Maksym Stepanenko

Customer Discovery: 50 Interviews That Will Change Your Product

Jobs-to-be-Done, The Mom Test, and a method for turning conversations into insights

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CHAPTER 1

Why Most Startups Build the Wrong Thing

According to CB Insights, 42% of startups failed because of “no market need.” They built a product nobody wanted. They were not stupid. They simply did not talk to enough customers before building.

The Mom Test (Rob Fitzpatrick) is the classic book on customer discovery. Its main thesis: most customer interviews are useless because you ask the wrong questions. “Would you like a product that does X?” always gets the answer “yes.” Nobody will say “no” to your idea to your face (especially your mom). The Mom Test rule: ask about the past, not the future. “Would you buy it?” is useless. “How do you solve this problem today? Show me.” is gold.

Jobs-to-be-Done (JTBD) is a theory from Clayton Christensen. People do not buy products. They “hire” them to do a job. “Hiring a milkshake” is McDonald's famous case. McDonald's tried to improve its milkshake. The researchers studied its attributes: flavor, consistency. But then they asked a different question: “When was the last time you bought a milkshake? Under what circumstances?” The answer: most people bought a milkshake in the morning on the way to work. The job: have something to hold so you are not bored in traffic. The job: avoid getting hungry before lunch. The milkshake's competitors: bananas (awkward to hold), bagels (crumbly), coffee (too hot). The insight: make it thicker (a longer pull through the straw means longer entertainment in traffic). The lesson: ask about the job, not the product.

Discovery vs. validation: discovery means understanding the problem and the customer's context. Validation means checking that your solution works. Most people do validation before discovery. The mistake: “Look at our product, do you like it?” The right approach: “Tell me how you handle [problem] today. What is

the most frustrating part?” Only after discovery can you build a product that solves a real problem.

CHAPTER 2

Whom to Interview and How to Find Them

50 interviews with the wrong people means 50 wasted hours. The right interviewees are people who have the problem you want to solve and are actively trying to solve it.

The profile of the right interviewee. Early adopter signs: they are already looking for a solution (Google, Reddit, communities). They have tried workarounds. They are ready to pay for a better solution. High pain: the problem affects them regularly and painfully. Decision maker: in B2B, the person who has the budget or influences the purchase.

Where to find interviewees. Reddit and Facebook Groups are the most accessible source. Find communities where your potential customers complain about the problem you solve. Example: a product for freelancers → r/freelance, r/SideProject. LinkedIn: search for people with the right title and industry. Send a personalized message. Conversion is 5–15%. Twitter/X: search tweets for your keywords plus complaints. “[problem] is frustrating” points to real people in pain. Your network: always underestimated. Ask friends and colleagues to introduce you. You are rarely more than a few introductions away. Conferences and meetups: live conversations convert better than online ones. Existing customers (if you already have some): the best source. They are already committed.

Recruiting by email or DM. Template: “Hi [name], I see that you are a [title/role] at [company/industry]. I am researching [problem] and want to understand how people like you handle it today. This is not a sales pitch. I need 20 minutes of your experience. Can I send you a Calendly link?” Key principles: honesty (research, not sales). Personalization (why this particular person). A specific ask (20 minutes, not “a chat”). Low commitment (a Calendly link, not “call me”).

Incentives: a $25–$50 Amazon gift card for a 30-minute interview significantly raises conversion. For a B2B executive, skip the money and offer reciprocity (“I will share the results of our research with you”). Number of interviews: at least 20 before drawing conclusions. 40–60 is ideal for reliable patterns.

CHAPTER 3

Questions That Work: Technique Without Leading

Bad questions give you what you want to hear. Good questions give you the truth.

The structure of a 45-minute interview. Warm-up (5 min): “Tell me about your work or situation. What do you do?” This builds rapport and gives you context. Past behavior (20 min): “When was the last time you ran into [problem]? Tell me more about it.” “What happened then?” “What did you do next?” “What was the most frustrating part?” Current solution (10 min): “How do you handle this today?” “Show me what it looks like” (screen share if possible). “What do you dislike about your current solution?” “How much time or money does it take?” Exploration (10 min): “If you had a magic wand, how would you want this to work?” “Have you ever looked for another solution? Why didn't you buy?” Closing: “Is there anything important I didn't ask?” “Can I get back to you once we start building something?”

Questions that kill the truth: “Do you like idea X?” is a leading question. “Would you pay $50/month for this?” is hypothetical and useless. “Wouldn't it be great if...?” is selling, not research. Replacements: instead of “Do you like our idea?” ask “How do you solve this problem today?” Instead of “Would you pay?” ask “How do you spend money on solving this problem today?” Instead of “Would you like feature X?” ask “What stops you from doing X right now?”

Silence is golden: after every answer, pause for 3–5 seconds. Most people fill the silence. The most important insights appear in exactly those moments. Resist the urge to interrupt.

Note-taking: write down verbatim quotes in quotation marks. Do not interpret in your notes; capture the exact words first. Video recording (with permission) gives you the chance to review. Right

after the interview, spend 10 minutes writing down the top 3 insights.

CHAPTER 4

Analyzing 50 Interviews: Patterns and Decisions

50 interviews give you a huge body of data. How do you turn it into concrete decisions?

Affinity mapping. After each interview, write the key pains, workarounds, and desired outcomes on sticky notes (or in Miro/FigJam for digital). After a series of interviews, group similar notes by theme. Patterns become obvious: if 35 of 50 people mention the same pain, that is a signal. If only 5 do, it is an edge case.

The frequency vs. intensity matrix. Two axes for classifying pains. Frequency: how often the problem occurs (daily, weekly, monthly). Intensity: how painful it is (a minor inconvenience vs. business-critical). Prioritize: high frequency plus high intensity is gold. That is where your product should start.

“Hair on fire.” The best product solves the problem of a person whose hair is literally on fire. The pain is so bad that they are looking for any solution right now. Signs of “hair on fire” in an interview: they interrupt their work right now to talk to you. They use 5 different workarounds in parallel. They are ready to name a specific sum they would pay for a solution.

From pains to product requirements. After affinity mapping, identify the top 3 pains. For each one, ask: what minimum solution addresses it? (the MVP candidate). Write a Job Statement: “When [situation], I want [motivation], so that [outcome].” Example: “When I need to send an invoice to a foreign client, I want to stop worrying about currency conversion and taxes, so that I can simply get paid without bureaucracy.”

Continuous discovery: 50 interviews are not the end. Teresa Torres, in “Continuous Product Discovery,” argues that you should interview all the time (at least 1 interview per week). The market

changes. Customers change. Your product changes. Teams that do not do this gradually lose touch with reality.

CHAPTER 5

From Discovery to Your First Paying Customers

The goal of discovery is not to research forever. The goal is to give you the confidence to start building and selling.

The “smoke test” before building: after 20+ interviews, if the pattern is clear, do not start building right away. Create a fake door: a landing page describing a product that does not exist yet. A “Buy” or “Join Waitlist” button leads to email capture. Launch it on Product Hunt or social media. Measure interest. If 1,000 visitors produce 50 email captures (5%), there is demand. The 5 out of 50 who said “I'll take it” are your first customers.

Pre-sales before the MVP: call the people who left an email and ask: “I am ready to launch. If it costs $X/month, are you ready to pay today?” Let them enter a credit card (through Stripe) or pay right now. Money before product is the highest level of validation. 5 prepaid customers beat 500 “sounds cool” responses.

Concierge MVP: instead of a product, do the work manually. The customer pays for the result. You deliver it “by hand” (with minimal or zero code). The goal: understand the flow, find the bottlenecks, and make sure the customer is happy. Then automate what repeats. Example: an AI content startup. The MVP: the customer pays $99/month. You write the content manually using ChatGPT. If 10 customers are happy, automate the pipeline. The flywheel: discovery → pre-sales → concierge MVP → automated MVP → scale.

What next

Thank you for reading “Customer Discovery: 50 Interviews That Will Change Your Product”.

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Maksym Stepanenko, Innova Publishing.