



Action Plan for

The Mom Test: How to Talk to Customers & Learn if Your Business is a Good Idea

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The Right Way to Validate Your Business

You probably have tons of ideas for new businesses. But how do you know if an idea is good or total crap?

You can't just go out and build the business. Choosing to commit to an idea is one of the most consequential decisions you'll ever make. It can shape your life for months or even years, leading to either fame and fortune or incredible frustration.

Before building a business, you need to test and validate your idea. You need to conduct research to gauge whether there is a demand for your product. You don't want to sink time and money into an idea that doesn't have any legs.

The best way to evaluate your idea? Step outside and talk to potential customers.

Many of us talk to customers. But we still end up building stuff nobody buys. Why does that happen?

It turns out almost all of us are doing it wrong.

Trying to learn from customer conversations is like excavating a delicate archaeological site. The truth is there, 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.

Lots of people use 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.

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.

In this action plan, you'll learn how to talk to customers the right way and discover if there is really a demand for your business.

Don't waste another day wondering if your idea is a hit or miss. Take the first step toward building something amazing.

This is an interactive action plan. You can complete it on your desktop. Or print it out.

Use it everytime you are talking to a customer.



01. Reach Out with Cold Calls and Emails

Starting conversations with cold leads isn't easy. But it's possible, and sometimes it's the only option.

Expect a lot of rejection. If you contact 100 people, 98 might ignore you. That's normal and not a reflection of your idea. Unless cold calling is your primary sales strategy, the rejection rate doesn't matter.

The goal of cold outreach is to build momentum. With one or two initial conversations, you can start forming genuine connections. If you respect people's time, those early cold calls can lead to warm introductions.

02. Immerse Yourself in Their World

Go to places where your target audience gathers. Attend conferences, workshops, meetups, or virtual events. Participate in discussions and engage with the community.

If you are building a business, you have tons of expertise in that sector. Share them. Give talks, host workshops, or offer advice. Teaching others opens doors to many conversation opportunities.

Be open to serendipity. Instead of formal interviews, have casual, natural conversations. People love talking about their challenges and daily experiences. Show genuine curiosity about their problems. You'll uncover valuable insights.

03. Create a Landing Page

Build a landing page to attract potential customers. Use it to share your ideas and collect their email addresses. This gives you a list of leads to reach out to for conversations.

Joel Gascoigne, founder of Buffer, did something similar. He created a landing page to explain his startup. Then, he collected emails from interested visitors. He emailed each person who signed up. These conversations helped him learn more about his audience and refine his idea.

04. Organize Your Own Meetups

Hosting your own meetup puts you at the centre of the conversation. This gives you a unique opportunity to connect and talk with people.

For example, if you want to understand the challenges HR professionals face, organize an event like "HR Profes-

sionals Happy Hour.” Simply being the person who sends the invites or introduces the speakers boosts your credibility. This gives you a natural way to engage in meaningful conversations about their problems.

Plus, hosting events helps establish you as a trusted figure in your industry. This will add a layer of credibility to your business.

05. Leverage Mutual Connections

Conversations become much easier when a mutual friend makes an introduction, vouching for your credibility and the purpose of your outreach.

The world is smaller than we think. Everyone knows someone. The key is to remember to ask for those introductions.

06. Tap into Investors and University Professors

If you’re in university, don’t overlook your professors. They’re a valuable resource for introductions. They often have connections with industry leaders who fund their research. These industry contacts are usually excited about new projects and innovations.

Top-tier investors are also great for making introductions. They have networks that span across industries. They can connect you with key people and opportunities.

Prepare Before Talking to People



01. Choose a Focused Segment

Make your best guess about who would benefit most from your product. Have a specific idea about the group you’re targeting, so you can make the features and language resonate for them.

When talking to potential customers, aim for even more specific segmentation than you would for your entire business. If you speak to five people with five different goals, you’ll get conflicting feedback. This will make it harder to gain confidence in your direction.

To avoid this, narrow down your focus into smaller, more defined groups. Start with a broad segment and keep breaking it down into more precise subsets until you know exactly who to reach.

Ask yourself:

- Within this group, who would benefit most from my product?
- Would everyone in this group use it, or just a specific subset?
- What problem or goal does my product solve for them?
- Do all members of this group share the same motivation or only some?
- Are there other motivations at play?
- Which other groups share these motivations?
- What are these people currently doing to address their problems or achieve their goals?

By going through these questions, you'll identify two types of segments: specific demographic groups and motivations. Some segments will be broader, so keep narrowing them down. For each subset, repeat the questions above. Keep drilling down until you have a clear picture of your ideal target.

Then target the most lucrative segment.

02. Decide on Your Big 3 Learning Goals

Before any conversation, identify the top 3 things you want to learn. Having these key questions pre-planned makes it easier to ask focused, meaningful questions. Without a plan, conversations often veer into trivial topics.

Your 3 learning goals will differ depending on the type of person you're talking to. If you have multiple customer segments, create a separate list for each.

You might get answers 1-3 from customer A, answer 4 from customer B, and answers 5-7 from customer C. There will be some overlap, but you don't need to repeat the same set of questions with everyone. Focus on gathering new insights where you still need data, and keep building a clearer picture.

What's your big three learning goals?

03. Decide on a Commitment

If you already have a product or a prototype, aim to get a commitment by the end of the conversation. Plan what kind of commitment you'll ask for before the discussion begins.

Commitment is important. It tells us whether people are actually telling the truth. The more they give us, the more you can trust what they say.

Commitment doesn't always mean money. Think of it like currency. What are they willing to give up for you? A simple compliment is easy to give but carries no real value. The more valuable currencies are time, reputation, and cash.

Time commitments might include: agreeing to give feedback on a prototype or using a trial version for a certain period.

Reputation risk commitments could include: making introductions to peers or decision-makers, or offering a public testimonial or case study.

If someone declines your request for a commitment, it's disappointing. But it's valuable data. Not everyone will convert. This rejection gives you a clear negative data point.

If you have a product or prototype, what commitment are you going to ask for?

During the Conversation



01. Ask Good Questions That Pass The Mom Test

Never ask anyone, including your mom, if your business idea is good. Your mom will lie because she loves you. It's also a bad question that encourages everyone to give you unhelpful, biased answers.

It's not anyone else's job to tell you the truth. You have to find it. And you do that by asking the right questions.

The Mom Test is a set of simple rules for asking questions that even your mom can't lie about. Here's how to do it:

1. Talk about their life, not your idea
2. Ask about real events from the past, not opinions about the future
3. Listen more than you talk

Ask questions that reveal the specifics of your customers' lives. What problems they face, what matters to them, their limitations, and their goals. The success of early conversations is measured by how much useful, concrete information you gather about their world.

Avoiding any mention of your idea at the start. This simple step helps you ask better questions and get more honest, useful feedback.

Good questions include:

- Tell me about the last time that happened.
- What were the consequences of that?
- What have you tried to solve it?
- How are you handling it right now?

Bad questions include:

- Do you think this is a good idea?
 - Would you buy a product that does X?
 - How much would you pay for X?
 - What would your dream product do?"
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02. Ignore Compliments

Most of your meetings will end with a compliment. It feels good. But don't be fooled.

Chances are, they're not being entirely honest. They may want to be supportive, protect your feelings, or just reflect your excitement. Even if they genuinely like it, their opinion still isn't valuable. Venture capitalists, for example, are wrong far more often than they're right. If even VCs can be off the mark, how reliable is the opinion of a random person?

Unless you're speaking to industry experts who've built businesses similar to yours, opinions are not useful. So ignore the compliment. You need hard facts and commitments.

03. Anchor Fluff

Fluff takes three common forms:

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

When someone starts using these vague terms, they're offering fluffy, unreliable information. To get past the fluff, follow The Mom Test. Steer the conversation to specifics about their past actions. Ask about when something last happened, how they handled it, and what other solutions they tried.

The most dangerous fluff is: "I would definitely buy that."

It sounds concrete. But people are often overly optimistic about what they will do in the future. They may be excited at the moment but will act very differently when the time actually comes.

To get useful insights, reject these general statements and future promises. Instead, focus on anchoring them to real-life actions and experiences. Ask them what they've already done and how they've solved problems in the past.

04. Dig Beneath Ideas

During a productive conversation, the person you're talking to may suddenly "flip" to your side. They'll become excited and start suggesting ideas, features, and possibilities. This is good news.

But don't rush to add their ideas to your to-do list. Startups thrive by focusing on one strong, scalable idea. Don't chase every good suggestion that comes your way.

For example, imagine they said: "Are you going to be able to sync to Excel? That's definitely a killer feature."

The wrong move here is simply writing "sync to Excel" on your to-do list and moving on. That's how feature creep starts. Instead, dig deeper to understand the motivation behind their request.

Why do they want this feature? How would it benefit them? How are they currently managing without it? Why do they choose this workaround? Would they need the feature from day one?

Pay attention to any strong emotions they express. Are they frustrated, excited, or relieved? Understanding the emotional drivers behind their requests can give you deeper insights into their true needs.

05. Stop Seeking Approval

Compliments can be sneaky and harmful. So it's best to stop them before they even start. The main source of compliment-creation is when you're subconsciously or consciously seeking approval.

When you intentionally fish for compliments, you're not looking for honest feedback. You're seeking validation. You've already decided what you want to hear, and now you just need someone to confirm it.

Signs that you're fishing for compliments:

- I'm thinking of starting a business... do you think it will work?
- I've got this great app idea—do you like it?

This happens when you're excited about an idea. Even if you encourage honesty and criticism, people often pull back and soften their feedback to avoid hurting your feelings.

The key is to keep your idea out of the conversation until you're ready to ask for true commitments.

06. Cut Off Pitches

Being persistent is a valuable quality for a founder. But when it creeps into a conversation that's meant to be about learning, it works against you.

It's easy to get carried away with excitement about your idea. But if you start pitching, you're likely to derail the conversation. You'll find yourself five minutes into an enthusiastic monologue while the other person nods politely. That's bad.

When you start talking about your idea, they stop sharing their problems. So, if you catch yourself in pitch mode, stop immediately.

If they really want to hear about your product, offer to share more at the end of the meeting or invite them to a demo later. Let them know you want to talk a bit more about their challenges first before biasing them with your idea.

07. If Relevant, Press for Commitment and Next Steps

This step only applies if you already have a product or prototype.

Once you've gathered key insights about your industry and customers, it's time to start sharing your idea and showing your product. This will invite nefarious compliments. But you can cut through the noise.

It's time to ask for real commitments. This will help you gauge genuine interest and avoid false positives.

08. Take Good Notes

Whenever possible, write down exact quotes and put them in quotation marks. You can use them later in your marketing language and fundraising decks. If the exact words aren't necessary, just note the key idea.

Use symbols and shorthand to add context to your notes. For example, if someone says "that's a problem," how you interpret it depends on their tone - whether they're neutral or frustrated.

Record strong emotions like outrage, excitement, or laughter, as they provide important clues about customer needs and motivations. Make a habit of capturing these emotional cues, and dig deeper into them when they arise.

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