. You don't want to just collect feature requests. You aren't building the product by committee. But the motivations and constraints behind those requests are critical.

Rule of thumb: People know what their problems are, but they don't know how to solve those problems.

"Why do you bother?"

Good question. I love this sort of question. It's great for getting from the perceived problem to the real one.

For example, some founders I knew were talking to finance guys spending hours each day sending emails about their spreadsheets. The finance guys were asking for better messaging tools so they could save time. The “why do you bother” question led to “so we can be certain that we’re all working off the latest version.” Aha. The solution ended up being less like the requested messaging tool and more like Dropbox. A question like “why do you bother” points toward their motivations. It gives you the why.

Rule of thumb: You're shooting blind until you understand their goals.

"What are the implications of that?"

Good question. This distinguishes between I-will-pay-to-solve-that problems and that's-kind-of-annoying-but-I-can-deal-with-it “problems”. Some problems have big, costly implications. Others exist but don’t actually matter. It behooves you to find out which is which. It also gives you a good pricing signal.

I once had someone keep describing the workflow we were fixing with emotionally loaded terms like “DISASTER”, accompanied by much yelling and arm waving. But when I asked him what the implications were, he sort of shrugged and said “Oh, we just ended up throwing a bunch of interns at the problem—it’s actually working pretty well.”

Rule of thumb: Some problems don’t actually matter.

"Talk me through the last time that happened."

Good question. Your high school writing teacher may have told you that good stories are meant to “show, not tell”. Whenever possible, you want to be shown, not told by your customers. Learn through their actions instead of their opinions. If you ran a burger joint, it would be stupid to survey your customers

about whether they prefer cheeseburgers or hamburgers. Just watch what they buy (but if you're trying to understand *why* they prefer one over the other, you'll have to talk to them).

Folks can't be wishy-washy when you're watching them do the task in question. Get as close to the real action as you can. Seeing it first hand can provide unique insight into murky situations. But if you can't get in there, asking them to talk you through the last time it happened still offers many of the benefits.

Being walked through their full workflow answers many questions in one fell swoop: how do they spend their days, what tools do they use, and who do they talk to? What are the constraints of their day and life? How does your product fit into that day? Which other tools, products, software, and tasks does your product need to integrate with?

Rule of thumb: Watching someone do a task will show you where the problems and inefficiencies really are, not where the customer thinks they are.

"What else have you tried?"

Good question. What are they using now? How much does it cost and what do they love and hate about it? How much would those fixes be worth and how big of a pain would it be for them to switch to a new solution?

I was checking out an idea with a potential customer and they excitedly said, "Oh man, that happens all the time. I would *definitely* pay for something which solved that problem."

That's a future-promise statement without any commitment to back it up, so I needed to learn whether it was true or not. I asked, "When's the last time this came up?" Turns out, it was pretty recent. That's a great sign. To dig further, I asked, "Can you talk me through how you tried to fix it?" He looked at me blankly, so I nudged him further.

“Did you google around for any other ways to solve it?” He seemed a little bit like he’d been caught stealing from the cookie jar and said, “No... I didn’t really think to. It’s something I’m used to dealing with, you know?”

In the abstract, it’s something he would “definitely” pay to solve. Once we got specific, he didn’t even care enough to search for a solution (which do exist, incidentally).

It’s easy to get someone emotional about a problem if you lead them there. “Don’t you *hate* when your shoelaces come untied while you’re carrying groceries?” “Yeah, that’s the *worst!*” And then I go off and design my special never-come-untied laces without realising that if you actually cared, you would already be using a double-knot.

Rule of thumb: If they haven’t looked for ways of solving it already, they’re not going to look for (or buy) yours.

"Would you pay X for a product which did Y?"

Bad question. The fact that you’ve added a number doesn’t help. This is bad for the same reasons as the others: people are overly optimistic about what they would do and want to make you happy. Plus, it’s about your idea instead of their life.

Let’s fix it: As always, ask about what they currently do now, not what they believe they might do in the future. Common wisdom is that you price your product in terms of value to the customer rather than cost to you. That’s true. And you can’t quantify the value received without prodding their financial worldview.

Another way to fix it, if you’re far enough along, is to literally ask for money. If you have the deposit or pre-order in hand, you know they were telling the truth.

"How are you dealing with it now?"

Good question. Beyond workflow information, this gives you a price anchor. If they're paying £100/month for a duct-tape workaround, you know which ballpark you're playing in. On the other hand, they may have spent £120,000 this year on agency fees to maintain a site you're replacing. If that's the case, you don't want to be having the £100 conversation.

Sometimes, both of the above will be happening simultaneously and you get to choose how you present yourself. Do you want to be a replacement for the web app at a yearly value of £1.2k or for the agency at 100x that?

Rule of thumb: While it's rare for someone to tell you precisely what they'll pay you, they'll often show you what it's worth to them.

"Where does the money come from?"

Good question. This isn't something you would necessarily ask a consumer (though you might), but in a B2B context it's a must-ask. It leads to a conversation about whose budget the purchase will come from and who else within their company holds the power to torpedo the deal.

Often, you'll find yourself talking to someone other than the budget owner. Your future pitches will hit unseen snags unless you learn who else matters and what they care about. This knowledge of their purchasing process will eventually turn into a repeatable sales roadmap.

"Who else should I talk to?"

Good question. Yes! End every conversation like this. Lining up the first few

conversations can be challenging, but if you're onto something interesting and treating people well, your leads will quickly multiply via intros.

If someone doesn't want to make intros, that's cool too. Just leave them be. You've learned that you're either screwing up the meeting (probably by being too formal, pitchy, or clingy) or they don't actually care about the problem you're solving. Take anything nice they say with an extra grain of salt.

"Is there anything else I should have asked?"

Good question. Usually, by the end of the meeting, people understand what you're trying to do. Since you don't know the industry, they'll often be sitting there quietly while you completely miss the most important point.

Asking this question gives them a chance to politely "fix" your line of questioning. And they will!

This question is a bit of a crutch: you'll discard it as you get better at asking good questions and as you get to know the industry.

Rule of thumb: People want to help you, but will rarely do so unless you give them an excuse to do so.

Using the mom test

You'll notice that none of the good questions were about asking what you should build. One of the recurring "criticisms" about talking to customers is that you're abdicating your creative vision and building your product by committee. Given that people don't know what they want, that wouldn't be a terribly effective approach. Deciding what to build is your job.

The questions to ask are about your customers' lives: their problems, cares, constraints, and goals. You humbly and honestly gather as much information about them as you can and then take your own visionary leap to a solution. Once you've taken the leap, you confirm that it's correct (and refine it) through Commitment & Advancement, which we'll look at in Chapter 5.

It boils down to this: you aren't allowed to tell them what their problem is, and in return, they aren't allowed to tell you what to build. They own the problem, you own the solution.

Before we move look at ways to confirm that you're building the right product to fit your customers' lives, we're going to look at fixing some of the ways conversations go wrong.

CHAPTER TWO

Avoiding bad data

They say that to bankrupt a fool, give him information. Practically everyone I've seen talk to customers (including myself) has been giving themselves bad information. You probably are too. Bad data gives us false negatives (thinking the idea is dead when it's not) and—more dangerously—false positives (convincing yourself you're right when you're not).

There are 3 types of bad data to watch out for:

1. Compliments
2. Fluff (generics, hypotheticals, and the future)
3. Ideas

Sometimes we invite the bad data ourselves by asking the wrong questions, but even when you try to follow The Mom Test, conversations still go off track. It could happen because you got excited and started pitching, because you had to talk about your idea to explain the reason for the meeting, or because the conversation is just stuck in hypothetical la-la-land.

These things will happen. Once you start to notice the noise, it's easy to get back on track by deflecting compliments, anchoring fluff, and digging beneath ideas.

Deflect compliments

Most of your meetings will end with a compliment. It feels good. They said they liked it!

Unfortunately, they're almost certainly lying. Not necessarily intentionally. They might want to be supportive or to protect your feelings. Or your excitement might be rubbing off on them.

Even if they really *do* like it, that data is still worthless. For example, venture capitalists (professional judges of the future) are wrong far more than right. If even a VC's opinion is probably wrong, what weight could that of some random guy's possibly have?

With the exception of industry experts who have built very similar businesses, opinions are worthless. You want facts and commitments, not compliments.

The best way to escape the misinformation of compliments is to avoid them completely by not mentioning your idea. If they happen anyway, you need to deflect the compliment and get on with the business of gathering facts and commitments.

Before we look at how to properly deflect compliments, here's what happens when you take them at face value:

A bad conversation:

You: "...And that's it. It's like X for Y, but better because of Z." *Bam!*
Totally nailed that pitch.

Them: "That's really cool. I love it." *How is this even relevant to me?*
(Compliment)

You: “It’s going to totally change the way you work. We’re predicting cost savings of 35%.” *I am so great.*

Them: “Sounds terrific. Keep me in the loop.” *I can’t believe I keep agreeing to these startup pitches. (Compliment + stalling tactic)*

You: “Awesome, thanks.” *I’m just like Steve Jobs. Except more handsome.*

You: (Back at the office) “That meeting went really well. They said they loved it! In fact, everybody loves it. I really think we’ve finally found our big idea. We’ve found something people want.” *It’s margarita time!*

Your Team: (6 months later) “Why do we have zero customers? I thought you said everybody loved it?” *Wasn’t this your job?*

You: “I don’t know, I talked to like a thousand people. I must have missed one of their buying criteria. Don’t worry, I’ll go talk to them some more and we’ll get it next time.” *Dooooooooomed.*

Let’s try that again while properly deflecting the confounding compliments:

A good conversation:

You: “...And that’s it. It’s like X for Y, but better because of Z.” *Rats, I just slipped into pitch mode. Let’s try to recover this and learn something.*

Them: “That’s really cool. I love it.” *How is this even relevant to me? (Compliment)*

You: “Whoops — really sorry about that — I got excited and started pitching. Listen: you guys seem to be doing a good job in this space — do you mind if I ask how you’re dealing with this stuff at the moment?” *That compliment made me suspicious. Let’s deflect it and find out whether they’re a potential customer or are just trying to get rid of me.*

Them: “What? Oh, well, sure. We’ve got a couple people who manage

the process just to make sure we're all in sync, and then we use Excel and a lot of emails to keep it all moving. Anyway, I really like your idea. I'm sure it will do well." *If you want facts, here they are, but your idea still isn't a good fit for me and there's no way I'm going to express an interest in buying (notice the sneaky compliment at the end).*

You: "I haven't heard of anyone solving it quite like that — that's interesting. Can you talk me through how it actually all fits together?" *Let's ignore & deflect that compliment to focus on the fact that they're spending a lot of money to solve this. Two full time staff!? I didn't know it was worth this much.*

Them: (More delicious workflow data)

You: "What sort of difficulties have come up with that solution?" *This is a bit generic and isn't the world's greatest question, but I'm trying to find an anchor to learn about workflow inefficiencies and bumps. When I find one, I'll dig around that signal with more follow-ups.*

Them: (Even more workflow and alternate solution data)

If we're early in the learning process, the meeting could end here quite happily. We have the learning we came for. If we were slightly later-stage and already had a product, we might continue by zooming in and pushing for commitments or sales.

Remember though: you don't need to end up with what you wanted to hear in order to have a good conversation. You just need to get to the truth. Here's a good conversation with a solid negative result.

A good (negative) conversation:

Them: "That's really cool. I love it." *Compliment.*

You: "How are you dealing with this stuff at the moment?" *Deflect that compliment and get to the real facts.*

Them: “Oh, it’s really not that big of a deal for us. We kind of just ignore it.” *The implications of the problem are non-existent so I’m not in the market for a solution.*

You can always be happy with a conversation like the above. You saw through the false compliment and found the facts behind the mirage. If the conversation is going well, I’d try to have them talk me through their process anyway so I can try to figure out whether it’s an industry wide non-problem or something specific to their particular situation.

Did you notice that in the conversations above, practically every response contains a sneaky compliment? They are pervasive, constantly trying to trick us into thinking the conversation “went well”.

Ignoring compliments should be easy, but it’s not. We so desperately want to hear them that we are often tricked into registering them as positive data points instead of vacuous fibs. Sometimes it’s easier to spot the symptoms than to notice the original compliment.

Symptoms (in the meeting):

- “Thanks!”
- “I’m glad you like it.”

Symptoms (back at the office):

- “That meeting went really well.”
- “We’re getting a lot of positive feedback.”
- “Everybody I’ve talked to loves the idea.”

All of these are warning signs. If you catch yourself or your teammates saying something like this, try to get specific. Why did that person like the idea? How much money would it save him? How would it fit into his life? What else has he tried which failed to solve his problem? If you don’t know, then you’ve got a compliment instead of real data.

Rule of thumb: Compliments are the fool’s gold of customer learning: shiny,

distracting, and entirely worthless.

Anchor fluff

Fluff comes in 3 cuddly shapes:

- Generic claims ("I usually", "I always", "I never")
- Future-tense promises ("I would", "I will")
- Hypothetical maybes ("I might", "I could")

When someone starts talking about what they “always” or “usually” or “never” or “would” do, they are giving you generic and hypothetical fluff. Just follow The Mom Test and bring them back to specifics in the past. Ask when it last happened, for them to talk you through it, how they solved it, and what else they tried.

The world’s most deadly fluff is: “I would definitely buy that.”

It just sounds so *concrete*. As a founder, you desperately want to believe it’s money in the bank. But folks are wildly optimistic about what they would do in the future. They’re always more positive, excited, and willing to pay in the imagined future than they are once it arrives.

The first startup I worked at fell for the “I would definitely buy that” trap and subsequently lost about 10 million bucks. They mistook fluffy future promises and excited compliments for commitment, wrongly believed they had proven themselves right, and wildly over-invested.

The worst type of fluff-inducing question you can ask is, “Would you ever?” Of course they *might*. Someday. That doesn't mean they will. Fluff-inducing questions include:

- “Do you ever...”

- “Would you ever...”
- “What do you usually...”
- “Do you think you...”
- “Might you...”
- “Could you see yourself...”

You don’t need to avoid these questions 100% of the time. They aren’t exactly toxic. It’s just that the responses to them are useless. The mistake is in valuing the answers, not in asking the questions. In fact, sometimes these questions can help the tempo when you’re transitioning into more concrete questioning. Here’s an example.

Transitioning from a fluffy question to a concrete one:

You: “Do you ever X?” *A fluff-inducing question.*

Them: “Oh yeah, all the time.” *A fluffy answer which has no value in itself, but which we can anchor from.*

You: “When’s the last time that happened?” *We use the Mom Test and ask for concrete examples in the past.*

Them: “Two weekends ago.” *We’ve successfully anchored the fluff and are ready to get real facts now instead of generics and hypotheticals.*

You: “Can you talk me through that?” *Back to asking good questions.*

To use a more tangible example, let’s say you’re designing some sort of inbox management tool:

A good conversation, anchoring generic fluff:

Them: “I’m an ‘Inbox 0’ zealot. It’s totally changed my life.” *A generic (e.g. fluffy) claim.*

You: “Haha, nice. I’m an ‘Inbox 0’ failure. What’s your inbox at right

now?” *Let’s get specific to see if this fluff holds up.*

Them: “Looks like about ten that have come in since this morning.”
Facts!

You: “Okay wow, so you are on top of things. I have like 200 right now. When’s the last time it totally fell apart for you?” *He’s still claiming to be on top of his email, so I’m going to look for concrete examples where he wasn’t.*

Them: “Ug, 3 weeks ago. I was travelling and the internet at the hotel totally didn’t work. It took me like 10 days to get back on track.”

You: “Can you talk me through how you handled it?” *Successfully anchored — now we’re talking about what actually happens instead of what “usually” happens.*

In this case, we took the generic claim, “My inbox is always under control” and added the important caveat: “Except when it’s not, in which case it’s a total nightmare to recover from.” While using generics, people describe themselves as who they want to be, not who they actually are. You need to get specific to bring out the edge cases.

Let’s say you’re building a mobile loyalty app to help stores give deals and discounts to their most loyal customers and you hear the guy in line in front of you complaining:

A bad conversation (pitching and accepting fluff):

Them: “Which idiot decided it was a good idea to make me carry around a thousand cafe loyalty cards?”

You: “Whoa! Hey! I’m building a mobile app to help stores give out discounts to their most loyal customers so you’d never need to carry paper cards again. Do you think you would use something like that?”
This is pretty much as bad of a question as you can find. You’ve revealed your ego and asked a “would you ever” question. You’re begging for a false positive.

Them: “Heck yes, it's about time! I would definitely use that.” *Fluffy hypothetical future promise!*

By switching into pitch mode, we just wasted a perfectly good opportunity for learning and instead got a fistful of fluff. Let's try again.

A good conversation:

Them: “What idiot decided it was a good idea to make me carry around a thousand cafe loyalty cards?”

You: “It's crazy, right? My wallet is like two feet thick. Hey — have you ever tried any of those loyalty apps for your phone?” *Anchor to past behaviours.*

Them: “Those exist?” *Perhaps my rage is misplaced...*

You: “Yeah, I'm sure you've seen the little signs for that one in the campus cafe.”

Them: “Oh yeah, I remember that. I'm always kind of in a rush.” *This is a nice bit of customer insight about their state of mind and circumstances when you're trying to advertise to them.*

You: “Why don't you download it now?” *If someone's being flaky, put them to a decision. If they don't care enough to try solving their problem already, they aren't going to care about your solution.*

Them: “I'll do it next time.” *Not a real problem.*

You can't help but laugh when you hear this one. “Someone should definitely make an X!” “Have you looked for an X?” “No, why?” “There are like 10 different kinds of X.” “Well I didn't really need it anyway.”

Long story short, that person is a complainer, not a customer. They're stuck in

the la-la-land of imagining they're the sort of person who finds clever ways to solve the petty annoyances of their day.

Beyond rousting some poor soul's consumeristic hypocrisy, anchoring the fluff can also yield useful signals:

You: "...Have you ever tried any of those loyalty apps for your phone?"

Them: "Yeah, I downloaded a couple of them. You need a different one for every chain. I don't want a hundred apps clogging up my phone any more than I want a bunch of cards in my wallet."

So he's an actively searching potential user, but we'd need to get critical mass with the stores he goes to before he'll be happy. Maybe we could take over a small university town first. Or he might say:

Them: "I looked into it, but you only end up getting like a 10% discount. That seems less like a loyalty reward and more like a cheap way for them to collect a bunch of data about me."

So he was on the fence, but needs better perks. Maybe we could find a way to force merchants into deeper discounts like Groupon was able to do. He also has privacy concerns. Or he could respond with:

Them: "Have you ever actually tried using that app? It's abysmal. It takes me longer to find the stupid button than to buy my coffee."

So all we need to do (for this particular user) is to out-execute and simplify. We could try to be the Instagram to their flickr.

The list goes on. There are tons of useful responses you can get. Even learning that the person is a non-customer is useful. To get toward this truth, you just need to reject their generic claims, incidental complaints, and fluffy promises. Instead, anchor them toward the life they already lead and the actions they're already taking.

Dig beneath ideas

Entrepreneurs are always drowning in ideas. We have too many ideas, not too few. Still, folks adore giving us more. At some point during a good conversation, the person you're talking to may “flip” to your side of the table. This is good news. They are excited and see the potential, so they'll start listing tons of ideas, possibilities and feature requests.

Write them down, but don't rush to add them to your todo list. Startups are about focusing and executing on a single, scalable idea rather than jumping on every good one which crosses your desk.

Let's say you're mid-conversation when this idea drops:

Them: “Are you guys going to be able to sync to Excel? I really think that's the a killer feature.”

What do you do here? The *wrong* response is to write “sync to Excel” on your todo list and then move on. That's the fast-lane to feature-creep. Instead, take a moment to dig into the motivations behind the request.

You: “What would syncing to Excel allow you to do?” *Maybe there's an easier way I can help you achieve the same thing.*

Them: “We've got all these legacy reports and we need to go through them every now and then. It would be nice to have everything in one place, you know?” *Don't worry, it's not a key buying criteria.*

Or they might say:

Them: “We've tried a bunch of these things and it's always the syncing that kills it.” *They're actively searching for solutions which are all missing a must-have feature — this could be your major differentiator if it's important enough*

to the segment and difficult enough for your competitors to emulate.

Or:

Them: “We have a decent workaround, as you saw. But it takes nearly a week at the end of each month to pull all the reports together in one place. It’s a big pain and totally stalls our work.” *They’ve cobbled together a home-brew solution, know it’s costing them money, and are ideally suited to become an early customer.*

At my first company Habit, we were adapting our product to sell to enterprise companies. MTV told me they needed analytics and reports for their campaigns.

I made a big mistake by accepting the feature request and face value and beginning the next meeting with a demo of our shiny new analytics dashboard (custom-built to solve their request, of course). They “ooh’ed” and “ahh’ed” appropriately and I left thinking we’d nailed it. It offered a zillion options and could carve up your data every which way. It was technically and aesthetically lovely.

Unfortunately, 90% of what we had built was irrelevant. We just didn’t know that yet.

They started calling every Friday asking me to email over a CSV (data file) of the week’s stats, so we added CSV export to the dashboard. Later, they asked for the report as a PDF instead of an CSV, so we obediently built PDF export. That took longer.

Salt was rubbed in the wound when, weeks later, they were *still* calling me every Friday and asking me to export and send over the same stupid analytics report. And every week, I would do so while politely explaining that, you know, we built this awesome self-serve dashboard so they could have their data whenever they wanted. And then, the next Friday, they’d call me.

It turned out we had entirely missed the real reason they’d been excited about

our analytics demo. In fact, we'd missed their whole motivation for wanting analytics.

The memory of being burned by feature requests was still fresh in my mind when they asked if we could add their logo and colours to the reports. I asked a couple incredulous questions about why in the world they wanted this feature when they didn't even use the ones I had already built, like an exasperated Dad at Christmas: "But you don't even play with the toys I bought for your birthday!"

So, I finally—and inadvertently—did the smart thing when I asked, "Why do you want this feature? What do branded reports get you that unbranded ones don't? It's the same data, right?" She replied, "Oh yeah, of course. I mean, nobody even reads these. Our clients just like to get something emailed to them at the end of every week and we think they'd be happier if it was a bit fancier, you know?" I knew exactly.

They had asked for analytics. We had jumped to the conclusion that they wanted to better understand their data. But they had really wanted a way to keep their own clients happy. If we had properly understood that, we would have built a totally different (and much simpler) set of features.

Consider how much easier our lives would have been if we'd understood the motivation behind the request. Instead of enabling the exploration and export of all campaign data, we could have just always exported the few high-level numbers a big brand manager would be interested in. And instead of a self-serve dashboard, we could set up a little scheduler to send it to them every Friday. In fact, we didn't even need to build a dashboard *at all*. And instead of coding up a layout and branding system for the reports, we could have had an intern hand-build them each week. All wasted because I didn't ask the right question. I sure wish I had those 3 months back!

When you hear a request, it's your job to understand the motivations which led to it. You do that by digging around the question to find the root cause. Why do they bother doing it this way? Why do they want the feature? How are they currently coping without the feature? Dig.

You should dig in the same way around emotional signals to understand where they're coming from. Just like feature requests, any strong emotion is worth exploring. Is someone angry? Dig. Embarrassed? Dig. Overjoyed? Dig!

I once overheard a founder interviewing someone at a cafe table next to me. The founder mentioned a problem and the guy responded, “Yeah, that’s pretty much the worst part of my day.” The founder jotted something down in his notebook, and then *moved on to the next question*. What!? It’s the worst part of his day and you’re not going to figure out why? That’s insane. You’ve got to dig.

Questions to dig into feature requests:

- “Why do you want that?”
- “What would that let you do?”
- “How are you coping without it?”
- “Do you think we should push back the launch add that feature, or is it something we could add later?”
- How would that fit into your day?

Questions to dig into emotional signals:

- “Tell me more about that.”
- “That seems to really bug you — I bet there’s a story here.”
- “What makes it so awful?”
- “Why haven’t you been able to fix this already?”
- “You seem pretty excited about that — it’s a big deal?”
- “Why so happy?”
- “Go on.”

These nudges don’t need to be complicated. People love talking about their opinions and emotions. Digging into a signal is basically just giving them permission to do a brain dump.

Rule of thumb: Ideas and feature requests should be understood, but not obeyed.

Stop seeking approval

As we've seen, compliments are dangerous and sneaky. So if we can nip them in the bud before they bloom, so much the better. The main source of compliment-creation is seeking approval, either intentionally or inadvertently.

Doing it intentionally is fishing for compliments. You aren't looking for contradictory information. You've already made up your mind, but need someone's blessing take the leap.

Symptoms of Fishing For Compliments:

- “I'm thinking of starting a business... so, do you think it will work?”
- “I had an awesome idea for an app — do you like it?”

Accidental approval-seeking is what I call “The Pathos Problem.” It happens when you expose your ego, leading people to feel they ought to protect you by saying nice things.

This comes up when you tell someone about an idea you obviously care about (which is pretty much always, since otherwise you wouldn't be asking). Even if you give folks permission to be honest and ask for criticism, they're still going to pull their punches.

Symptoms of The Pathos Problem:

- “So here's that top-secret project I quit my job for... what do you think?”
- “I can take it — be honest and tell me what you really think!”

To deal with The Pathos Problem, keep the conversation focused on the other person and ask about specific, concrete cases and examples. Once someone detects that your ego is on the line, they'll give you fluffy mis-truths and extra compliments. Disregard that data and use The Mom Test to re-focus on the person, their life, and their goals. People rarely lie about specific stuff that's

already happened, regardless of your ego.

Some famous entrepreneurs don't suffer the effects of The Pathos Problem, but you should ignore their advice since it's not reproducible if you aren't them. Guys like Elon Musk, Reid Hoffman, and Gordon Ramsey are all notorious for actively seeking negative feedback. It evidently works for them. But nobody is worried about hurting Elon, Reid, or Gordon's feelings. You and I must be more circumspect.

In short, remember that compliments are worthless and people's approval doesn't make your business better. Keep your idea and your ego out of the conversation until you're ready to ask for commitments.

Rule of thumb: If you've mentioned your idea, people will try to protect your feelings.

Cut off pitches

Being pitchy is the dark side of the "seeking approval" coin. Instead of inviting compliments by being vulnerable, you're demanding them by being annoying. It's when you hold someone hostage and won't let them leave until they've said they like your idea. Normally, compliments are well-intentioned. In this case, they're just trying to get you out of their office.

"Won't-take-no-for-an-answer" is generally a good quality for a founder to have. But when it creeps into a conversation that's meant to be about learning, it works against you.

Symptoms:

- "No no, I don't think you get it..."
- "Yes, but it also does this!"

If you slip into pitch mode, just apologise. You're excited about your idea.

That's good! Otherwise you wouldn't have taken this crazy leap in the first place. But suddenly, you find yourself five minutes into an enthusiastic monologue while the other person nods politely. That's bad. Once you start talking about your idea, they stop talking about their problems. Cut yourself off and say something like:

“Whoops—I just slipped into pitch mode. I’m really sorry about that—I get excited about these things. Can we jump back to what you were just saying? You were telling me that...”

If they say they really want to hear about what you're working on, promise that you'll tell them at the end of the meeting or loop them in for an early demo, and that you just want to talk a bit more about their stuff before biasing them with your idea.

Rule of thumb: Anyone will say your idea is great if you're annoying enough about it.

Talk less

You can't learn anything useful unless you're willing to spend a few minutes shutting up (even if you have something really smart to say).

After you introduce your idea (either intentionally or accidentally), they're going to begin a sentence with something like “So it's similar to...” or “I like it but...” It's tempting (and common) to interrupt and “fix” their understanding about how it's totally different than that competitor or it actually *does* do that thing they want.

Alternately, they'll raise a topic you have a really good answer to. For example, they'll mention how important security is, and you'll want to cut in and tell them how you've thought about all that already. This is also a mistake.

In both cases, the listener was about to give you a privileged glimpse into their mental model of the world. Losing that learning is a shame. You'll have the chance to fill them in later. Plus, it's annoying to people if they start trying to help you and you cut them off to correct them. Nobody likes a know-it-all!

Rule of thumb: The more you're talking, the worse you're doing.

The rest of the book

This is the end of the sample. I hope it's been helpful. If you liked it, you can buy the full book at: momtestbook.com

Beyond asking good questions and avoiding bad data, what else is covered in the full version?

Chapter 3: Asking important questions

Once we know about The Mom Test and start trying to ask non-biasing questions, sometimes we over-compensate and ask completely trivial ones. Chapter 3 is about find and focus on the world-rocking, business-ending, scary questions which matter. Otherwise you're just spinning your wheels.

Chapter 4: Keeping it casual

As a founder, time is one of your most precious resources. But setting up and commuting to meetings takes a ton of time. Chapter 4 is about how to strip all the formality from the process without damaging your learning. You end up with no meetings, no interview questions, and a much easier time. The conversations become so fast and lightweight that you can go to a industry meet-

up and leave with a dozen high-value customer conversations under your belt.

Chapter 5: Commitment and advancement

Once we've learned the key facts about our industry and customers, it's time to zoom in again and start revealing our idea and showing some product. The bad news is that this invites nefarious compliments. The *good* news is that since we have the beginnings of a product, we're now in a position to cut through the false positives by asking for commitments. Chapter 5 is about how to win at meetings.

Chapter 6: Finding conversations

Now that you know how to ask good questions and fix bad meetings, you know enough to have good customer conversations. Take this opportunity to go flex your conversational muscles and talk to some people. If you're scratching your own itch with this business, you likely already know your customers. Great! Go talk to them. But if you don't already know folks, where do these conversations and meetings come from?

Chapter 7: Choosing your customers

They say that startups don't starve, they drown. You never have too few options, too few leads, or too few ideas. You have too many. You get overwhelmed. You do a little bit of everything. When it comes to avoiding drowning and making faster progress, good customer segmentation is your best friend.

Chapter 8: Running the process

Even if you do everything else right, you can get bad results if you don't have the right process wrapped around your conversations. A common anti-pattern is for the business guy to go to all the meetings and subsequently tell the rest of the team what they should do. Bad idea. Chapter 8 is about what to do before, after, and during the meetings to ensure they move your business forward.

Chapter 9: Conclusion & cheatsheet

We'll end with few notes on the mindset startup founders, as well as a reference of the major tools, tips, and tactics we've talked about throughout the book.

Where do I get it?

The book covers all the big mistakes people make during customer conversations and how you can do better. I hope it will save you lots of time and money.

You can grab it at momtestbook.com. Thanks!