

INSIDE THE CUSTOMER'S MIND

**Five Tools for User-
Centered Innovation**

By Alison Peters



Introduction

Understanding your customers' needs is essential to building and maintaining a successful business. However, in today's world, there are many ways to “hear” your customers’ voices. Maybe too many. Sometimes the amount of data available becomes overwhelming.

Luckily, we have new tools to help make sense of the information coming in. They come from a range of fields-- design thinking, lean development, user experience, community-based social marketing--but they share a common theme: TALK to your customers, and LISTEN to what they say—and what they don't say.

Sound simple? It is, but it takes some practice. Here are a few tips to engage your users in designing your products to be as effective as possible. These tips are based on the concept of USER-CENTERED INNOVATION – a strategy that starts with the people who will actually use your product, service, or system, who can give you often surprising insights into how to best serve them. Then the strategy employs “low-resolution prototypes” to help you test and learn which actions yield the best impact.

5 Tools for User-Centered Innovation

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Listen to Real People

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Get Curious about WHY

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Keep It Simple

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Show, Don't Tell

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Let Customers Try It On

1

Listen to Real People

Also popularized as “Get Out of the Building “ by customer development guru Steve Blank. Go talk to people who might be interested in what you're offering. In fact, talk to some people who probably wouldn't be interested. And don't actually talk that much. Go LISTEN to them. Get their stories, understand what happens in their lives that affects the problem or solution you're interested in.



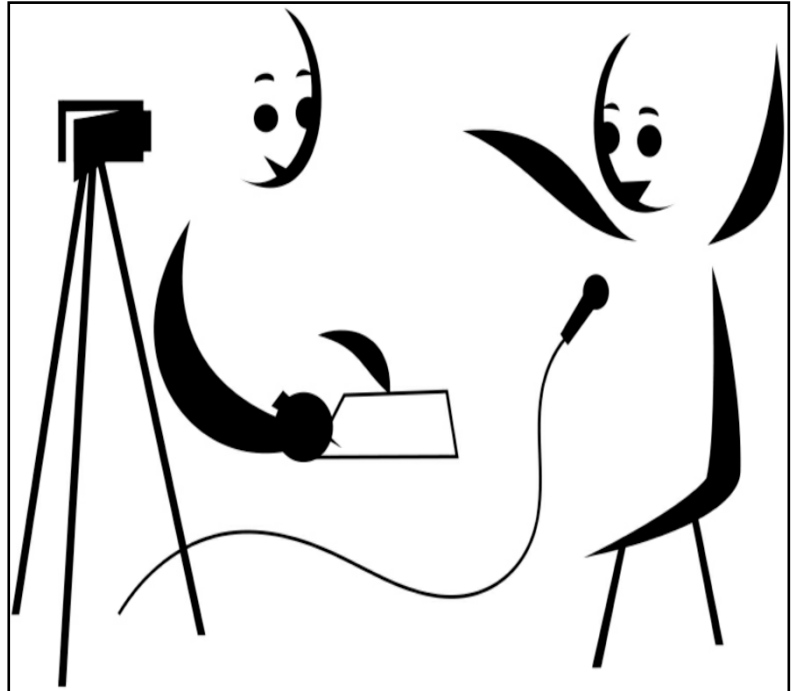
One of the best articulations of the potential for interviews and observations to reframe needs comes from Clayton Christensen's "Milkshake Analysis." Christensen describes the impact of thinking of a milkshake in terms of “jobs to be done.” Going beyond typical market research and thinking about the actual needs that milkshake buyers were trying to fill led to a whole new approach to milkshake sales.

Finding out what people think sounds easy, but it can be intimidating. Remember, you're not trying to sell anything, you're just trying to learn. And even a handful of interviews can give you some clear direction.

2

Get Curious about WHY They Do what They Do

To take your listening tour to a deeper level, don't settle for what people say to you. Remember that people will be good at telling you what doesn't work, but they may not be very good at defining what would solve their problems. That's why you're listening for



“latent” needs—things they can't quite articulate. Places where they contradict themselves, or seem uncertain, tone of voice, body language, even things you notice in their environment or their interactions with you and others may give you clues.

One easy way to dig deeper is to ask “Why?”. And keep asking. A design thinking exercise known as “The Five Whys” advocates asking “why?” five times in a row to make the user get down to the level of their underlying motivations and drivers.



Keep It Simple

As you're developing something new, it helps to have two key questions in mind:

- What do I need to learn now?
- What's the simplest possible way to learn it?

Once you start getting input from your customers, it can be tempting to try to meet everyone's needs. Don't do that. Look for the core services that are most exciting to your users. Test those first. This strategy has been popularized by Eric Ries and Ash Maurya, among others in the Lean Startup movement.

Be ruthless in stripping things down, and if you can't, get a friend to serve as "The Ruthless One." How many features do you really need to see if your website answers user questions? How complex does your event need to be to assess what participants want?

Cut it down.

Cut it down again.



Show, Don't Tell

Instead of explaining your product to a potential customer in order to collect feedback, *prototype* it and then get their reactions.

Why prototype? Well, why guess if you don't have to? If you're designing a product, a program, an event, a service without feedback, you're doing more work than you need to. Start early to get input, and keep bouncing your concept off potential users as it develops. That way, you're vetting the approach you're taking every step of the way. You are, in effect, building to learn.

Prototypes don't have to be fancy. The simpler they are—paper and sticky notes, cardboard and tape—the less they cost you in time and money, and the less attached you are to their success. You can also develop multiple prototypes to get a wider range of feedback.

Case Study:

Nordstrom Innovation Lab Sunglass App



In the Nordstrom Innovation Lab’s “flash build” of a sunglass app, the team actually built the app from paper prototypes to finished product in the sunglass department of one of their stores. Along the way, they collected real-time feedback from listening to the customers.

Click the image above to see the YouTube video of the Nordstrom team in action.



Let Customers Try It On for Size

It turns out that people like making small commitments before they make big ones. This probably shouldn't come as a surprise, but we don't always think of how to apply it to new products.

Doug MacKenzie-Mohr has some great examples of how people who make a small commitment, such as wearing a pin in support of a charity, or agreeing to answer a few questions, are substantially more likely to engage in a larger effort.

Let your early users become your advocates. Find ways to engage them that are low-risk for them, but draw them in to a deeper connection with your offering.

Give it a try! Using the techniques from User-Centered Innovation can help you design your products and services in a way that aligns with what your users want. And that can help you achieve greater success.

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Resources

- **Steve Blank: Get Out of the Building,**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILEebbiYIkI&list=PLkplm4nc4fY9SXanjrWQuRCi0-aw6sh5e>
- **Clayton Christensen: Milkshake Analysis,**
<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6496.html>
- **Eric Ries: Lean Startup,** <http://theleanstartup.com/>
- **Ash Maurya: Practice Trumps Theory,**
<http://practicetrumpstheory.com/>
- **Nordstrom Innovation Lab: Sunglass App,**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szr0ezLyQHY>
- **Doug MacKenzie-Mohr: Fostering Sustainable Behavior,**
<http://www.cbsm.com/pages/guide/preface/>

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