Vecteris
INSIGHTS. INNOVATION. GROWTH.

GETTING MORE
from Customer Interviews

Introduction

Understanding our customers—or more specifically their *urgent and expensive problems*—is the key to developing a successful product. I've seen too many companies waste time developing a new product that no customer wants or needs. This often happens when a CEO develops a product because they have fallen in love with an idea or a technology or are trying to out-do a competitor and they don't want to take the time to talk to any customers about the real-life problems they are solving.

To understand those real-life problems, we need talk to our customers. Directly. Feedback from a sales force is not a replacement for our own customer conversations.

Interviews can be time consuming and a bit of a headache, if we're being completely honest. But there is no other approach that can yield rich data with the deepest insights. And if you do them well, you don't need to do that many.

5 Tips for Better Interviews

I've talked to a lot of customers over the years. Here are 5 useful tips I've learned for doing this well – with a minimal amount of pain for you and the customer.

1. BE CLEAR ON WHAT YOU NEED TO LEARN

We need be sure the conversation stays on task. We can easily let open ended questions spiral out of control or run off on a million tangents.

To make sure you stay on track *start with a list of your hypotheses*.

- What do you think may be true about the main problem?
- What is the root of that problem?
- How are you customers solving that problem today? Are they satisfied?
- How much value do your customers receive in solving that problem?
- Can your product idea solve that problem?

Then build your interview guide around those hypotheses. Your goal will be to prove or disprove each hypothesis. Review after each interview to see what you have learned and what you have left to learn. This keeps conversations headed in the right direction, to get the answers we need, without being overly prescriptive about where the conversation goes.

2. START WITH THE BASICS

Remember, the #1 goal is to understand your customers' most urgent and expensive problems. Use two or three broad and open-ended questions in the beginning of each customer conversation about their experience. Not only does this warm-up the conversation, it gives you the opportunity to explore the big picture. You are looking to learn:

- What pain does this customer have that you can solve?
- What problems are keeping them up at night?
- What essential tools or processes do they have that are costing more than they are benefiting from them?

Really explore the most pressing problems customers are facing from *their* point of view. Broad and open-ended questions open the door for the customer to express themselves without biasing the results (a real risk to be aware of).

3. TALK TO A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

We don't have time to talk to everyone. So, this is where our customer personas come in. Well-developed customer personas will help us make sure we talk to the right mix of sample customers to capture a diverse mix of voices.

Keep in mind the product you plan to create – is it intended to bring in new clients? Make sure you have prospects in the mix. Could the product be received differently by very mature vs less mature customers? Will there be differences between the end user and actual buyers?

This may sound like a daunting number of interviews, but it is really about quality over quantity. If you plan ahead to have a good mix of participants, you should be able to get the data you need from 10-12 interviews.

4. ITERATE, ITERATE, ITERATE

This should be your mantra in everything product. Pull up your notes after every interview to highlight what you have learned. Return to those questions we discussed earlier. What is the most expensive, urgent problem people are facing? Can we solve that problem? Are we creating enough value for customers to jump on board? Have you proven or disproven your hypotheses? Do you need to re-work your assumptions?

Now, ask yourself, what do you need to change in the next conversation to continue learning? Should you tweak an opening question? Should you make changes to your product vision? Can you add more specificity to your sample packaging or pricing? Don't go more then 2-3 interviews without adjusting your interview guide.

5. BE CUSTOMER-CENTRIC

Finally, it's imperative that we remember that we are dealing with people. People with packed schedules, to-do lists a mile long, and, basically, a million other things they could be doing instead of answering our questions. Keep the entire process focused on the customer. Work around their schedules. Thank them for giving up their time and sharing their insights.

You'll also need to make them comfortable sharing – even when they have something to say that we might not want to hear. Be prepared for your customer to crush your vision entirely.

> *"Disarm "politeness" training: people are trained not to call your baby ugly. You need to make them feel safe to do this. My approach was to explain that I needed their honesty, so I didn't build something nobody wanted to use, which seemed to resonate with folks."*
>
> **Giff Constable** Chief Product Officer at Meetup

Last but not least, we need to listen more than we talk. It's human nature to fill the gaps that make us feel awkward. We can use prompting cues like "tell me more" or "interesting, can we expand on that?" The goal is to get the customer talking again.

As we have already noted, people are busy and sometimes hard to schedule, but don't let that stop you. With hundreds of interviews under my belt, I can honestly say that 99% of people really enjoy being part of the product development process and appreciate that we value their opinions and care about their problems.

Sample Key Insights Tracker

Immediately after each interview give a rating to give you an at-a-glance look at how impactful that interviewees comments were. You can use A-B-C or 1-2-3. Later when you have forgotten the details this will help you weigh the insights appropriately and guide you on where to spend your analysis.

We also like to track big a-has! As we hear them. The more we hear that key insight the more weight it gets in our analysis. Hopefully these key insights track to your hypotheses but, occasionally, something new pops up to surprise you.

We would typically use Google Sheets for easy tracking and team collaboration.

	Rating	Key Insight 1	Key Insight 2	Key Insight 3	Key Insight 4
Customer A					
Customer B					
Customer C					

Sample Customer Notes Page

Please Read: This is just a sample. Your notes pages should include your key questions and any follow up probing questions that you are looking to learn more about. Your notes template should be highly customized to your product and company. Feel free to reach out to Vecteris for guidance if needed.

Name:

Date:

Recording Link:

Background (*Confirm these before the interview.)*

Contact details	
LinkedIn	
Location	
Role / Title	
Responsibilities	
Other	

Notes

Role, Responsibilities, Personal/Company Goals for 2020

Major Challenges today in the Way of Reaching 2020 Goals

Current Solutions & Satisfaction

Test Concept Ideas

Other Ideas and Suggestions