



THE LEAN INNOVATOR

How to Ask Your Customers the Right Questions

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HINT: IT'S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH YOUR STARTUP

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CAFE

5 Questions to Ask Your Customers

(hint: it has nothing to do with you)

You're starting a business. You're reading books, going to workshops, and hitting the networking events. Maybe you're going through a startup accelerator. At some point, you'll hear about Customer Validation, and you'll be encouraged to 'get out of the building' and see what your customers think of your idea.

It sounds awesome and makes total sense until you actually go to do it, because there are two problems with this approach:

Problem 1: There are no customers to ask yet.

Problem 2: Interviews easily turn into sales pitches.

Let's get that first problem out of the way, because it's not as hard to solve as you might think: Where are the people I'm going to interview?

To get started, I'll usually make a list of 10 people I know, whether they're potential customers or not. I will start an interview, and if they're not the right folks to talk to, I ask them to introduce me to a friend. If I keep doing this, I'll get the interviews I need.

Now, let's cover the second, more debilitating problem: how to avoid pitching your customers during the interview so you can get actionable insights.

In the past, I've asked customers if they'd had the problem I was solving for, and then followed that up with, 'Would you buy it?' Every time they would reply, 'Oh, yes, I would.'

Which, as we all know, is a comforting but untrue answer. Customers don't lie to us on purpose; they lie because they want to be supportive and because

we kind of put them on the spot if we pitch during the interview. To avoid this, I want to ask questions that reveal *observable behavior* rather than *self-reported preferences*. And the best way to do that is to avoid mentioning my startup in the first place!

In a customer interview, there are 5 things I want to know:

1. Are you a customer?
2. Can you tell me a story about the last time you had this problem?
3. What was hard about that? Or, what was awesome about that?
4. If that was hard, on a scale of 1 - 10, where would you fit? Same for if it was awesome.
5. How do you currently achieve this objective?

We shouldn't really ask these questions verbatim. With actual people, we have to ease into things. We should also remember to be gentle and go at the customer's pace, or else we'll get hasty answers which end up spoiling the interview's integrity.

To help you get the interview right, I've taken a deep dive into each of these questions and made suggestions on how you can ask them. Each section will tell you about the question itself, list prompts you can use to get your customer talking, and show you an example interview. I'll also discuss ways to tell if you're doing it right and the insights & benefits you can get from each question.

To begin, let's put ourselves in the shoes of an Entrepreneur who is tech savvy and wants to help people be more productive by creating a goal-setting app.

Question 1: Are you a customer?



Finding out if you are interviewing the right person.

About the question

This is a screening question that can save us and our interviewee a lot of time. First, we need to ask *ourselves*:

What are my customers trying to do? What are their objectives? What are they trying to do before they encounter a problem they have to solve?

Prompts to try

It's weird to just go up to someone and ask them if they're a customer - that's like asking if they've seen your baseball. So instead of making it hella awkward from the get-go (there will be time for that in question 3, btw), I like to

start nice and slow by asking general questions first, then drilling down for specifics.

General:

- What you want to be when you grow up?
- What are you working on right now?
- What do you do for work? What do you do for fun?

Specifics (in the context of interviewing for my goal-setting app):

- What would you rather be doing professionally?
- How do you feel about your ability to get stuff done?
- What's in your way right now?

Example

Meet Jan: she's young, awesome, and ambitious with lots of ideas and a career path. Out of pity, she agreed to talk with me about goal-setting. I figured she could teach me a thing or two while we were at it.

Me: Goalsetting's cool when I can make it work for me.

Jan: I know, right?

Me: I'm not always that good at it, though.

Jan: Yeah sometimes life gets in the way.

Me: Are you working on something right now?

Jan: Sort of. I want to start a chicken coop.

Me: Wow, cool! Where are you at with that?

Jan tells me all about how to set up an urban chicken coop and what's entailed. She wants to be able to sell the eggs it produces, but doesn't have the headspace to work it as a side hustle. She even picked out a name and a logo, short for Chicken-in-a-Box:



CiaB (chee-a-bee)

How to know you're doing it right

Here, we're basically confirming that the person we're talking to has the problem for which we want to solve. If the person has a goal that she is working on, that's a good indication that we can move on and ask question number 2.

Benefits / Insights

This is a time and brain-saving question. It's designed to see whether or not we have a potential customer. If Jan's not a potential customer, we can talk about something else, thank her for her time, and move on quickly to our next interview.

It turns out that Jan *is* a potential customer, which is nice because now I can write the rest of this article. On to question 2!



“Fresh eggs,
bruh. Yass.”

- One of Jan's customers

Question 2: Can you tell me a story?



Can you tell me a story about the last time this happened?

About the question

Since time immemorial, humans have been telling each other stories - in fact, it's the primary means we use to communicate effectively. Stories contain so much more information than a normal statement of facts: they use all five senses and give us a broader idea of what's happened. For that reason, getting Jan to tell us a story is much better than asking her to fill out little bubbles on a scan sheet. Who uses number 2 pencils anymore?

Prompts to try

Our customer needs a little help to get started. When we ask this question, a

customer will start telling us general things, like, "usually this will happen, and I get angry." While this is a wonderful demonstration of the human ability to summarize stuff, it will not help us here. No, what we want is *specificity*. So we ask for details in a way that encourages the customer to tell us the juicy details:

- What day of the week was it?
- What time was it?
- Who was there?
- What were you trying to do?
- What would happen if you didn't accomplish your goal?

Example

Me: So have you done anything about this?

Jan: Yeah I did a little research.

Me: You know your stuff!

Jan: Yeah I guess I geeked out back there.

Me: So what stopped you last time?

Jan: Hmm, I guess I really wasn't sure how to start selling eggs. I figured it was just going to take too much time.

Me: So when was this?

Jan: About 4 months ago.

Me: I'm curious - when was the moment you realized it was going to be too much?

Jan: I think I was sitting at my day job, and I got handed this big messy project - you know, that one project that different people have had a crack at, bungled it, and then it just lost momentum?

Me: Ya I can relate.

Jan: So they dumped this on me, and I tried to think about CiaB still but I knew that this was going to take more time and focus.

So it kind of...

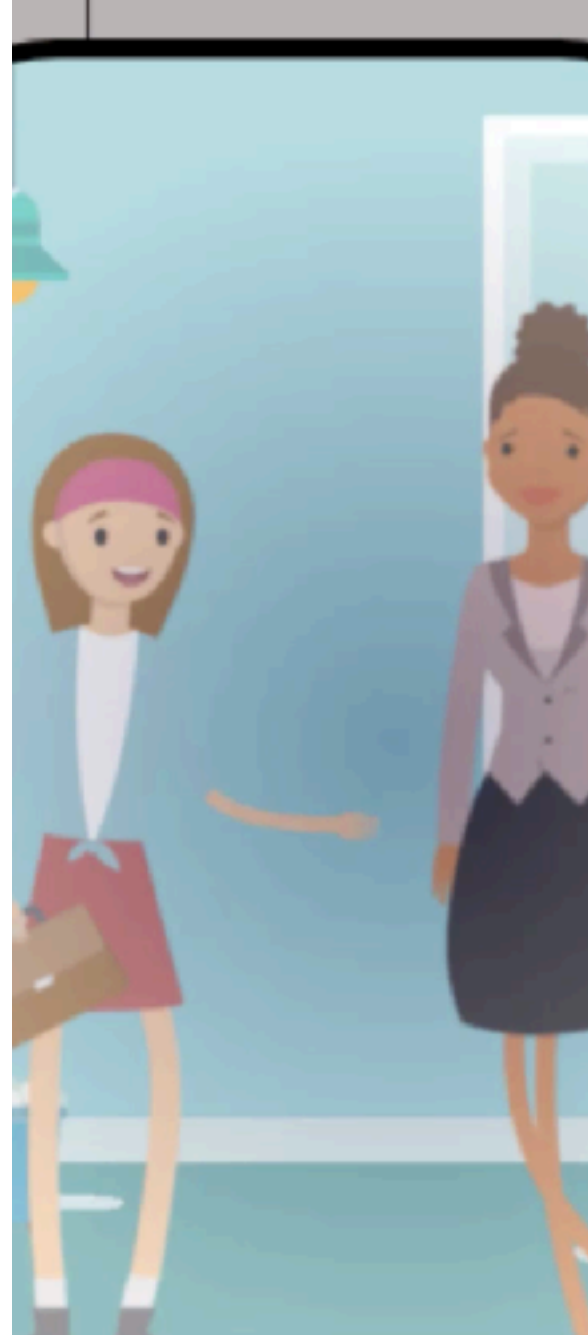
Tapered off.

How you know you're doing it right

During the first part of this question, your interviewee will be looking at you while she tells you about her experience in general. But once she goes into specifics, she'll be looking anywhere but you (usually down, or diagonally up). This is because she's combing through that mental filing cabinet, remembering details.

The benefit of the question

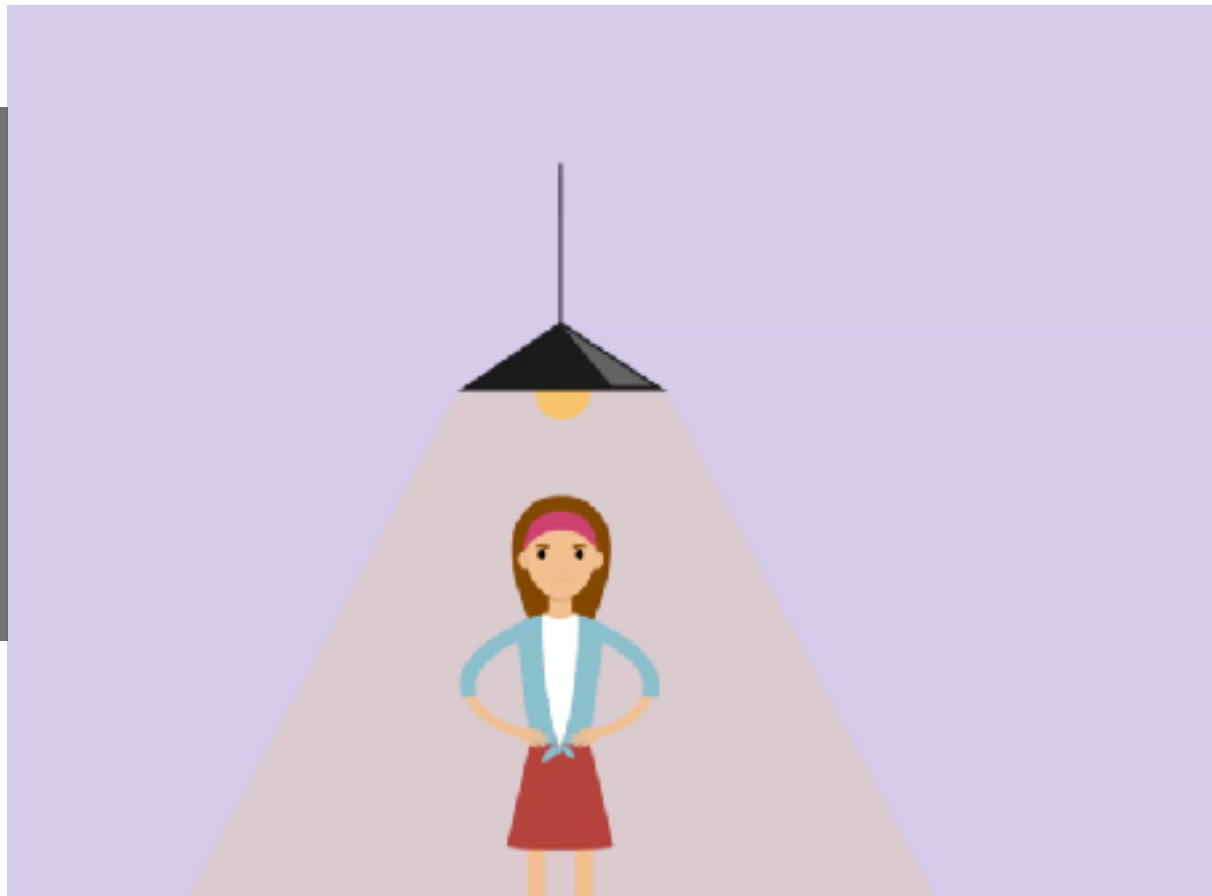
If we get the customer to tell a real story of what happened, we get a clue for our next question. Remember how we talked about getting a lot of information in stories? Like unwritten stuff that's hard to locate otherwise? What we really want to know is how Jan feels while she's experiencing her problem. This is mostly because people make purchasing decisions on both functional and emotional levels. The functional stuff is easy enough to get to - but the emotion is buried under a couple layers and not as readily apparent. We got that clue when Jan said, "So it kind of... Tapered off."



“This one
time? At
accounting
camp?”

- Jan's boss in Scranton,
PA

Question 3: What was hard about that?



What was hard about that experience?

About the question

This is the hardest part of the interview for the customer, and she may start feeling a little uncomfortable. We'll know this because she'll start squirming around, touching her nose, crossing her arms, and fiddling around with her earlobes all of a sudden. This is actually a good sign, one that tells us we're on the right track.

To be clear, our goal is not to make the customer feel uncomfortable! Rather, we're after what I like to call the emotional gold - we learn the customer's true sentiment about how painful the problem really is.

Prompts to try

So all we have to do is ask questions and observe. The key is to ask 'why' around four or five times, just like when we were kids.

- Why is that frustrating?
- Why does that make you angry?
- Why do you have to solve this problem?
- Why is it important to you to [insert ambition]?
- What happens if you can't?

Example

Me: So there was this bigger priority that came along.
Jan: Yup.
Me: Did you still want to do CiaB?
Jan: Yeah, but I figured I'd just put it on the back burner til I had time.
Me: Is the project done?
Jan: The heavy lifting is over.
Me: So what about CiaB? Will you pick it back up?
Jan: I don't know.
Me: Huh? Why?
Jan: I think it was just a pipe dream.
Me: Fair enough. But you seemed pretty fired up about it before.
Jan: True. I guess I just don't want to get all excited for nothing again.
Me: Why?
Jan: Because other things are going to happen just like that project.
Me: And so you want to conserve your brain?
Jan: Yeah.
Me: Why?
Jan: Because I need it for work
Me: Why?
Jan: So I can pay the bills...
Me: Why is that important?
Jan: So I can live...
Me: Like a standard of living thing?
Jan: No, more like a career thing.
Me: So you have ambitions.
Jan: Yeah! Doesn't everyone?
Me: I do, yes. I think that's right.

Pause

Me: So how would you feel if you didn't reach your ambitions?
Jan: Like a failure.
Me: And that would be icky, huh?
Jan: Are we done yet?

How to know you're doing it right

At some point, we reach the natural conclusion to this line of questioning. We can tell because feelings always have a source: if it's on the pain side, the

root feeling is usually fear, anger, guilt, or shame. On the 'I'm-feeling-awesome' side, it's usually joy, love, or contentment. You can get to these root feelings by continuing to ask why.

To avoid alienating our customer, we can use a little empathy. By this time, Jan's arms were crossed and she was looking around. I talked with her for a few more minutes about my own experience with ambitions and careers. Like how I always wanted to start a business because my parents were Entrepreneurs, and I figured that it would be easy, until I found out it wasn't. And how I had setbacks just like hers. After that, she relaxed a little more. I could tell she would hang around for a little longer, but not much - which is ok, because there are only a couple more questions.

Benefits / Insights

We talked about the emotional gold earlier, and this question delivers it. In my experience, I can tell a customer about her problem all day and she'll rarely get excited until I show her I understand how it makes her feel.

I know that when others describe my problem to me and they're accurate about how I feel, I'm more keen on listening to them. And what's more, I assume that they've got a solution since they know my problem so well. That's why it's gold - if we can know more about our customer's problem than they do, it takes less convincing about our solution and is therefore easier to sell.

This next part takes a little practice, but it's worth it: if you can remember each 'why-point' in the interview, write it down after the interview. In addition to deeply understanding the customer's pain, you'll have a real customer journey you can use. A quick tidbit worth mentioning here - I usually don't like to take notes during the interview but do write them down afterwards. I have found that taking notes while I'm talking with a customer detracts from the human connection I'm trying to create.



“Are we
done yet?”
-Jan

Question 4:
On a scale
of 1 to 10...



On a scale of 1 - 10, how hard or awesome, or important is this?

About the question

Beware! This question is not so much about data as it is about future reference. Right now, we are asking what the current state is. Later, when we've come back with an actual value proposition, we want to ask this question again. If we've moved the needle, the Value Proposition must be worth something.

Prompts to try

- On a scale of 1-10, how important is it?
- On a scale of 1-10, how painful is this problem for you?
- On a scale of 1-10, how big of a problem is this?
- On a scale of 1-10, how badly do you want this thing to happen?

Example

Me: So on a scale of 1-10, how important is it that you achieve your ambitions?

Jan: 11 for sure.

Me: Cool. If money weren't a part of that, how important would it be to keep the job you've got now?

Jan: A 5, I guess.

Me: And if money weren't a part of it, how important would it be to do CiaB?

Jan: 7

How to know you're doing it right

This portion is pretty intuitive for customers - they'll give us a number. Our job here is to "frame up" the question in context. We know we're doing it right when we can recognize the general level of pain a customer feels about their core issue - the one we uncovered in question 3, as it relates to their original objective (uncovered in question 1).

Benefits / Insights

If we record our customer's answer here, we can come back during later interviews when we've worked on their problem a little more and ask the same question in similar context. If the number changes, we'll have a *subjective* indication of how effective your value proposition is.

Jan reveals an interesting nugget with this question. It turns out that money is a great motivator for her - because when we take it out of the equation, doing CiaB actually gets her closer to achieving her personal ambitions.



“Owwwie!”

- Also Jan

Question 5: What's your solution now?



How do you currently solve for this?

About the question

Humans are awesome because they problem-solve and create stuff. I think it's safe to say that despite our killer idea, our customer is already solving her problem without my help. Which is actually desirable, since we have an opportunity to make things better for her.

The point of this question is to get an idea of how she's already solving or dealing with her problem. We can know if it's a solution that works well or if just kind of works. It's also an indication of where she goes for information about it or where she goes to purchase it. If we know *that*, we know where to get in front of other customers like her.

What's more, we can identify hidden opportunities - derivative problems that result from trying to solve this one. And of course, these kinds of opportunities can spur more detailed product development.

We're interested in learning four things:

1. What actions the customer is willing to take now to solve her problem.

2. How she searches for it online
3. What things she's open to trying
4. Where she goes to talk about it

Prompts to try

It's turning out that goal setting, while probably important for Jan, is only a means to an end. Her internal motivations (ambitions) are actually more important. Just like me, she bases her ambitions on her passions and what she has learned. So we're learning that maybe a goal-setting app isn't the right thing to focus on. Maybe it's a tool she can use to help her learn about her career path and how people typically navigate the path she's chosen. We can still make an app for that, of course - maybe something like a gamified career progress tracker.

Here are some questions we can ask:

- If you were looking for this, which search terms would you type in?
- After google, how would you research this?
- Would you look on Amazon? Quora? Reddit? Facebook? IG?
- What things have you tried in the past?
- Who else has this problem? Do you talk about it with them?

Example

The questions I ask next pertain to how she keeps on track.

Me: It seems you're pretty open to how things will turn out for you, but you've got a pretty good idea of where you're headed.

Jan: I mean life changes, so I'm flexible. But yeah, I have a vision.

Me: How do you do that? Keeping things flexible and focused at the same time?

Jan: I read. I learn as much as I can.

Me: Any mentors?

Jan: Not really. But I'm totally looking for some right now!*

Me: Do you do casual research or active?

Jan: Casual, most of the time.

Me: What social media platforms do you find that stuff on?

Jan: I use Instagram but mostly, I find career stuff on LinkedIn. Sometimes Facebook.

Me: What about events?

Jan: Nah, I like my cats and reading books.**

Me; How do you network then?

Jan: Mostly through friends from school and coworkers.

Me: So if you were to google this, what terms would you use?

Jan: Probably something like...idk...career advice, mentor network, or maybe even books about taxes as a career (yes, Jan is an accountant. Betcha didn't see that one coming).

*this is an opportunity - Jan is looking and open to mentors. If it makes sense, this could be a thing for us to address in our value proposition.

**this is another opportunity - Jan has revealed a way that she consumes information: reading books. Thought of as a media vessel, books may be a way for us to deliver content to her. Maybe an app is only part of the value proposition we can offer Jan.

How to know you're doing it right

If we have done this correctly, the customer will reveal the language she uses to research her problem. We can use these terms in ads, or we can use them to conduct more research at places like answerthepublic.com.

Benefits / Insights

We'll know what to write about when you go a-blogging / a-podcasting. We'll understand what she's willing and not willing to try, and you'll have an idea of how she socially validates her solution - ie, where she goes to talk with others about it. This can give us a clue about how word of mouth spreads later.



“Yeah, no.”

- Me when Jan asked if I would watch her dog over the weekend while she went to Yosemite with her boyfriend.

I'd like to close by just coming right out and saying it:

It's a statement of fact that beans are the 'magical fruit.' And obviously, beans should be served at every meal. But how they're dressed up and which type of bean they are - well, that's your job to determine that.

As a startup, you're making beans - you want to serve the right beans to the right folks based on their preferences. Because you can serve butter beans to a family expecting baked beans. And they might get eaten, but they won't be raved about or consumed and seconds requested.

They'll just be there on the table, with every other food for the meal. And all of a sudden, the beans - your beans, the ones you worked so hard to perfect - will remain anonymously in the shadows of the tri-tip.

Our customer interviews have the power to reveal competition-crushing and growth driving insights if we ask the right questions. Notice how, during the whole interview, we didn't tell Jan once about our app idea - that's because it would have spoiled our discovery. We learned that Jan wants a fulfilling professional life while still financially leveling up. She knows she can't do it by herself, and she is willing to connect with others for that help. So what started out as a goal-setting app may actually turn into something far greater - a tool that will help Jan realize who she can become and actually help her get there.

Next Steps & How to Use These Insights

Suppose we've conducted about 10 of these interviews, and it's safe to say that we've uncovered some recurring themes / problems, along with common pain points and opportunities to make people feel better. The next step would be to craft a Value Proposition.

For our purposes, a Value Proposition would consist of a list of things we can do to help our customers (taken from question 5), plus a list of benefits they will gain by using our offering (derived from question 3).

For more on how to craft a Value Proposition, you can visit strategyzer.com or do a quick google search.

Credit to Justin Wilcox. I'd like to thank Justin or providing me with the basic framework for customer interviews. At CustomerDevLabs.com, he and his team have this dialed in, and I recommend you have a visit over there.

For information on how to go from idea to app design, this article by Erika Harano is pretty sweet: <https://medium.com/erika-harano/ux-case-study-goalful-productivity-app-c4c0958d3c1d>



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