Twitter Thread by Ravencroft



Ravencroft
@ProductMonad

"Talking to customers is a superpower."

But nobody actually teaches how to do it.

The Mom Test by @robfitz is a priceless guide for how to talk to (and actually learn from!) customers.

Here's the blueprint to take to your next interview:

First rule of thumb: customer conversations are bad by default.

It's your job to fix them.

Practically everyone I've seen talk to customers 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).

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.

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, help us improve our business.

The Mom Test
Rob Fitzpatrick

Use The Mom Test to make customer interviews better.

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

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

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.

Mom is unable to lie to us if we never talk 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 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.

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For customer conversations to really matter, you need to ask questions that matter.

You need to search out the world-rocking scary questions you've been unintentionally shrinking from.

In addition to ensuring you aren't asking trivialities, you also need to search out the world-rocking scary questions you've been unintentionally shrinking from. The best way to find them is with thought experiments. Imagine that the company has failed and ask why that happened. Then imagine it as a huge success and ask what had to be true to get there. Find ways to learn about those critical pieces..

You can tell it's an important question when its answer could completely change (or disprove) your business. If you get an unexpected answer to a question and it doesn't affect what you're doing, it wasn't a terribly important question to begin with.

Every time you talk to someone, you should be asking at least one question which has the potential to destroy your currently imagined business.

There's no easy solution to making yourself face and ask these questions. I once heard the general life advice that, for unpleasant tasks, you should imagine what you would have someone else do if you were delegating it. Then do that.

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More specifically, make sure every meeting counts by planning your list of 3 big questions.

Pre-plan the 3 most important things you want to learn from any given type of person (e.g. customers, investors, industry experts, key hires, etc). Update the list as your questions change.

Don't stress too much about choosing the "right" important questions. They will change. Just choose whatever seems murkiest or most important right now. Answer those will give you firmer footing and a better sense of direction for your next 3.

Your time is valuable; don't feel obliged to repeat questions you already have solid data on. Pick up where you left off and keep filling in the picture.

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During each conversation, watch out for three types of bad data:

- Compliments
- Fluff (generics, hypothetical, and the future)
- Ideas

There are three types of bad data:

Compliments
Most of your meetings will end with compliments. It feels good. They said they liked it! Unfortunately, they're almost certainly lying.

With the exception of industry experts ... opinions are worthless. You want facts and commitments, not compliments.

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)

Ideas
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.

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Once you notice bad data, get back on track by:

- deflecting compliments
- anchoring fluff
- digging beneath ideas

Deflect Compliments
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. Folks tend not to lie about specific stuff that's already happened, regardless of your ego.

Anchoring Fluff
When someone starts talking about what they "always" or "usually" or "never" or "would" do, they are giving you generic and hypothetical fluff. Ask good questions that obey The Mom Test to anchor them back to specifics in the past. Ask when it last happened or for them to talk you through it. Ask how they solved it and what else they tried.

Digging Beneath Ideas
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.

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Another pitfall to avoid: zooming in too fast.

A great way to miss the important questions is by obsessing over ultimately unimportant nuances.

Another way to miss the important questions is by obsessing over ultimately unimportant nuances. We let ourselves get stuck in the details before understanding the big picture.

Everyone has problems they know about, but don't actually care enough about to fix.

Zooming in too quickly on a super-specific problem before you understand the rest of the customers life can irreparably confuse your learnings.

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Keep it casual during your conversations.

Learning about a customer and their problems works better as a quick and casual chat than a long, formal meeting.

Learning about a customer and their problems works better as a quick and casual chat than a long, formal meeting.

We're going to strip the pomp and circumstance and reduce it from a meeting to a chat. If we do it right, they won't even know we were talking about our idea.

Early on, it only takes 5 minutes (maximum) to learn whether a problem exists and is important.

Once you have a product and the meetings take on a more sale-oriented feel, you'll want to start carving out clear blocks of 30ish minutes.

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Who should you be talking to?

Good customer segments are a who-where pair.

Before we can server everyone, we have to serve someone. But in the moment, choosing a really specific customer segment just feels like we're losing all the other options. And that loss is painful. Remind yourself that you'll get to the whole world eventually. But you've got to start somewhere specific.

Getting specific about your ideal customers allows you to filter out all the noise which comes from everyone else.

Without a tight enough segment, you can never prove yourself neither right nor wrong. You can never say that a new idea has really worked or totally failed. If you pay attention to too many customer segments there will pretty much always be someone it worked for. But making a so-so product for a bunch of audiences isn't quite the same as making an incredible product for one.

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Still not sure where to find your customers?

Keep slicing your segment into smaller pieces until you do.

Customer slicing. Start with a broad segment and ask:

- Within this group, which type of person would want it most?
- Would everyone within this group buy/use it, or only some?
- Why does that sub-set want it? (e.g. what is their specific problem)
- Does everyone in the group have that motivation or only some?
- What additional motivations are there?
- Which other types of people have these motivations?

You'll have two sets of answers: the first is a collection of demographic groups and the second is a set of goals/motivations. Some will still be fairly generic. Go back through the generic ones and keep slicing.

Now that we have a bunch of who-where pairs, we can decide who to start with based on who seems most: profitable or big, easy to reach, personally rewarding.

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Rob Fitzpatrick

But where do these conversations and meetings come from?

What if you don't already know folks?

Hustle for cold conversations to beget warm ones.

Drumming up good conversations from cold leads is hard. It's doable and sometimes you have no choice, but it's far from ideal.

The goal of cold conversations is to stop having them. You hustle together the first one or two from wherever you can, and then, if you treat people's time respectfully and are genuinely trying to solve their problem, those cold conversations start turning into warm intros. The snowball is rolling.

We should look for ways to separate ourselves from the crowd so they can find us. Beyond saving vast sums of time and frustration, bringing people to you also makes them take you more seriously and want to help you more.

Warm intros are the goal. Conversations are infinitely easier when you get an intro through a mutual friend that establishes your credibility and reason for being there.

Rule of thumb: Kevin Bacon's 7 degrees of separation applies to customer conversations. You can find anyone you need if you ask for it a couple times.

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Once you've found someone to talk to, set up the meeting with:

- Vision
- Framing
- Weakness
- Pedestal
- Ask

Sometimes a proper meeting can't be avoided. In those cases, the right explanation and framing can do wonders.

The framing format I like has five key elements.

1. You're an entrepreneur trying to solve horrible problem X, usher in wonderful vision Y, or fix stagnant industry Z. Don't mention your idea.

2. Frame expectations by mentioning what stage you're at and, if it's true, that you don't have anything to sell.

3. Show weakness and give them a chance to help by mentioning the specific problem that you're looking for answers on. This will also clarify that you're not a time waster.

4. Put them on a pedestal by showing how much they, in particular, can help.

5. Explicitly ask for help.

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Once the meeting starts, you have to grab the reins.

Once the meeting starts, you have to grab the reins or it's liable to turn into them drilling you on your idea, which is exactly what you don't want (since that forces you into a pitching situation, thus destroying your learning.)

To set the meeting framing agenda, I basically repeat what I said in the email and then immediately drop into the first question.

These conversations are easy to screw up. As such, you need to be the one in control. You set the agenda, you keep it on topic, and you propose next steps. Don't be a jerk about it, but do have a plan for the meeting and be assertive about keeping it on track.

Once again, you can only pull this off if you have prepared your list of 3 big learning goals and have an idea of some possible next steps and commitments that you can ask for if the meeting goes well.

In terms of mindset, don't go into these discussions looking for customers. It creates a needy vibe and forfeits the position of power. Instead, go in search of industry and customer advisors. You are just trying to find helpful, knowledgeable people who are excited about your idea.

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How many meetings do you need?

Under perfect circumstances, you might only need 3-5.

More typically, the answer probably lies closer to 10.

How many meetings? Under perfect circumstances... it might only take 3-5 conversations to confirm what you already believe. But you usually won't get so lucky. If you've run more than 10 conversations and are still getting results that are all over the map, then it's possible your customer segment is too vague, which means you're mashing together feedback from multiple different types of customers.

It's not about "how many" meetings. It's about having enough for you to really understand your customers.

The overall process of learning is never finished, but in most cases you should be able to answer almost any individual question about your business or your customers (and then move onto new ones) within a week.

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Once you've learned the facts of your industry and customers, start pushing for advancement and commitments to separate dead leads from real customers.

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.

Meetings either succeed of fail.

It took me years to learn that there's no such thing as a meeting which just "went well." Every meeting either succeeds or fails. You've lost the meeting when you leave with a compliment or a stalling tactic. A meeting has succeeded when it ends with a commitment to advance to the next step.

If you leave with worthless wishy washiness, I'd bet you're falling for one (or both) of the following traps:

1. You're asking for their opinion about your idea (e.g. you're fishing for compliments)
2. You're not asking for a clear commitment or next steps

Rule of thumb: if you don't know what happens next after a product or sales meeting, the meeting was pointless.

The real failure #2: not even asking. I never consider rejection to be a real failure. But not asking certainly is.

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Even if you do everything else right, you can get bad results without the right process wrapped around your conversations.

Don’t neglect prep, note taking, and review.

Even if you do everything else right, you can get bad results without the right process wrapped around your conversations. Getting the most out of conversations has three parts: prepping, reviewing, and taking good notes.

Your most important preparation work is to ensure you know your current list of 3 big questions. If you've already learned the facts of your customer and industry, then you should also know what commitment and next steps you are going to push for at the end of the meeting.

After a conversation, just review your notes with your team and update your beliefs and big three questions as appropriate.

Taking good notes is the best way to keep your team (and investors and advisors) in the loop.

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Final word: don't overthink it.

Get out and use this information!

Don't spend a week prepping for meetings; spend an hour and then go talk to people.

Anything more is stalling.

This stuff is fast. The point is to make your business move faster, not slower.

Don't spend a week prepping for meetings; spend an hour and then go talk to people. Anything more is stalling.

Don't spend months doing full-time customer conversations before beginning to move on a product. Spend a week, maybe two. Get your bearings and then give them something to commit to.

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If you enjoyed these tips:

1. Follow me @GoodStrategyHQ for more threads on strategy for resource constrained businesses

2. Quote tweet the top tweet with one takeaway you're going to use immediately

3. Read about what this account is about. https://t.co/Xu41d2QuBm

> I'm starting something new: product and go-to-market strategy ideas specifically for resource constrained businesses.
>
> Lots get written for startups and enterprises. We're going to focus on an even tougher segment: the middle market.
>
> — Ravencroft (@ProductMonad) August 27, 2021

Big thanks to @robfitz for The Mom Test.

If you made it this far, you should definitely buy the book.

The above is a great summary, but it's hard compress a book like The Mom Test without losing lots of important bits.

It's just so dense with actionable stuff.