

## Customer Interview Rules

0. **People are really nice and they don't want to hurt your feelings.** This means that they will lie! Don't believe me? Just think about the last time a friend introduced you to a significant other you didn't like or told you about a brilliant idea you thought was really dumb. Did you lie to spare their feelings? Your objective is to make it difficult for them to lie by making it hard for them to tell what you are after.
1. **Ask open-ended questions to get them talking.** It's unlikely that you'll find what you're looking for through yes or no questions. It will be through the stories your subjects are sharing that they will convey useful information they might not even understand is important.
2. **It's not a real problem unless the subject has spent time and money trying to fix the problem.** It has to be a real, migraine need.
3. **Always qualify your interviews to make sure they are the customer segment you are targeting and not just a random person.** Everyone is not your customer! When you are first getting started, you need to find the early adopters – those people that can't live without your product because their pain is so great. This is often around 13% of the total addressable market for your product. You need to figure out what they have in common as a group and where you can find groups of these people.
4. **Conduct the interviews in person.** The majority of an individual's communication is non-verbal. If you try to conduct interviews by phone, you will miss out on very important indicators of topics where you should dig deeper. Also, if you've never met the person before, it's a lot more difficult to get them to trust you and open up over the phone because you have a lot less time for small talk and establishing a connection/bond.
5. **Potential customers will be a lot more open about their problems if you don't try to sell them something during the initial interview.** Think about how you act on the phone when a telemarketer calls. You are just trying to find the first opportunity to get out of the conversation. You aren't going to open up and share additional information. If you want your subject to really open up and share, you need to get them to trust you. And the best way to establish trust is to convince them, up front, that you don't have any kind of an ask at the end of the conversation, that you aren't trying to set them up for something. I like to tell them that a friend or someone soliciting an investment has pitched me an idea and I'm just trying to understand the space better. Some of my students tell interview subjects that they are conducting interviews for a class.
6. **Separate the Problem and Solution interviews.** The problem interview should establish whether the customer segment you've chosen has a migraine problem they want solved. The solution interview is a simulation where you attempt to presell the solution to a product that doesn't exist yet. #5 explains the importance of separating these two interviews.



7. **Don't use "would you" in a question.** These are the worst two words you can have in an interview question. You won't learn anything. People cannot predict the future. It's not just that they are trying to be nice, it's that they are awful at it because they answer questions rationally, but they act subconsciously, often in irrational ways. So any questions like "would you use this?", "would you pay this much?", "would you recommend this to your friends?", are totally useless. You should only ask questions about present day or past behavior. A person's memory is much more accurate than their fortune telling ability.
8. **Interview only one person at a time.** It's always better to interview individuals rather than focus groups. Subjects by themselves are going to be a lot more honest and less likely to be influenced by others, as sometimes happens in focus groups. This also means no surveys. Surveys don't allow you to ask follow up questions. They don't allow you to dig deeper when the subject begins to hint at an interesting story.
9. **Understand what you are trying to learn from the interview before you begin.** Write out a hypothesis you are trying to test. I.e. whether a certain customer segment is experiencing a particular problem. Write it in a way that can be proven true or false. Then set out success criteria before you start. How many out of 20 interviews will prove your statement true? 2? 10? If you aren't sure where you are heading, you'll waste a lot of the interview asking questions that don't yield any useful answers. But be careful to mind Rule #15.
10. **Try to prove the opposite.** Once you understand Rule 0, that it's human nature to be nice and lie to you to protect your feelings, you'll see that if you are hinting to people what the right answer is, they are going to give it to you almost every time. Try to hint the opposite. Make it hard for them to prove your hypothesis. If they are really experiencing a problem, this is the only way to smoke out their feelings.
11. **Always ask a potential customer if they know anyone else you could interview.** Sometimes it's difficult to find many members of your customer segment. Once you have an interview with a perfect candidate and they believe that you aren't trying to sell them anything and that you are trying to understand something that's a real problem for them, they will be happy to provide the names of others just like them.
12. **Do a lot more listening than talking.** You should speak no more than 20% of the conversation, including introductions. You aren't trying to convince them of anything. You are just trying to understand how they currently operate.
13. **Record the interview as quickly as possible.** Certain things they tell you won't instantly appear to be significant. They will gain importance once you hear others mention something similar. Plus, once you conduct a few interviews, they will likely start to blend together in your mind. Try to write down or record as much as you can so that you can always go back and see what they had to say.
14. **Make sure you are giving them plenty of opportunities to tell their story.** Your subjects' true feelings aren't going to come out through the direct answers to your questions, but in the stories they tell you around their answers.



15. **Try to get the potential customer to articulate their pain without leading them in any way.** For instance, if your assumption is that picking up after their dog is a migraine problem, ask them to tell you about the last time they walked their dog and take them through the process. Don't just ask them directly about whether picking up after their dog is a problem. See what you can ask about the dog walk to get them to say that it's a problem on their own, without leading them. I.e. Are there any parts of the walk that you don't enjoy? Do you find yourself complaining about anything having to do with walking your dog on a regular basis? Have you shopped around for any tools or accessories to make the walk more fun or easier? Remember, you're not trying to convince them that they have a problem (that's expensive to implement), you are trying to uncover whether they actually have a problem.
16. **The founder of the company should be the one doing the interviews, otherwise, they are meaningless.** You'll be a lot more likely to believe and act on the information if you gather it yourself. Employees are going to be hesitant to tell you negative results of interviews. They will try to please you just like your interview subjects. And they won't care enough about the interviews to dig deeper when necessary or be careful to not lead the interview in any way.
17. **People sitting down are more likely to talk and endure questions than people walking or standing.** Try to find subject in the following order: introduction from a mutual friend, contacting someone you have some connection to (belong to the same organization, graduate of the same school, 2nd or 3rd connection on linkedin, etc), going to a public place where potential subjects are likely to spend their time.
18. **Finding a problem worth solving alone won't guarantee success – you have to prove that customers want your solution.** Solution interviews shouldn't really be interviews at all. They should be objective experiments of whether your customers will perform a certain action. Examples of objective experiments include setting up a simple landing page on unbounce.com to test whether customers will enter their credit card info, actual presales, etc.
19. **Try to use the 5 whys.** Once someone articulates a problem, ask them why they think it's a problem. Then once they give you an answer, ask why again. You try to do this 5 times and hopefully by the 5th why, you will get to the heart of whatever was causing the original problem.
20. **Don't be all business.** The more conversational you can be, the more they will share. If they say something interesting, try to offer similar things you've heard from other subjects to let them know they are not alone. Don't make it feel like an interrogation. Try to make it more like a first date ☺.

If you have any questions or comments about these rules, feel free to send Diana a message at [dkkander@gmail.com](mailto:dkkander@gmail.com).



## Testimonials

### What people are saying

"I dare you to find a business book for entrepreneurs that's as useful as All In Startup, and I double-dare you to find one that's as much fun to read. Diana Kander captures what it's like to launch something new. The result is a book that helps set readers on the path to finding startup success."

—**Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos.com and author of the #1 New York Times Bestseller Delivering Happiness**

"This is a must read for anyone interested in launching a new product or business. All In Startup makes lean concepts more accessible through a simple but powerful allegory to which readers will easily relate. Diana Kander helps readers understand the value of the lean approach by tying it to a memorable story."

—**Steve Blank, Lecturer, U.C. Berkeley, Stanford University, Columbia University and UCSF**

"Not often enough is a business book so chock-full of intelligent advice and such a fun read."

—**John Jantsch, author of Duct Tape Marketing and Duct Tape Selling**

"There is seldom a read that when you start it, you can't put it down. Diana Kander has crafted such an experience that fuses an engaging story of choices, dilemmas, tradeoffs, and problems with the real-world experience of the entrepreneur. In a narrative that captures the culture and the spirit of an entrepreneur in a worthy tale of swagger, hustle and intuition, the reader will learn the lessons of the 'all in' entrepreneur and build a framework to approach their own entrepreneurial pathway. Before you know it, the lessons framed in the book become your own, to the extent that you will convince yourself you have always known them. I've concluded that anyone who thinks they may want to take a crack at founding a business should read All In Startup first."

—**Ted Zoller, Director, Center for Entrepreneurial Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill**

"If more books were like All In Startup, the business world would be much better off, and significantly more entertaining. This is a delightfully fresh take on what it requires to follow your passion—even against the odds. Highly recommended!"

—**Jay Baer, New York Times bestselling author of Youtility**

"I loved this book! It is a fun read but also really makes you think. The concepts apply nicely to many business situations, not just start-ups. Before generating any solution, make sure you understand who the customer is (you better have one) and talk to them. Whether you are work in Accounting, IT, HR, Supply Chain Management before creating solutions or services intended for your customers - ask first!"

— **Julie M Miller, co-author of Culture Without Accountability - WTF? What's The Fix?**

I really enjoyed this book. It was engaging and entertaining -- two words that you usually don't associate with books about entrepreneurship and the challenges of new startups. I'm not an entrepreneur, but I try to be entrepreneurial in the way I run my library. I found the recommendations about "headaches vs migraines" to be very valuable in my decision-making process. Of course, the idea of engaging the customer early on is critical, and something that good NPOs and government services need to do, too. Even if you don't attend to start a new venture read this book. It is very entertaining and you'll learn lots.

— **Steven V. Potter, Library Director and CEO Mid-Continent Public Library**