

Review Article

Practical Skills to Get the Most from Customer Interviews for Entrepreneurs and Startups

John Michael York*

Rady School of Management, University of California, San Diego, USA

***Corresponding author:** John Michael York, Rady School of Management, University of California, San Diego, USA.
Tel: +1-8052382485; Email: jlyork@ucsd.edu

Citation: York JM (2019) Practical Skills to Get the Most from Customer Interviews for Entrepreneurs and Startups. Arch Bus Adm Manag 2: 126. DOI: 10.29011/2642-3243.1000126

Received Date: 08 May, 2019; **Accepted Date:** 17 May, 2019; **Published Date:** 28 May, 2019

Abstract

Customer discovery, which entrepreneurs use as part of the lean startup methodology, is a critical process for entrepreneurs to identify customers and their needs successfully. It also allows these individuals to learn and make more effective decisions. This effort requires entrepreneurs to develop practical and successful interviewing skills and to minimize any biases they may bring to the process.

This paper builds on an initial publication that explores interviewing strategies. This piece focuses on critical tactical pieces involved with interviewing. First, it will cover customer selection and engagement. Second, it will review the interview process, including documentation and analysis considerations. Third, this discussion will focus on questions. Fourth, it raises awareness in interviewing and question biases, which can lead to misleading findings. Finally, the paper will provide examples of effective and ineffective types of questions.

In the end, interviewing should focus on customers and their needs, and not about one's company and its products. When used correctly, effective questioning and interviewing tactics will foster learning and lead to valuable insights that guide data-driven decision-making for entrepreneurs to reduce risks, to confirm their products and business models, and to aid scale-up of their ventures.

Keywords: Customer discovery; Entrepreneurs; Interview; Interview analysis; Interview biases; Interview questions; Lean startup; Startup

Introduction

Interviewing is an essential component of the customer discovery process that the lean startup methodology uses [1]. Unfortunately, many entrepreneurs focus on their products, and not on their customers. They try to fit a product to a particular market or customer. As a result, they fail to gather valuable information and learnings that can make or break the success of the product and firm. In the end, they develop products that fall short of addressing customer requirements. Such outcomes are because many entrepreneurs lack strong customer discovery skills and processes, in which proper interviewing techniques are essential.

Investigators of the lean startup process report challenges concerning the proper use of questions, the gathering of insights, and the interpretation of the interview findings by entrepreneurs [2,3]. In examining how Indian startups implement of the lean startup methodology, Rao highlights the difficulties involved with obtaining and conducting productive interviews [3]. Chen and colleagues discuss several cognitive biases with Indonesian entrepreneurs when adopting the "Get-Out-of-the-Building" approach [2].

A previous paper on this topic of interviewing and customer discovery focused on the strategic aspects of planning and conducting interviews [4]. This publication examined the four-quadrant planning approach, along with the "FUNNEL," and the "SPEECH" techniques. These provided useful frameworks for entrepreneurs to use.

This paper builds on this initial publication that explores interviewing strategies. It focuses on critical tactical pieces involved with interviewing: (1) customer selection and engagement; (2) the interview process, documentation, and analysis; (3) questions; (4) interviewing and question biases; and (4) practical examples of effective and ineffective questions as identified in Rob Fitzpatrick’s book, *The Mom Test* [5].

Targeting the Right Customers

Identifying the right customer or customers is essential for conducting compelling interviews. When entrepreneurs go out to interview, they do not necessarily focus on the appropriate individual or persona who defines the target audience. This point is critical because the target sample should be representative. Sometimes, the entrepreneur fails to recognize that multiple customers (and personas) may participate in deciding on a particular product or service. This consideration is especially important in the “Business-to-Business” (B2B) and and the “Business-to-Consumer” (B2C) setting. The interviewer needs to consider the different roles with respect to the purchase process. These include the beneficiary, the influencer, the saboteur (e.g., a competitor), and the decision maker. Hence, one needs to engage such players, particularly the beneficiaries and decision makers, and consider each stakeholder’s situation and motivation when interviewing these individuals. Such can help to optimize the customer acquisition process and the user experience, which is essential to loyalty and repeated purchases.

Getting the Interview

Once the interviewer identifies the target customers, one needs to engage them to conduct the “Painful” interview. Many times, this effort will include some communication to set up a time. The invitation can be via a telephone message, email, or letter.

Engagement communications involve three parts, which should take only thirty seconds or less (Figure 1). Part 1 sets the frame. It can include a “Hook.” The interviewer should personalize the opening with the customer’s name and including one’s own name and position in the first sentence. One should state how he/she obtained the interviewee’s name (e.g., referral or expert opinion) or a relevant, insightful question to prompt interest. The frame then covers the relevant information and the interview’s purpose. Remember, this opening needs to be concise. Part 2 covers what the interview would entail, including the time needed, a high-level description of the topic, and whether compensation is involved. One should try to keep the proposed interview times short (e.g., 10-15 minutes for uncompensated and 30 minutes for compensated interviews). Part 3 puts forth an action step. One should ask about availability or, even better, propose a few times from which the interviewee can choose. The interviewer should include one’s contact info (e.g., a telephone number, email, text number, or an RSVP weblink) or a response. The bottom line is to make this initial engagement relevant, concise, and easy to respond.

<p>Elements</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How connected 2) Purpose 3) Relevant background 4) Time involved 5) Key questions/topics (Depends) 6) Ask for or propose times 7) Have a call to action 8) Make response easy- calls, text, and email <p>Tips</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Digestible in 30 seconds 2) Point out the meeting is not a sales call 	<p>Email Example</p> <p>To: jo.white@accountingpros.com From: AlexSmith@accountingsolutions.com</p> <p>Jo,</p> <p>My name is Alex Smith, CEO of startup Accounting Solutions. Jim Jones, a colleague of yours, recommended that I speak with you. I started this entrepreneurial journey due to personal frustration related to expense reporting. I am trying to figure out how to make it less problematic for firms.</p> <p>I would enjoy learning from you about your experience concerning expense reporting management, some of the challenges you and others have faced, and advice you would offer.</p> <p>Would you be available for 20-30 minutes for a short informational session? I am looking to gain some insights from you and not to sell anything.</p> <p>Can you let me know when would be a good time to connect in your office, for coffee outside, or via a video conference (Skype or Zoom)? You can let me know via AlexSmith@accountingsolutions.com or at 949-458-1122 (live or text).</p> <p>Sincerely, Alex Smith</p>
	<p>Email Example</p> <p>Hi Jo,</p> <p>My name is Alex Smith, CEO of startup Accounting Solutions. I am exploring how companies handle their expense workflow. Jim Jones, a colleague, a colleague of yours, recommended that I speak with you as you have expertise in this area.</p> <p>Would you be available for 20-30 minutes for a short informational session? I am looking to gain some insights from you and not to sell anything.</p> <p>Can you let me know when would be a good time to connect? You can reach me at 949-458-1122 (live or text) or via AlexSmith@accountingsolutions.com.</p> <p>Thank you Alex</p>

Figure 1: Engagement Communications [6].

Sometimes one can even engage an individual on an ad hoc basis, such as at a convention, meeting, mall, or on the street. Such events or opportunities offer a fertile ground for conducting multiple customer interviews. When engaging customers in these settings, one should remember to ask whether they have five to ten minutes or whether the present time is suitable for an interview. People are busy going from place to place; they feel rushed. Therefore, interviewers speed through these conversations to accommodate. If one can get the interview, remember to say within the promised time frame. Sometimes the interviewer can get five minutes to gather some insights, but not a full interview. Hence, if further discussion is needed, one should ask about a follow-up time for a little more detailed conversation.

Conducting the Interview

The interview consists of several parts— a beginning, middle, and end. Ideally, one should conduct it in person to watch for non-verbal signals in response to the questions asked and to ensure that the interviewee is not distracted. If not live, then the interviewer should try to use some Internet-based platform to allow for a face-to-face exchange. Useful platforms include Skype, Zoom, or Facetime. Zoom is particularly attractive because the interviewer can record the interview to the cloud and receive in a few hours MP4 and transcript files [7].

The interview should involve one interviewee at a time. This approach prevents “Groupthink” or the overt influence by

vocal or more senior individuals within a group. The individual interview approach allows for a diversity of ideas and opinions and customization of the interview to each interview, both of which can lead to better results in less time for each interview.

When starting off the interview, one should thank the individual and frame the purpose of the conversation. This approach helps the interviewer to build rapport and establish a frame of reference for the discussion. In the beginning, the interviewer might start with simple screening and “Softball” questions to keep it human. The interviewer should focus on the first two “FUNNELS,” the target audience and the individual’s attitudes concerning the topic area, to determine whether one has the right customer, and to build rapport.

As the interview progresses, the interviewer will want to expand to more significant questions. One should use the middle “FUNNELS” to delve into interviewee’s experiences, “Pain Points,” “Job-to-Do,” and solutions that the interviewee. During this portion, the interviewer might ask the interviewee to tell a story, propose solutions, and identify priorities. As the conversation progresses, the interviewer should explore the interviewee’s experience, efforts to address the problem, and requirements for a potential solution. Great questions might include the following: (1) Tell me about the last time it happened?; (2) How large of a pain is this one?; (3) How has the interviewee addressed the problem; and (4) What would the solution look like if the individual had a “Magic Wand,” blank piece of paper, or an iPhone wireframe.

During the interview, one should try to make it conversational. Griff Constable, the author of *Talking with Humans*, points out that this effort is critical to disarming the interviewee [6]. Knowing the topic helps the interviewer build credibility with the interviewee and make the interview more of a conversation; one is not just asking questions, but instead is conversing back and forth with the customer. As a result, the interviewee begins to feel more comfortable, lets one’s guard down, forgets about time, and enjoys the exchange.

As the discussion progresses along, the interviewer needs to listen actively. In doing so, one observes the interviewee’s body language and facial expressions, acknowledges points, urges for expansion of points, asks questions, and summarizes comments. Concerning body language, the interviewer should note when the interviewee is nodding or leaning in.

The interviewer should be empathetic and display the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. In essence, empathy allows the interviewer to step into the interviewee’s shoes and view things from another person’s point of view. It is critical for the entrepreneur who is the interviewer to step away from oneself and one’s product. Instead, one should dive into the interviewee’s life and challenges.

As part of an empathetic or “Painful” interview, one should respect the interviewee’s time. Thus, the interviewer needs to be watching the time (or have a partner who is doing so) to respect the interviewee’s time and to pace the interview. One can make the most of the time by planning out what key “FUNNELS” or questions to explore with the interviewee. To optimize the interview, the interviewer should not be talking too much, but instead framing and asking questions, rather than trying to “Pitch” the product (such efforts turn off the interviewee and result in misleading information). The interviewer can monitor time by using either the timer in one’s watch or smartphone.

During the interview, some individuals will go off on tangents, which can impact time. Sometimes the tangents provide useful insights. At other times, these responses may reflect the interviewee’s lack of clarity with the question or lack of desire to address the specific query. However, tangents can be challenging. The interviewer needs to work adeptly redirect the conversation towards the core questions by listening actively and diplomatically looking for places to segue back to the primary areas of discussion, while not being too brusque because such an action could shut down the interview. One can also use further follow up questions, called “Drill Downs,” to help discern the lack of desire or understanding, and redirect back to the primary flow of conversation. Another technique is to acknowledge the points as excellent insights to make a note of, thank the individual, and pivot back to the primary areas of discussion. One can also indicate that the interview can return to the topic a little later.

The interviewer successfully closes out the discussion by being mindful of a few essential wraps up actions. First, thank the interviewee. Second, try to summarize the critical takeaway points to confirm accuracy. Third, highlight any specific action points. Fourth, ask two crucial questions: (1) Is there any question I should have asked but did not?; and (2) Who else should I talk with (and could you extend the referral)? Both of these questions can lead to essential insights and additional references with a recommendation from a colleague. Finally, the interviewer should always send along a follow-up note to thank the interviewee and highlight any follow-up actions.

After the Interview: Documentation, Analysis, Application, and Communication

Following the interview, the interviewer needs to document, analyze, apply, and (5) communicate critical findings.

The first issue to address is that of taking notes. To aid documentation, one can utilize one of three strategies to take notes. First, if the conversation involves a live face-to-face interaction, the interviewer can record the interview with a digital audio recorder or on one’s smartphone. This approach is the “Gold standard.” It allows for a complete record for further review. The interviewer

can take the digital file and upload it to a transcription service, such as Rev.com, which can turn around the notes in 24 hours at \$1 per minute transcribed [8]. There are also several apps that the interviewer can use as well. If the interview is via the web, then check to see if one’s platform will record and transcribe. For example, with Zoom, an interviewer can record the engagement to the cloud and obtain a transcript along with the digital audiovisual file within a few hours [7]. However, if one is going to record the meeting, remember to obtain permission. In some states, such as in California, the taping an interview requires that the interviewer obtains the consent from the interviewee to record the engagement. Finally, make sure one’s recorder works and had adequate storage space and battery life.

The second technique involves taking notes. It is a useful approach, especially with *ad hoc* interviews. Taking notes helps with active listening. However, one needs to be aware of the bias of the interviewer in interpreting responses, and having to multitask can limit and bias this effort [2].

The third technique involves having two people. Many entrepreneurship educators encourage this approach, and McKinsey Consulting uses it [9]. It overcomes the previously mentioned interviewer’s bias, interpretation, and multitasking issues. It is helpful when one cannot record the interview as well. In this case, the notetaker can take more detailed notes, allow for an additional perspective, and make observations concerning the interviewee’s nonverbal responses. Still, with notetaking by a second individual, the potential for interpretation bias does exist [2]. Also, interviews with two people can sometimes intimidate and influence the interviewee’s responses.

An interviewer should document the interview quickly while it is still fresh in one’s mind. It would be ideal for fashioning a summary within a day. One approach is to write up a summary with headlines and bullet points, which McKinsey Consulting uses [9]. It contains an executive summary, which is followed by the expansion of each major bullet area. Generally, these summaries range from one and a half to three. The interviewer can then share the results rapidly with stakeholders, clients, and teammates for analytic and action purposes. Another pragmatic approach is to lay out the critical “FUNNEL” areas, put bullet responses under each, then tie in what learned and how applied (e.g., updating a Business Model Canvas [BMC] or Value Proposition Canvas [VPC]. A final approach is to use an interview summary template (Figure 2a) covering the functional, emotional, and social “Pains” and “Jobs-to-Do” and a debrief template (Figure 2b) to translate the interview learnings into a customer story.

(a) Interview Summary Worksheet Template

Item	Answer or Assumption
Name	
Age	
Gender	
Estimated Income	
Interests Outside Work	
Workplace/Company	
Industry	
Title	
What is this person trying to achieve in their job?	
Functionally	
Emotionally	
Other	
What things are causing this person problems in their job?	
Functionally	
Emotionally	
Other	
Other notes:	

(b) Debrief Summary Template

NAME: _____

Complete this worksheet from the perspective of the person you observed and interviewed during your Painful Interview.

1. I am _____
(person & profession)
2. I’m trying to _____
(name the thing the person is trying to accomplish or get done)
3. But _____
(what’s in the way?)
4. Because _____
(your best guess or hypothesis about the root problem)
5. Which makes me feel _____
(name the emotion the person feels)

Figure 2: Templates to Document Individual Interviews: (a) Interview Summary Template, and (b) Interview Debrief Summary Template [10].

Once an interviewer conducts several interviews, he/she can summarize the findings in a table (Figure 3). This table condenses critical pieces of information— number of conversations, customer personas, critical learnings, applications to the BMC and VPC, and pivots (and why). This process helps to inform insights, applications, and decisions to make.

Another way to make sense of the data is to put multiple interviews into an Excel spreadsheet, code the response, and perform a keyword analysis. This approach becomes more useful when one collects data from forty to fifty interviews, or when one is participating in the National Science Foundation Innovation CORPS™ program where the team needs to conduct 100 or more engagements [12]. Once the interviewer inputs the data, one can then turn the qualitative information into something more quantitative. This effort can lead to more data visualization via figures or word clouds. It allows for detecting patterns or trends within the data, which the interviewer can pursue further with additional meetings or through surveys.

However, it is essential to watch for false positives within the data. Thus, any analysis should employ questions such as “So what” and techniques, such as the “Truth curve,” to identify what is relevant and truthful, and what that might be misleading. This view is essential because interviewees might inform the interviewer of one behavior, but instead, when observed, display actions that reflect something completely different. Hence, one needs to view such data with the requirement to conduct further interviews, tests, and experiments based on learnings gained from customer discovery.

The Power of Questions

In conducting interviews, one needs to have a set of tools. Questions are these tools. In considering who are effective interviewers, at the top of the list are attorneys, consultants, journalists, physicians, and salespeople. One of the critical attributes of individuals who are successful in those occupations is that they “think in questions.”

Why is that important to think in questions. In the *Harvard Business Review* article by Brooks and John, “The Surprising Power of Questions,” the authors highlight several benefits [13]. First, questions spur learning and idea exchange. Second, it fuels innovation and better performance. Third, they build trust among team members and for it mitigates risk by uncovering unforeseen pitfalls and hazard. The authors also point out the need to ask the right question. It is not about one’s company and its product. For example, as Constable illustrates in his book, *Talking to Humans*, an example where an individual is interviewing a customer, and rather than exploring the customer’s needs, the interviewer is asking about the product and packaging [6].

The Fundamentals

When thinking about questioning fundamentals, one needs to start with the “Journalist’s Six”— Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why? The strength of the “Journalist’s Six” is that these questions provide a flexible array of areas for the interviewer to probe the interviewee to draw out the facts that underly a story.

Of the “Journalist’s Six,” the question “Why” is the most important. It is considered to be the “Power Question.” “Why” is essential because it helps to define motivation. It also can define the “Root Cause” of a problem or “Pain” by using the “Five Whys” technique [14].




Customer Persona	# of interviews	Customer feedback	Lesson learned (BMC Application, Pivot)
In vitro/early pre-Clinical Scientist 	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfied with existing methodology • Not interested in adopting new way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not our current target customers
Translational preclinical Scientist 	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking new/better ways to track cells • Willing to adopt new methods • Wants accessible, cheaper, and faster than current standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our beachhead market (update BMC and pivot from clinical study manager)
Clinical study manager 	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not currently track cells in real time • Not currently required by regulatory agency • Might consider changing if can save time/cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hesitant to adopt unless mandated • Possible future market, needs other influencers

Figure 3: Presenting Summarized Data from Multiple Interviews [11].

The next area focuses on open-ended versus closed-ended questions. Open-ended queries are very critical because they allow for the interviewee to elaborate and provide greater insight. A good list of general open-ended questions include the following queries: (1) What would happen?; (2) I wonder if?; (3) What would you think about that?; (4) In what way?; (5) Tell me about X?; (6) What would you do?; (7) How can we?; (8) How did you in what way?; and (9) What do you suppose? However, the “Watch Out” with open-ended questions is for the interviewee to avoid the question or move on to another issue (i.e., “Going Off the Reservation”).

In contrast, closed-ended questions are generally not ideal. Yes/no types of questions are very limiting. When using this type, however, add on a “Why” to avoid a terse and limiting response. Sometimes, there is a value using the yes/no to confirm the position. This approach is accurate and what it does is to verify what the interviewer has heard. For this type of yes/no question, active listening is essential. So, repeat what one hears to clarify and confirm the response.

As an alternative to using yes/no types of questions, one can change to a graded scale to understand better the rationale and degree of adherence to the belief. For rating, use either a one to seven scaled or a “Hot,” “Warm,” or “Cold” response. Another technique is to use a rank order response. These types of questions can also let an individual obtain both quantitative as well as qualitative information. For example, is the issue related to where something fits into the “Top Five” pains to gauge motivation and to quantify the problem.

The next area of interview questions involves “Drill Downs.” These types of questions involve when an interviewer starts with an initial question and then pursues with a second question based on what one hears from the interviewee. This approach, however, involves active listening to be effective. It provides a path to add value to one’s customer insights. One can guide the customer for clarity as well. Example “Drill Down” questions can include: (1) Tell me more about that?; (2) How did you do that what works?; and (3) Why or tell me that the last time that happened?”

Questioning Techniques

Several additional questioning techniques build on the fundamentals. The first one is the “Boomerang.” This approach is when one receives a question and responds with a question. Thus, it functions similar to a “Boomerang” that has been thrown out and returns. For example, when getting a tough question, the interviewer can respond with, “Oh, that is an interesting question, but could you please explain the rationale for asking about this issue.” This approach changes the control of the exchange and offers the opportunity to obtain valuable insights.

A second approach is getting input from the interviewee. For instance, one can ask whether one would offer an opinion. This

approach provides an excellent strategy to put the respondent on a pedestal since the interviewer is asking directly for a particular perspective on a topic.

A third strategy is the empathy card. For example, if one were to step into someone else’s shoes, then the individual might wish to query about: (1) How would one feel about this issue?; and (2) How one would respond to the other approach? The interviewee’s response could provide a glimpse to high-value propositions. An interviewer could also use this strategy with an interviewee to have the individual project one’s reactions as if one were another type of customer. For example, if the interviewer first asked for a response from an interviewee as a particular type of medical specialist, one could then follow up with the question as to how the interviewee would respond if one were a generalist. The responses could be quite different.

The final strategy involves other ways to understand an interviewee’s rationale for a particular perspective or response. For instance, one could use the query, please help “Me” (the interviewer) understand the approach involved here. Another example might involve the response, “I” (the interviewer) am a little confused here in terms of what “I” (the interviewer) have heard, could “You” (the interviewee) clarify this issue or your response for “Me” (the interviewer). In many ways, this approach is just another way of asking “Why.”

Questioning Biases

Biases exist in both the conduct of the interview and the interpretation of the interviewee’s responses. Several reports highlight this problem and related concerns [2,15,16]. Grace Ng, the co-Founder of Javelin.com, a software and services company that implements lean startup, reinforces these concerns in her 2014 *Forbes* piece [15]. She highlights that asking the wrong questions one of the five common pitfalls into which startup falls. She explains that these practices exist because the startup focuses its discovery phase on selling the product, instead of exploring current customer behaviors and insights. Ng points out several mistakes including that of leading questions, selling too soon, talking too much, and not digging deeper when insights surface.

Interestingly, York and Danes highlight in their *Journal of Small Business* review article that entrepreneur biases and heuristics exert significant risk in the customer discovery process [16]. They are significant watch-outs to prevent the interviewer from finding the truth. In their paper, they note that entrepreneurs, constrained by time and expenses, fail to obtain critical information available for making a proper decision. They continue on to observe that many entrepreneurial activities rely on a subjective view and limited data.

Furthermore, they identify several biases and heuristics that carry significant risk to the discovery or customer development

the interviewer is to engage the customer to talk about one’s life instead of the entrepreneur’s idea. He encourages entrepreneurs to ask interviewees about specifics in the past instead of generics or opinions about the future, which is another common mistake. He adds that entrepreneurs need to listen more to identify customer needs, deflect compliments, anchor fluff, and dig beneath ideas and insights to get at the truth. He also recommends “Googling for Trivia” to allow for more robust queries and allow for more effective preparation.

Fitzpatrick highlights a list of helpful and inadequate questions (Table 1) [5]. His discussion offers suggestions to improve inappropriate or weak questions. Of these, the most concerning are that of “Pitching Types” of questions, which he

notes the entrepreneur should reserve for later in the discovery process once one has identified the customer’s needs and developed a minimum viable product or MVP. He points out the familiarity bias, which York and Danes highlight, through the book’s title since most individuals understand that moms (along with dads and friends) will reinforce the one’s view of the product is terrific [5]. His point concerning “Pitching” ties into York and Danes bias of acquiescence [16]. Fitzpatrick advocates that interviewers should deflect compliments and anchor fluff, as these type responses are false positives or reactions to get out of the interview. He also includes in the list of more imperfect questions are those related to willingness to pay and pricing. These are detrimental when the entrepreneur is in the customer discovery phase.

Question	Type	Comment	Fix by Asking
Do “You” think it is a good idea?	Ineffective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only the market can tell if one’s idea is good. • Everything else is just opinion, which is self - indulgent noise. • High risk of false positives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows one how the customer currently does it. • Which parts the customer loves and hate.
Would “You” buy a product which did x?	Ineffective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking opinions and hypotheticals from overly optimistic people who want to make one happy. • The answer to a question like this is almost always “yes,” which makes it worthless. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: Anything involving the future is an overoptimistic lie. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the customer currently solves X? Also, how much it costs them, and time it takes?
Would “You” pay x for a product which did y?	Ineffective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price one’s product in terms of value to the customer rather than a cost to oneself. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: People stop lying when one asks them for money. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What they already do now, not what they believe they might do in the future? • Another way to fix it, if one is far enough along, is to ask for money literally. If one has the customer’s deposit or pre-order in hand, the one knows the customer is telling the truth.
How much would “You” pay for x?	Ineffective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This question is as ineffective as the last one, except it is more likely to trick one because the number makes it feel rigorous and truthful. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: People will lie if it is what one wants to hear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About their life as it already is.
What “Your” would dream product do?	Reasonably Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • However, only if one asks effective follow - ups. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: People know what their problems are, but they do not know how to solve those problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why they want these features?

Question	Type	Comment	Fix by Asking
Why do “You” bother?	Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love this sort of question. • It is great for getting from the perceived problem to the real one. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: One is shooting blind until one understands their goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None needed
What are the implications of that?	Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This question distinguishes between the customer - will - pay - to - solve that problems and that It - is - kind - of - annoying - but - the customer - can - deal - with - it “problems.” • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: Some problems do matter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None needed
Talk “Me” through the last time that happened?	Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whenever possible, one will want customers to show, not tell about their commitment. Try using a blank piece of paper or wireframe for them to illustrate the problem, the process, or requirements for a solution. • Learn through their actions instead of their opinions • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: Watching someone do a task will show one where the problems and inefficiencies are, not where the customer thinks they are. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None needed
What else have “You” tried?	Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are they using now? • How much does it cost? • What do they love or hate about it? • How much would those fixes be worth? • How traumatic would it be for them to switch to a new solution? • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: If the customer has not looked for ways of solving it already, this individual not going to look for (or buy) yours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None needed
How are “You” dealing with it now?	Highly Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond workflow information, this gives one a price anchor. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: While it is rare for the customer to tell precisely as to what one will pay, one will often show what it is worth to them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None needed
With whom else should “I” talk?	Highly Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End every conversation with this question. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: If the customer has not looked for ways of solving it already, one is not going to look for (or buy) yours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None needed

Question	Type	Comment	Fix by Asking
Is there anything else “I” should have asked?	Highly Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually, by the end of the meeting, customers understand what one is trying to do. • Since the interviewer does not know the industry, the customer often is sitting there quietly while one completely misses the essential point. • <u>Rule of Thumb</u>: Customers want to help. One needs to give them an excuse to do so. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None needed

Table 1: Ineffective and Effective Questions as per *The Mom Test* [5].

Conclusions

Customer discovery requires the entrepreneur to “Get-Out-of-the-Building” and to talk to the right customers. To this end, productive interviewing is essential. The entrepreneur needs to master several skills and strategies to gather data to understand where the startup needs to go. These include identification of the right customer(s) and securing the interview. In conducting the interview, there are proper steps to ensure success. The process of the interview should try to follow such a flow that follows a natural conversation to allow for valuable insights. Proper documentation of the interview is essential. It starts with how one records the interview and then how one summarizes and reports the findings. In conducting multiple interviews, along with proper documentation and analysis of findings from them, the entrepreneur can hone in on important issues specific to his/her customers and discover insights and data that will guide the product and business model development process.

Questions are powerful tools for conducting compelling interviews. They spur learning and idea exchange, fuel innovation and performance, build trust among team members and mitigates risk by uncovering unforeseen pitfalls and hazard. However, entrepreneurs need to ask the right questions. There are several useful strategies that entrepreneurs should have in their toolkits. Questioning strategies start with the basics that journalists use (i.e., the “Journalist’s Six”), but also techniques that consultants and salespeople use (e.g., “Boomerang,” in other’s shoes, your opinion).

However, entrepreneurs and interviewers need to guard against biases in their interview approaches and questions, which can lead to misleading data. Therefore, the interviewer’s questions should focus on the customer and the “Job-to-Do,” and not about one’s company and its products. Questions should not focus on prices, feedback on product or packaging, or hypotheticals in the future. Instead, effective question strategies focus on the customers’ experiences, problems, and “Jobs-to-Do,” what they have done to address such pains, and recommendations they have for potential product requirements.

Furthermore, interviewers should always probe for additional referrals or issues that the interviewer missed through the conversation. In using these tactics properly, one will gain valuable insights that will guide a data-driven decision, instead of one based on assumptions or guesses. In the end, it is about understanding one’s target audience in order to identify and develop a value proposition based on customer insights. Through effective use of interviewing and questioning strategies, the entrepreneur can mitigate risk and “Nail” one’s product and business model, and then move to scale the venture with greater confidence.

References

1. York JM (2018) Putting Lean Startup into Perspective: A Novel Approach for Discovering and Developing a Successful Business Model. *Arch Bus Adm Manag*. DOI: 10.29011/ABAM-104. 100004.
2. Chen T, Simon M, Kim J, Poploskie B (2015) Out of the Building, Into the Fire: An Analysis of Cognitive Biases During Entrepreneurial Interviews, *New England Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 18, 59-76.
3. Rao AS (2014) Minimum Viable Product (MVP) for Product Startup: An Indian perspective. Presented in Forum for Knowledge Sharing IX Annual Conference. Conference Theme: Technology: Corporate and Social Dimensions, Venue-National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore.
4. York JM (2019) Strategic Interviewing Frameworks for Entrepreneurs to Optimize Customer Discovery. *Arch Bus Adm Manag*. 2: 124. DOI: 10.29011/2642-3243.1000124
5. Fitzpatrick R (2013) *The Mom Test*. Foundercentric.com
6. Constable G (2014) *Talking to Humans*.
7. Zoom.com (2019).
8. Rev.com (2019).
9. Friga P (2009) *The McKinsey Engagement*. New York: McGraw Hill.
10. York JL (2016) Business 310: Introduction to Entrepreneurship. “Painful” Interview Interviewing Templates. The Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Orfalea College of Business. California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
11. Liu M (2018) I-Corps™ Presentation 2. Institute for the Global Entrepreneur (Jacobs School of Engineering, University of California, San Diego). San Diego, CA.

12. National I-Corps™ Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (2018) NSF I-Corps Sites Program.
13. Brooks AW, John LK (2018) The Surprising Power of Questions. *Harvard Business Review*. 96, 60–67.
14. Serrat O (2017) Serrat O (ed.). “*The Five Whys Technique*,” *Knowledge Solutions: Tools, Methods, and Approaches to Drive Organizational Performance*. Singapore. Springer: 307–310,
15. Ng G (2014) Five Pitfalls of Running Lean Startup Experiments. *Forbes*.
16. York JL, Danes JE (2014) Customer Development, Innovation and Decision-Making Biases in the Lean Startup. *Journal of Small Business Strategy*. 24, 21-39.
17. Tversky A, Kahneman D (1981) The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice. *Science, New Series*, 211: 453-458.
18. Campbell S, Sharpe S (2009) Anchoring Bias in Consensus Forecasts and Its Effect on Market Prices. *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis*. 44, 369-390.
19. Cialdini RB (2009) *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. New York: HarperCollins.
20. Milgram S (1974) *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row.
21. Rieck D (1998) *Influence and Persuasion: The Rule of Authority, Liking, and Scarcity*. Direct Creative.