ITI8740/ITX8522: Software Development Team Project. 2025

05. Talking to Customers: The Mom Test

Martin Verrev

martin.verrev@taltech.ee

**Building without an understanding of your customer is superstition, not science.**

Building without some reasonable understanding of your business and customer is just guessing. And if you're guessing, you're in the realm of superstition rather than science.

A product manager presenting customer data to the executive team, or two priests showing the application of torture under the supervision of the Inquisition?
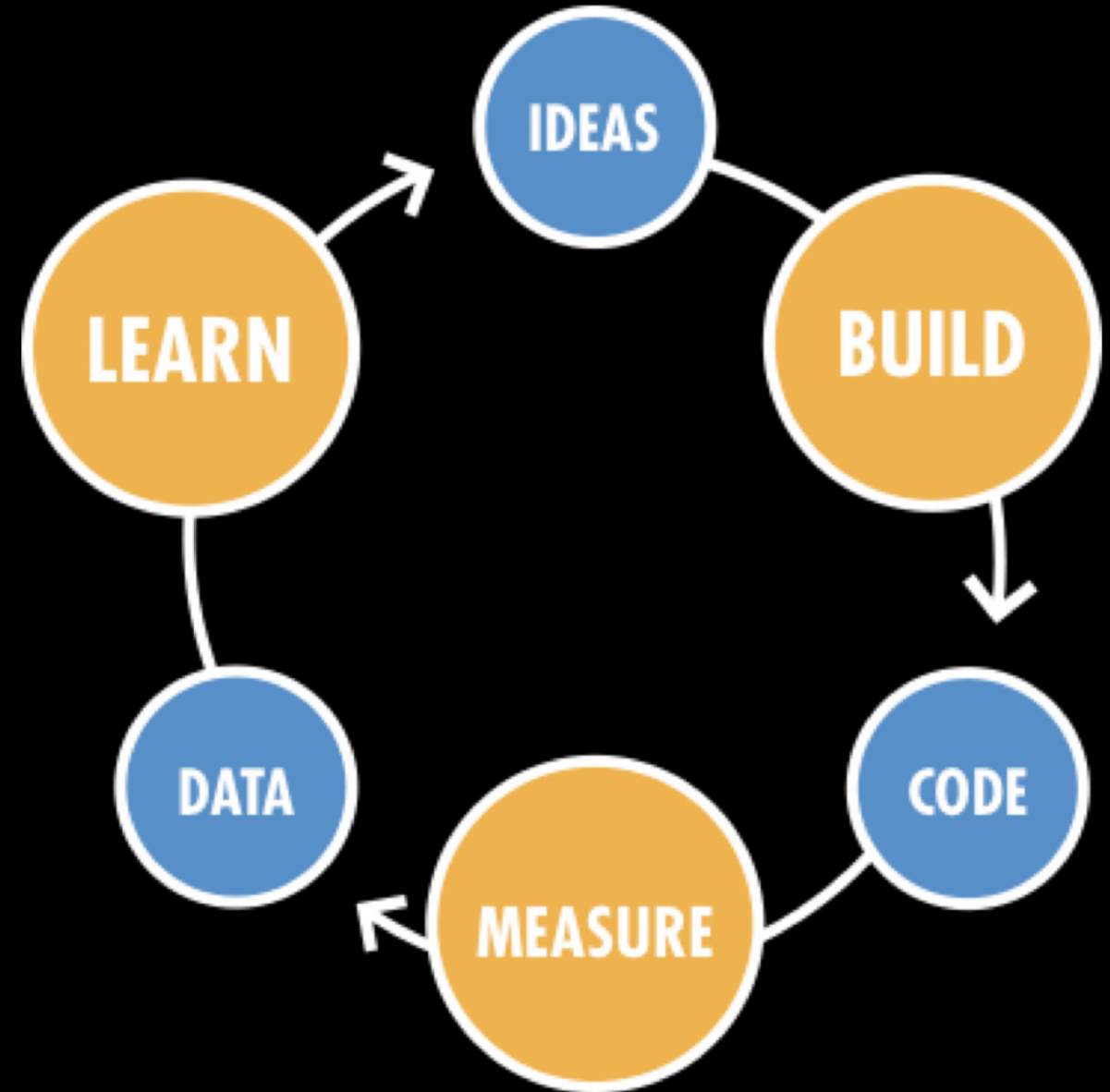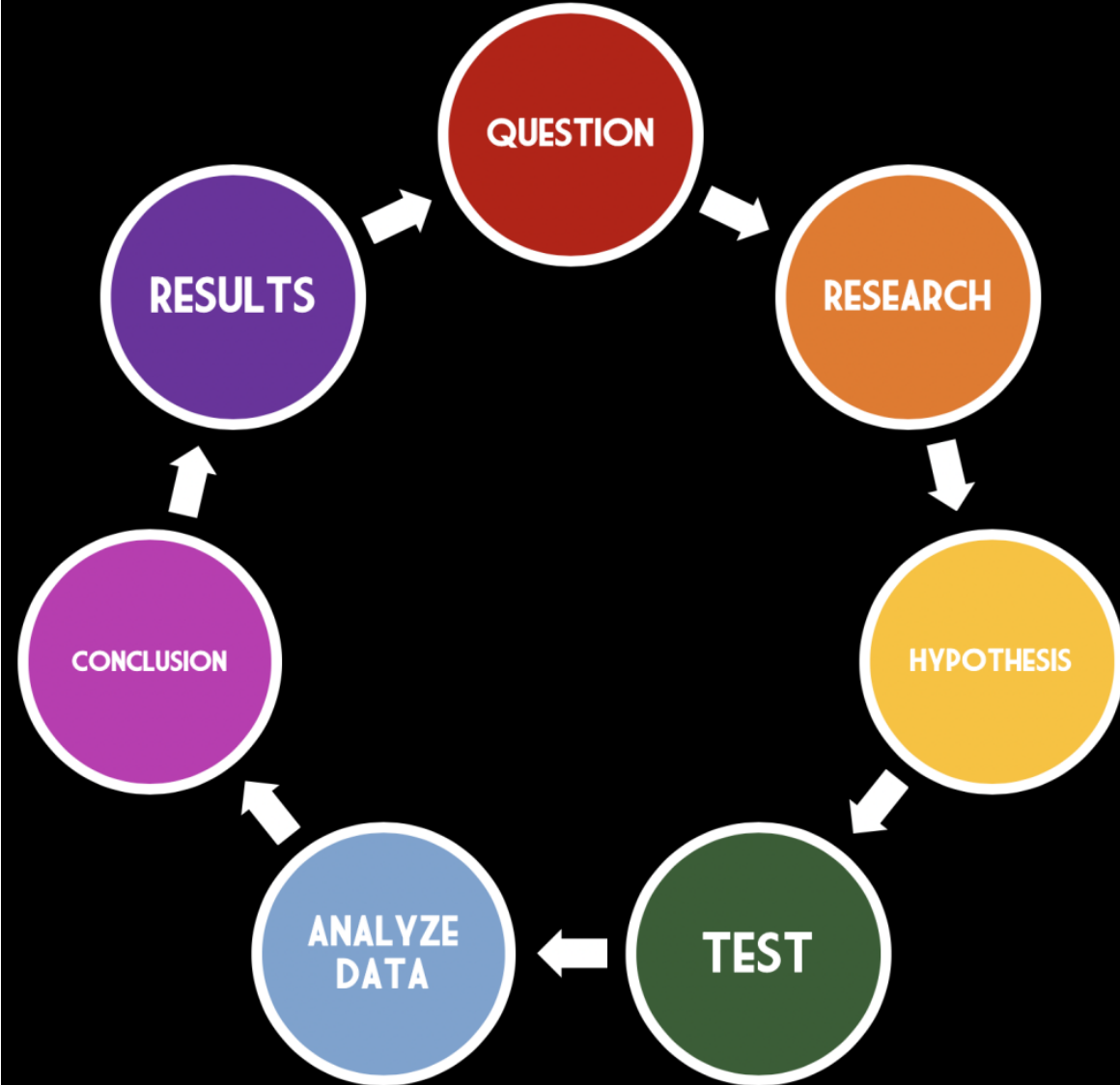
A hypothesis is a tentative statement that expresses a possible explanation or prediction based on your observations, assumptions, and data. A hypothesis helps you to narrow down your problem, communicate your assumptions and expectations to others, and to evaluate your results objectively. A hypothesis is not a guess or a hunch, but a logical and testable proposition that can be supported or rejected by evidence.

"*Because we believe X, if we do Y, we expect Z to happen*."

You can think of your team as:

The Problem Team: *"What?"*

The Problem Team is *mostly* involved with "outside the building" activities such as interviewing customers, running usability tests, etc.

The Solution Team: *"How?"*

The Solution Team is *mostly* involved with "inside the building" activities such as writing code, running tests, deploying releases, etc.

Decouple the Problem From the Solution

The Problem Interview

Your main objective here is identifying your early adopters and learning how they currently solve these problems.

The Solution Interview

Armed with a prioritized must-have problem list and an understanding of how early adopters address this problem today, you are then in the best position to define and test a MVP. Even here you build a "demo" first and use that to test the must-have features, positioning, and pricing.

The problem Interview

Customer Segments: Who has the pain?

- How do you identify early-adopters?

Problem: What are you solving?

- What is their pain level: must-have, nice-to-have, don't-need?

- How do customers solve these problems today?

PROBLEM INTERVIEW SCRIPT DECONSTRUCTED

WELCOME
2 min • Set the Stage

Focus on behavioral triggers or psychographics

COLLECT DEMOGRAPHICS
2 min • Test customer segment

• THE SETUP
• IDENTIFY EARLY ADOPTERS

Frame around outcome versus problem

TELL A STORY
2 min • Set problem context

~~PROBLEM RANKING~~
~~min • Test Problem~~

Zoom in further on how to uncover this

EXPLORE CUSTOMER'S WORLDVIEW
15 min • Test Problem

• TEST PROBLEM

WRAPPING UP
2 min • The Ask

• PERMISSION TO FOLLOW-UP
• REFERRALS

DOCUMENT RESULTS
5 min

• DOCUMENT RESULTS

The Problem Interview: Exit Criteria

You are done when you have interviewed at least 10 people and:

- Can identify the demographics of an early adopter,

- Have a must-have problem and

- Can describe how customers solve this problem today

Key points to figure out

1. Do consumers recognize that they have a problem you are trying to solve?

2. If there was a solution would they buy it?

3. Would they buy it from us?

4. Can we build a solution for that problem?
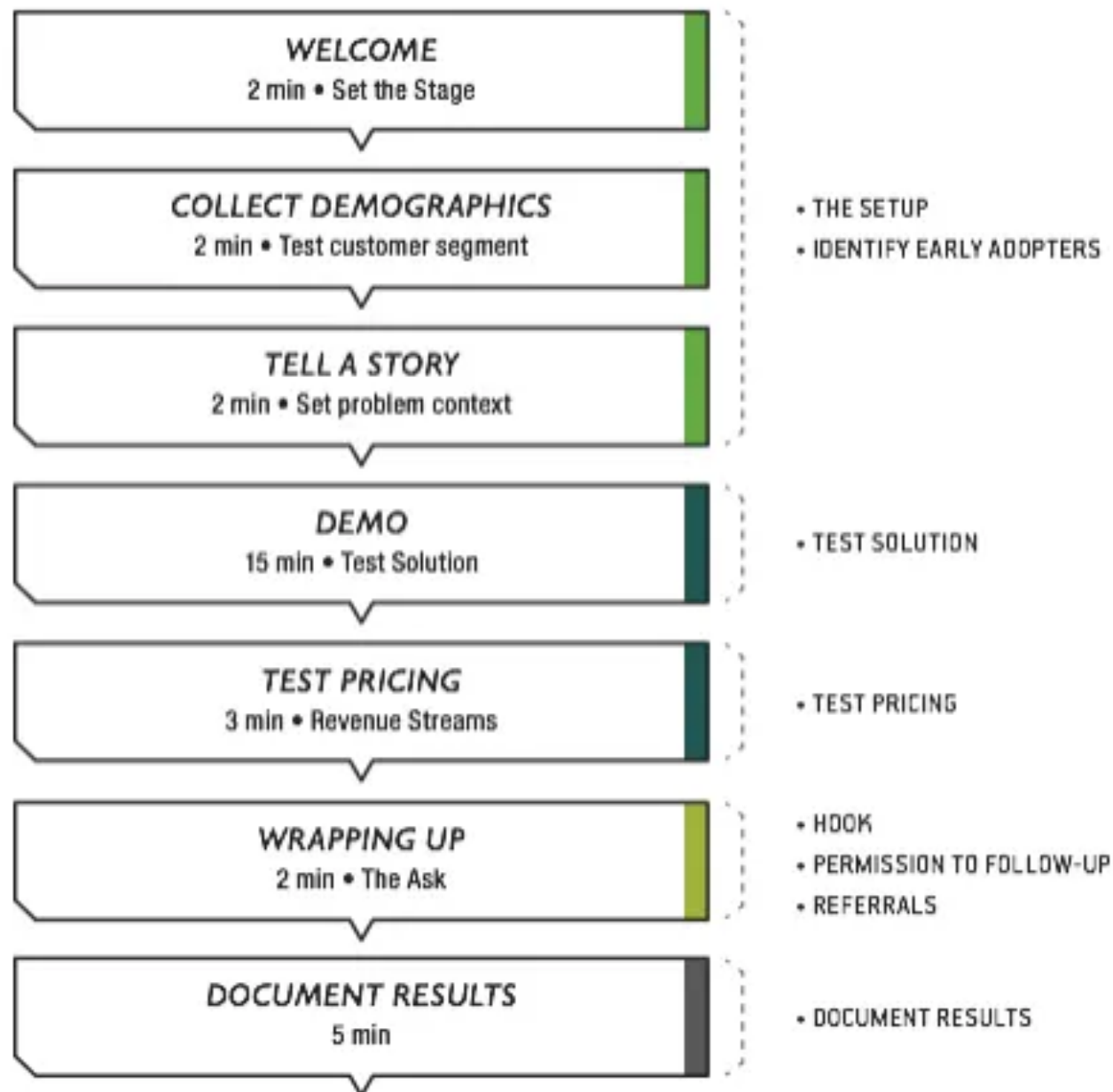
The Solution Interview

Solution: How will you solve these problems?

- What is the minimum feature set needed to launch?

Revenue Streams: What is the Pricing Model?

- Will customers pay for a solution?

- What price will they bear?

SOLUTION INTERVIEW SCRIPT DECONSTRUCTED

WELCOME
2 min • Set the Stage

COLLECT DEMOGRAPHICS
2 min • Test customer segment

- THE SETUP
- IDENTIFY EARLY ADOPTERS

TELL A STORY
2 min • Set problem context

DEMO
15 min • Test Solution

- TEST SOLUTION

TEST PRICING
3 min • Revenue Streams

- TEST PRICING

WRAPPING UP
2 min • The Ask

- HOOK
- PERMISSION TO FOLLOW-UP
- REFERRALS

DOCUMENT RESULTS
5 min

- DOCUMENT RESULTS

Key Considerations

1. **Review your results weekly** Wait for at least 3 interviews to change your script

2. **Add/kill features** Work on UX. Remove unnecessary features

3. **Confirm your earlier hypotheses** Revisit your older hypotheses and refine them until you get consistent results.

4. **Refine pricing** If you got no resistance to your pricing, consider testing a higher price. Take the customers' alternative solutions into account.

The Solution Interview: Exit Criteria

You are done when you can confidently:

- Identify the demographics of an early adopter,

- Have a must-have problem,

- Can define the minimum features needed to solve this problem, and

- Have figured out a price the customer is willing to pay

- Have figured out problem-solution fit you can build a business around (using a back-of-the-envelope calculation).
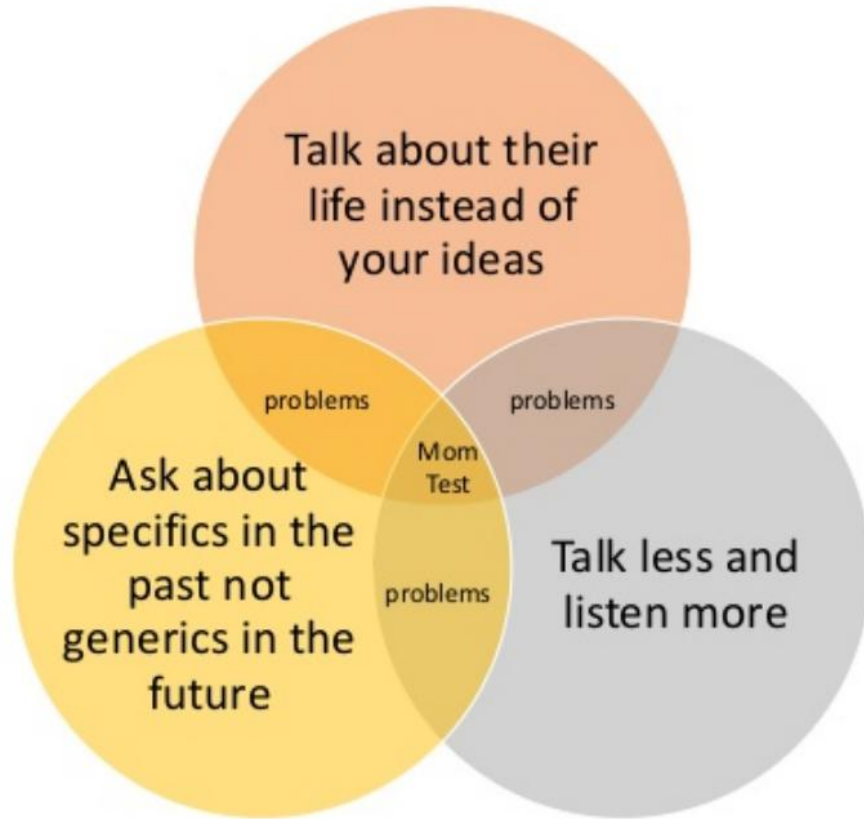
The Mom Test: How to talk to customers and learn if your business is a good idea when everyone is lying to you.

Rob Fitzpatrick

2013
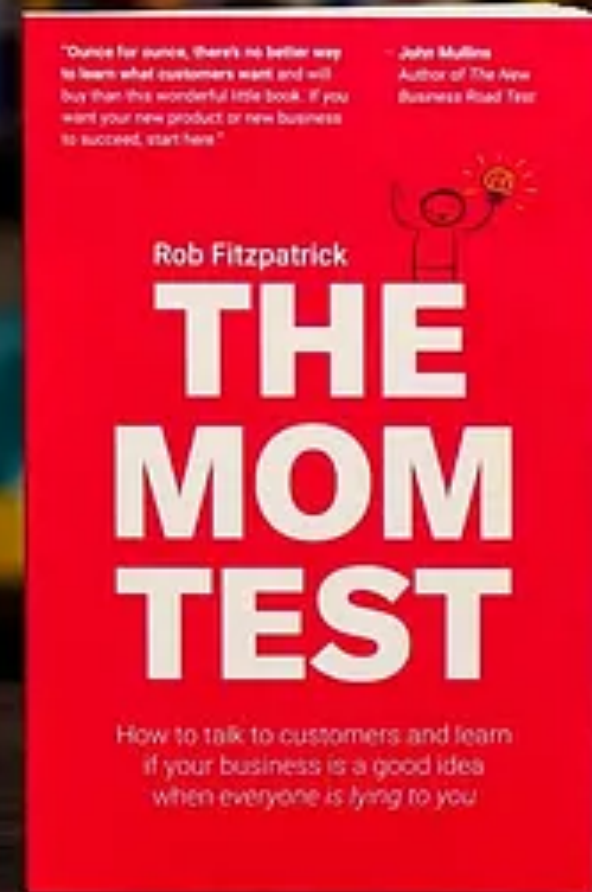
Customers cannot lie to you if you do not talk to them about your idea.

The Mom Test

1. Talk about their life and not your idea

2. Ask about specifics in the past instead of generic options about the future

3. Talk less and listen more.

Important questions are those that can change what you are doing. You should be terrified of at least one you are asking in every conversation.

You're searching for the truth, not trying to be right - as quickly and cheaply as possible. Here, "best outcome" means learning most, not selling. Learning being wrong is progress - bringing you closer to real problem and good market.

Bad data:

- **Compliments** are worthless and people's approval doesn't make your business better. Keep your idea and your ego out until ready to ask for commitments. *If you've mentioned your idea, people will try to protect your feelings.*

- **Fluff:** generalizations about past behavior, and speculation about the future or some hypothetical reality:
  - *Generic claims*: "I never pay for apps"
  - *Future promises*: "I would totally pay for something like this"
  - *Hypotheticals*: "I might use a service like yours"

- **Ideas**: features you should add. *Ideas and feature requests should be understood, but not obeyed.* Don't ask *why* they want X feature, instead, ask *when* they wanted it.

You are **not allowed** to tell their problem. They are **not allowed** to tell what to build.

Questions for ...

Understanding Feature Request	Digging into Emotional Signal
- Why do you want that? - What would that let you do? - How are you coping without it? - Should we push back the launch add the feature, or is it something we could add later? - How would that fit into your day?	- Tell me more about that. - That seems to really bug you, I bet there's a story here. - What makes it so awful? - Why haven't you been able to fix this already? - You seem pretty excited about that, it's a big deal?

"Does-this-problem-matter" questions:

- How seriously do you take your blog?

- Do you make money from it?

- Have you tried making more money from it?

- How much time do you spend on it each week?

- Do you have any major aspirations for your blog?

- Which tools and services do you use for it?

- What are you already doing to improve this?

- What are the 3 big things you're trying to fix or improve right now?

Do-s and Don't-s

- Do not sell - Anyone will say your idea is great if you're annoying enough about it.

- The more you're talking, the worse you're doing.

- Start broad and don't zoom in until you've found a strong signal, both with your whole business and with every conversation.

- Do not bias - but also do not focus on trivialities.

- Give as little information as possible about your idea while still nudging the discussion in a useful direction.

- Keep having conversations until you stop hearing new things.

Have a list of 3 most important and murkiest things you want to learn - most important and murkiest *at this moment*

You always need a list of your 3 big questions.

It only takes 5 minutes to learn whether a problem exists and is important. Learning how someone currently achieves a certain goal or solves a problem is also quick. The potential speed of the early conversations one of the big reasons to keep it casual and skipping the meeting.

If you don't know what happens next after a product or sales meeting, the meeting was pointless.

Symptoms of a pointless meeting:

- A pipeline of zombie leads
- Ending product meetings with a compliment
- Ending product meetings with no clear next steps
- Meetings which "went well"
- They haven't given up anything of value
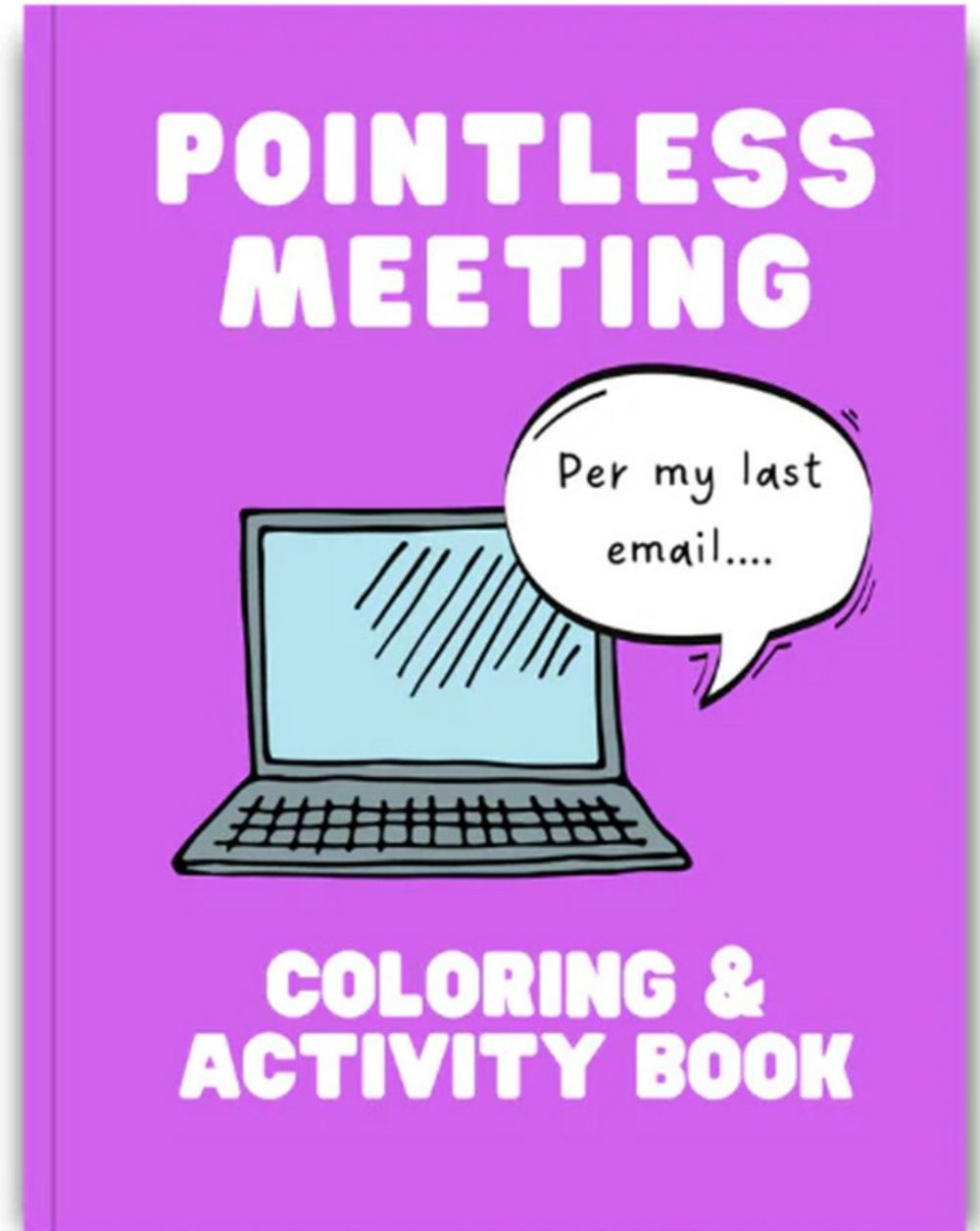
Commitment: They are showing they're serious by giving up something they value.

Advancement: They are moving to the next step of your real-world funnel and getting closer to a sale.

Good and Bad Finishes

- That's so cool. I love it!

- Looks great. Let me know when it launches.

- There are a couple people I can intro you to when you're ready.

- What are the next steps?

- I would definitely buy that.

- When can we start the trial?

- Can I buy the prototype?

- When can you come back to talk to the rest of the team?

The more potential customer is giving up, the more seriously you can take their kind words. It's not a real lead until you've given them a concrete chance to reject you.

The major currencies are time, reputation risk, and cash.

Summary

PASSES THE 'MOM TEST'

questions even your mom won't lie to you about

Yup, she's likely going to lie when you ask *"Mom, isn't this a great idea?"*

THEIR LIFE/ PROBLEMS

not ideas / solutions but day-to-day inefficiencies

Get them to do their tasks and observe the inefficiencies

THE PAST

not hypotheticals / the future

Problems they have actually encountered

SPECIFIC DETAILS

not generics / vague information

No one was ever able to find a location with a *'maybe take a turn in a bit'.*

Excercise: good and bad questions.

Extra Reading

- Find Better Problems Worth Solving with the Customer Forces Canvas. https://medium.com/lean-stack/the-updated-problem-interview-script-and-a-new-canvas-1e43ff267a5d

- The Mom Test – Summary and Insights. https://www.wilselby.com/2020/06/the-mom-test-summary-and-insights/

- The Mom Test by Rob Fitzpatrick. https://feelinspired.medium.com/things-i-learnt-the-mom-test-by-rob-fitzpatrick-9d9d58ce8098

- The Mom Interview. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hla1jzhan78

Thank you!