

The Mom Test Summary

By Rob Fitzpatrick

'Mom, do you think this is a good idea?' If you've ever asked your mom, or anyone for that matter, whether you think your next big business venture is a good idea, then you've just failed the "mom test."

The Mom Test provides simple rules for crafting good questions, that even moms can't lie to us about. We're taught how to talk to customers, navigate the noise, and understand what businesses need to succeed. Typically, when we ask, 'Is this a good idea?' we inadvertently coax people to say something nice about our proposed concept.

According to author and entrepreneur Rob Fitzpatrick, customer conversations are wrong by default, but we can learn how to fix them. Before his entrepreneurial success, he started out as a programmer, and like many others, was forced into a customer-facing role in his first company. He knew it was important to talk to customers, but none of the books about sales and "customer development" seemed to help him figure out *how to* talk to customers properly. So he wrote "the missing handbook", *The Mom Test*.

Fitzpatrick believes that every question we ask, carries the very real possibility of inflicting bias on the person to whom we're talking. This innate bias renders the whole conversation pointless. Although Fitzpatrick suggests that our moms will lie to us the most (because of how much they love us), asking leading questions actually invites *everyone* to lie to us, even if just a little.

We'll briefly look at what questions can help us pass the "mom test," and how to cut through compliments, anchor through the fluff, and avoid "idea talk." Having these skills will allow us to conduct better conversations that don't waste anyone's time. We'll look at how to do this in a way that we can build something that people *actually* want.

What *is* the Mom Test?

When it comes to the "mom test," the biggest mistake we make is turning to our family and friends, and asking what they hypothetically think of our next big business idea.

Like it or not, friends and family might conceal what they really think about our idea, because they want to be encouraging. And, potential investors might tell us they like our concept just to get us to stop talking.

So to find out if people genuinely care about what we're doing, avoid mentioning a "brilliant" idea at all. Instead, talk to customers about their lives. Yes, obviously, at some point we need to tell people what we're building and ask for money in return. However, almost always, the biggest mistake we make is to mention our idea too early in the conversation.

Not talking about our idea is the easiest, and most significant improvement we can make in our early-stage customer conversations. Why? Because when we *stop* talking about our idea, we *start* to listen more, and thereby begin to ask the right questions.

According to Fitzpatrick, 'The measure of usefulness of an early customer

conversation is whether it gives us concrete facts about our customers' lives and world views.' He proposes a simple test to ensure that early customer interviews are naturally driven towards facts instead of opinions.

The mom test has three rules: First, 'talk about their life instead of your idea.' Second, 'ask about specifics in the past, instead of generics or opinions about the future.' And third, remember to 'talk less and listen more.'

Customer Conversations Are Bad by Default, So it's Our Job to Fix Them.

Every question we ask carries the genuine possibility of subtly influencing the person we're talking to, and rendering the whole exercise pointless. We might end up with false negatives (we think the idea is dead when it's not) if we apply the wrong approach and inappropriate questions. Or, more dangerously, we might come up with false positives where we're convinced that we're on the right track when we aren't.

According to our author, 'Trying to learn from customers' conversations is like excavating a delicate archeological site. The truth is down there somewhere, but it's fragile. So to find the truth about how to make our business succeed - we need to dig for it, and dig past "bad data."'

What is bad data? Compliments, generic "fluffy" responses, future talk, and feature talk, all have the potential to lead us astray. Here are some ways customer conversations go wrong, and how we can fix them, so we can get to the truth as to whether our business idea is a good one or not.

Detect and Deflect Compliments

The goal of any customer conversation is to extract facts, not compliments. If you catch yourself saying to customers, "Thanks," or, "I'm glad you like it." then you're in the red zone. This is when it's time to "talk less and listen more."

Fitzpatrick's rule of thumb is: 'Compliments are the fool's gold of customer learning: shiny, distracting, and worthless.' With the expectation of industry experts, who have built a similar business, opinions are worthless. More often than not, a compliment is a polite way of trying to fob us off. How do customers or investors show that they're interested? They usually skip the compliments and go straight to the specifics. They look for concrete details about a product or service.

A typical meeting might go as follows. We get excited about what we're building, fall into pitch mode and say, 'Our product is like X, for Y, but it's better because of Z.' We think we're "crushing it" because we might get a response like, 'That's cool, I love it.' In reality, the customer or investor might be thinking, 'How on earth is this relevant to me?' We believe we're great, and they end the meeting with a response like, 'Sounds terrific, keep me in the loop.' (Which, by the way, is a stalling tactic, not a commitment). We go back to the office or out for celebratory drinks, and six months down the road, we can't understand why we have zero customers.

The best way to avoid compliments is to *not* talk about an idea. However, that's easier said than done, especially if we're really excited about it and want others to like our idea as much as we do. Here's how to notice when we fall into "approval-seeking mode" or "pitch-talk," and how to redirect the conversation to avoid coaxing people into complimenting us.

If you start the conversation with, 'I'm thinking of starting a business... so, do you think it'll work?' you've slipped into accidental approval-seeking mode. Or if you find yourself five minutes into an enthusiastic monologue, while the other person nods politely, then you've fallen into "pitch mode." Both are bad.

Accidental approval-seeking is what our author calls "The Pathos Problem." It happens when we expose our egos, leading people to feel they ought to protect us by saying nice things. As for pitch talk, Fitzpatrick warns, 'The more you're talking, the worse you're doing.' All is not lost though, you can recover with a well-timed, 'Whoops, I just slipped into pitch mode. I'm sorry about that; I get excited about these things. Can we jump back to what you were just saying?'

Now that we're a step closer to being compliment-proof, we need to avoid steering the conversation into hypothetical la la land.

Anchor Fluff

How do we tell when we're in fluff talk territory? Customers will use generic statements like, 'I usually, I always, I never...' or will start to talk hypothetically and say, 'I might, I could,' or 'I will'. When this happens, it's time to "anchor" the conversation back to the present, or talk about the past.

'I would *definitely* buy that!' is probably the world's deadliest fluffy response that can lead us astray. Why? Any talk about a hypothetical future leads people to be over-optimistic about what they'll do, and what they might be willing to pay for something. People tend to talk about who they want to be, and not who they are, leaving us with unreliable data.

So future-related questions to avoid, include: 'Would you buy a product that does X?' Or, 'How much would you pay for X?' And stay clear of questions that start with, '*Might* you, do you think, or *could* you see yourself...'

Instead, use questions that anchor people in the life they already lead, and the actions they're already taking. Questions that elicit reliable data are based on a customer's past behavior and what they're willing to commit to or pay for in the present.

A meeting is useful when we learn about how our customers spend their days, the tools they use to get tasks done, the constraints of these tools, and how a product can fit into their day. Try to get customers to talk about when last they encountered the problem you're trying to solve, how they wanted to solve it in the past, and other solutions they might have tried. It's even better to watch someone perform the task you're trying to help them with. This is a reliable way of assessing where the actual inefficiencies lie and what you can do to improve them.

Let's now turn to the last conversation tip, which is to avoid getting sidetracked by customer ideas and feature suggestions.

Ideas and Feature Suggestions Should be Understood, Not Obeyed

Customers may try to suggest features that they think could solve their problem, or should be added to the product. The problem is most entrepreneurs face the dilemma of having too many ideas, as opposed to too few. Startups are about focusing on and executing a single, scalable idea rather than jumping on every "good" idea that crosses our desks.

Our lives would be so much easier if we truly understood the motivation behind a customer's request. So when a customer gives us a feature idea, make sure to take note, but don't rush to add it to the to-do list. And

do some digging behind their request. Ask questions like, 'Why do you want that?' 'What would that let you do?' or 'How are you coping without it?'

Our author's rule of thumb is, 'We aren't allowed to tell customers their problems, and they aren't allowed to tell us what to build.'

Early-stage meetings must focus on learning, with revenue as the side effect. So our goal is to stick to the three rules of the mom test, and dig past the bad data. However, once we've learned the facts of our industry and our customers, and designed the solution, it's time to start pushing for advancement and commitment. This brings us to the practical ideas on how to do this.

That Went Well. Or Did It?

Think about this. We've just had two meetings. Which went well, and which didn't?

The first meeting ended with, 'Looks great. Let me know when it launches.' The second ended with, 'When can we start the trial?'

A meeting that ends well is one where there's a commitment or some form of advancement. Classic good meeting conclusions end with the following: 'There are a couple of people I can introduce you to, when you're ready.' 'What are the next steps?' 'When can you come back to talk to the rest of the team?'

A meeting that ends with a compliment and no commitment is a meeting that didn't go well. And, after a product or sales meeting, if we don't

know what will happen next, the meeting was pointless. Even worse than this is the wishy-washy meeting, where we're left with neither rejection nor advancement. We're essentially in no man's land.

So how do we fix bad meetings? We can learn to be more forward about enforcing the next step, and risk rejection by asking for some form of commitment. The trick is to be upfront and clear about what we're asking for in terms of commitment. People commit when they give up something of value; this usually means cash. But cash isn't the only currency of commitment; two other forms of commitment include time and reputational risk. A time commitment could consist of a clear next meeting with known goals. Reputation risk commitments might be introducing us to decision-makers, like their boss or friends, or even giving a public testimonial. Commitment is important because it shows us if people care about what we're doing.

If whoever we're speaking to doesn't commit, then no problem; there's no need to waste anyone's time further. If you do secure commitment, even better, the project can begin.

What if we're asking mom test-worthy questions, and when relevant, pushing for commitment and advancement, but still confused about what to build? Then it's time to be more selective about *who* we talk to.

Slice Your Customers

If you're getting mixed feedback and can't make sense of it, then your customer segment is likely too broad. And it's time to slice. In other words, narrow down your customer segment to a small, highly specific group of target customers and focus *only* on their unique goals and

motivations.

Our author's rule of thumb: 'If you aren't finding consistent problems and goals, then you don't have a specific enough customer segment.'

Consider the following example of a woman our author interviewed. She developed a new superfood powder. It was sweet but had all the nutrition of a multivitamin, and any number of people could use her product. For example, bodybuilders could sprinkle it on their breakfast or mix it in with their protein shake. Moms could use it to trick their kids into being healthy. Restaurants could leave it on the tables as a healthy sugar alternative. There was just one problem. The more people she talked to, the more confused she got. The bodybuilders wanted one thing, the restaurants wanted another, and moms needed a third. The feedback she was getting was wildly inconsistent. She was asking the *right* questions but couldn't find the *right* problems to focus on and brand her product accordingly. Her customer segment was too broad.

So she asked herself who would most likely buy her product and decided it was moms with young kids who shopped at health food stores. She targeted small, independent health food stalls to market her product and successfully scaled her business from there.

If you think your customer segment is too broad, perhaps ask the following questions. 'Within this group, which type of person would want this most?' 'Would everyone within this group buy or use your product or only some?' 'Does everyone in the group have the same motivation, or just some, and what additional motivations are there?' 'What might *that* customer subset want, and what are their specific problems?'

Before we can serve everyone, we have to serve *someone*. Customer

slicing helps to target a well-defined "who", so we can start to build our business around a specific set of "what's", and grow from there.

Running the Process: Before, During, and After a Meeting

A few comprehensive notes and a bit of pre-and post-meeting admin will have you covered.

Before any meeting, decide on the "three big questions" you want to ask. If you're able, sit down with your whole team and ask, 'what do you guys want to learn from these guys?'

During meetings, remember to keep it casual. Talking over coffee beats any formal meeting. If there's one thing our author's learned, it's that customer interviews work best through quick, casual chats rather than formal meetings. If possible, have two people from your team present during a coffee chat. Have one person on talking duty, and the other on note-taking duty. Our author likes to keep it "old school" and carries around post-it notes to jot down ideas during meetings. However, notes are useless if we don't look at them, which brings us to the final part of the process, the review.

'The goal here,' says Fitzpatrick, 'is to ensure that learning is on paper and in everyone's heads, not just in yours.' Ensure you communicate the key quotes, key takeaways, and the main problems you ran into, with the team. It might even be helpful to do a meta-review, where you look at what questions worked well, which didn't, and what can be improved upon. After the review process, remember to store the information

somewhere more permanent and easily retrievable, like on a Google spreadsheet or a program like Evernote.

In Conclusion

The Mom Test isn't just another theoretical framework to help us "conceptualize" the startup world. It's a tactical book.

If you take two hours out of your day and read this short book from front to back, you might just find your time repaid tenfold. Why? Because bad customer conversations aren't just useless, they're dangerous. Such discussions may convince us that we're on the right path, but they often give us "false-positives" that cause us to over-invest our money (maybe even "mom's" money). Furthermore, they often lead us to waste precious time and energy on building something that nobody wants. Instead, we can learn to talk less, listen more, discover what our customers genuinely care about, and create something of value.

While Fitzpatrick primarily targets those of us who are still trying to define our solution to a specific problem, much of his advice can still be applied to customer and investor conversations as the company matures.

So, if you believe you've got a brilliant business idea, how can you bring it to life by asking the right questions?