



Session 9 – Interviewing 101

Building a business like a scientist requires gathering evidence to validate or invalidate your ideas. In this video we are going to discuss a powerful tool for gathering evidence – customer discovery interviewing.

Customer discovery interviewing is a fancy term that's used to refer to having structured or planned conversations with people who fit your customer segment profile and might have the problem(s) you're trying to solve.

To prepare for your first round of customer discovery interviewing you need to do three things. First, you need to turn your customer and problem assumptions into falsifiable hypotheses. Second, you need to find some prospective customers to talk to. And third, you need to prepare a script to guide your conversation. Each of these tasks is important, so let's take a minute to drill down.

Turning your customer and problem assumptions into falsifiable hypotheses involves devising statements that can be demonstrated as valid or invalid based on evidence. For example, one of the startups that we've worked with believes that university students struggle to know what classes they need to take to fulfill their graduation requirements and therefore experience frustration. To test this assumption, the startup founders translated it into this testable hypothesis – 60% of all undergraduate students will express frustration with knowing what classes they need to take when asked to describe their dissatisfactions with the academic advising process.

Two important notes about this hypothesis. First, it specifies a success criterion; namely, that at least 60% of the target segment customers will exhibit the problem. This criterion was chosen based on the founders' best estimate of how many students would need to have the problem to make their business viable. Second, it implies the types of questions that should be asked to gather evidence. In this case, questions about experiences and frustrations with the academic advising process.

Once your assumptions about customers and their problems are turned into falsifiable hypotheses, the next step is to begin the process of finding prospective customers to talk to. You can do this by first listing the names of people you know who fit your profile of a typical customer. For example, list people who match on age, economic standing, lifestyle, motivations and preferences. Then, if you have less than 10 people on your list, ask your friends, parents, and teachers to help you identify additional prospects.

After you develop an initial list with at least 10 names, start reaching out to people to schedule interviews. Your message should focus on your need for their expertise and highly valued opinions. People like to help others and feel that their opinions are important, so if you ask in

the right way, then many will agree to help. Be sure to emphasize that you are NOT going to try to sell them anything; your first conversation should be about listening to their experiences and problems. If you struggle to get people to agree to be interviewed, try changing how you are asking and what you are asking for; in other words, experiment until you find a way of asking that gets prospective customers to agree to give you some of their valuable time.

As the date for your first scheduled interview approaches you'll want to be sure to develop a script to guide your conversation. For your initial customer discovery interviews your script should have six distinct parts:

1. Welcome
2. Customer characteristics questions
3. Exploration of customer experiences
4. Customer-problem fit
5. Exploration of customers' world view
6. Wrap up and ask

The "welcome" portion of your conversation is meant to establish rapport and disarm politeness training. Be sure to thank the people you're interviewing for taking the time to help you and also encourage them to be totally honest and not worry about hurting your feelings. Remember, you are gathering evidence so you need them to be unbiased in expressing their opinions.

The "customer characteristics" portion of your conversation should focus on a few questions that will let you know whether the person you're talking to is a member of the customer segment you believe has the problem you're trying to solve. If they aren't part of the segment, that's okay. They might have some great insights to share, but you'll want to exclude them when determining whether the evidence you've gathered validates or invalidates your hypotheses.

The "exploration of customer experiences" portion of the conversation should give the person you're talking to a clear sense of the problem context and include a few broad questions about their experiences. For example, if I was writing a script to test the hypothesis about frustrations with academic advising mentioned previously, then my script would guide me to say something like "We believe that there's a lot of room for improving the current academic advising process for undergraduates,. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves in developing solutions, we want to make sure we're solving a real problem. Please tell me about your experiences with academic advising." I'd then be ready to follow up with "What major frustrations, if any, have you experienced?"

The "customer-problem fit" portion of the conversation should focus directly on questions related to your hypotheses. Again continuing the previous example, I might say "We've heard from other students that not knowing what classes to take to meet graduation requirements is a major frustration. Does this resonate with you?"

The "exploration of the customers' world view" portion of the conversation should focus on asking people to "tell you more" about any major problems or point of pain that you've uncovered by talking to them. It should also include questions about how they are solving the problem(s) or addressing the pain today, as these questions will give you a clear sense of the alternatives that your solution will be competing against if you decide to move forward.

The final portion of the conversation should include a “wrap up and ask”. The wrap up should thank the person for his/her time and valuable opinions. It should ask them whether they’d be interested in hearing about the solution when you have something ready and whether there are other helpful people they can refer you to. A prospective customers’ willingness to hear more about the solution and refer others provides additional evidence about their interest in what you’re working on.

To close this video, I’d like to offer a few general tips for customer discovery interviewing.

- Meet face to face and pay careful attention to body language

Interviewing face to face is important because it gives you additional nonverbal feedback from body language. Be sure to note excitement or disinterest in their tone of voice, whether they are leaning in, and other cues that you simply can’t get from a phone call or survey.

- Be prepared to really listen

Initial customer discovery interviews are NOT about you talking about the product or service you’re envisioning or pitching your idea; On the contrary, they’re about listening to prospective customers and developing a rich, evidence-based understanding of customer problems.

- The interview script is a guide; be prepared to drill down

A good script is just a guide for the conversation. Practice with it before interviewing and get comfortable with it, but be prepared to go off script and drill down. “That’s interesting. Tell me more about that.” Is always a good way to probe interesting customer comments to elicit additional insight.

- Document results immediately

It’s important to note responses relevant to your hypotheses and write down as much detail as possible immediately after the interview to ensure accuracy and capture nuance.

- Get psyched to hear things you don’t want to hear

No one wants to gather evidence that proves their idea is invalid; however, it’s way better to fail fast and cheap than it is to spend a lot of time and money building an entire business only to discover that no one really cares about the problem you want to solve.

Remember, as long as you’re learning, you will be moving forward in your search for a viable business model. The objective is to see how quickly you can change your business model guesses into facts based on evidence.

Once you succeed in using customer discovery interviewing to confirm that there is a segment of customers who have a big problem that needs a novel solution, you'll be a lot closer to launching a successful business.

A great quote from Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart stores, illustrates this point -

"There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire anybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else."