TALKING TO CUSTOMERS: LEARNING WHAT THEY REALLY NEED

How to ask questions that get honest answers, not polite compliments, and what to do with what you hear.

TYPE: GUIDE REVIEWED: NOVEMBER 2026 TIME: 9 MINUTES LEVEL: BEGINNER

AT A GLANCE

- Customer conversations are the cheapest and fastest way to test an idea.
- Ask about **their life and past behavior**, not about your idea. "Would you buy this?" gets polite yeses. "How did you handle this last time?" gets the truth.
- Aim for **10 to 20 conversations** before you spend real money.

Why it matters

Friends and family want to be supportive, so they'll often say your idea is great. That feels good but can lead you to build something nobody pays for. Good questions uncover what people actually do, how much the problem costs them, and whether they'd switch.

Good and bad questions

Instead of asking...	Ask...
"Would you buy this?"	"How do you handle this today?"
"Do you like my idea?"	"What's the hardest part of [the problem]?"
"How much would you pay?"	"What have you spent trying to solve this?"
"Would you use an app for this?"	"Tell me about the last time this happened."
"Is this a good idea?"	"What else have you tried? Why didn't it work?"

KEY POINT

Talk about **the past**, not the future. What people did is a much better guide than what they say they'll do.

Step by step

1. **Make a list** of 20 people who fit your target customer. See **I-02 Who Is Your Customer?**.
2. **Ask for 15 minutes.** "I'm researching how [type of person] handles [problem]. Could I ask you a few questions? I'm not selling anything."
3. **Use a short script**, like the one in **I-11 Customer Interview Script and Notes**. Start broad, then go deeper on what they bring up.
4. **Listen more than you talk.** Aim for them talking 80% of the time.
5. **Write down their exact words.** You'll use them in your marketing later.
6. **End with two questions:** "Who else should I talk to?" and "Can I follow up when I have something to show you?"
7. **Look for patterns** after every 5 conversations.

Signs you're onto something

- People describe the problem with strong feelings or a story.
- They've already spent money or time trying to fix it.
- They ask when they can buy, or offer to pay upfront.
- They introduce you to others with the same problem.

Signs to rethink

- People say "that's interesting" but can't remember the last time it happened.
- Nobody has tried to solve it.
- The problem is real, but they don't control the budget.

> EXAMPLE
>
> **Diego** wanted to build an app for booking barbers. In 12 interviews with barbers, he learned most were happy with their existing booking tools. Their real pain was **no-shows**. He changed his idea to a deposit-and-reminder service, and six barbers paid for a three-month trial.

Common mistakes

- **Pitching instead of listening.** Save the pitch for later.
- **Only talking to friends and family.** Find strangers who fit.
- **Leading questions.** "Don't you hate when...?" gets the answer you want, not the truth.
- **Stopping at 3 conversations.** Patterns show up after 10 or more.

Your checklist

☐ List 20 people who fit your customer

☐ Write or adapt your script (I-11)

- ☐ Book 10 conversations this month
- ☐ Write down exact words and stories
- ☐ Review patterns after every 5
- ☐ Update your customer description (I-02)

Key words, explained

Word	What it means
Customer discovery	Learning what customers need before building.
Leading question	A question that pushes someone toward an answer.
Validation	Evidence that people want and will pay for something.

Where to go next

- **I-11 Customer Interview Script and Notes**
- **I-06 Testing Your Idea Before Spending Big**
- **I-09 Making Your First Sale**

IMPORTANT
This guide is general education from the Project Underdogs Founder Library. It is not legal, tax, accounting, immigration or investment advice, and it is not an offer of investment or a promise of funding. Figures are general examples and ranges, not quotes. Rules change and every business is different, so check your situation with a qualified professional. Full terms: LIB-03 Disclaimer and Terms of Use.