

Before you build: the demand testing and interviewing guide

Opinions are cheap. Time, reputation and money are not. This guide shows you how to interview people about their real lives, then ask for the kind of commitment that tells you whether a problem, an offer and a price are worth building for.

The one idea in this guide

What people do is evidence. What people say is a lead. A friendly “I’d definitely use that” costs the speaker nothing, so it tells you almost nothing. A second meeting, an introduction to their boss or a paid pilot costs them something, so you can believe it.

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Where it fits in Learning Loop’s decks

Discovery Patterns helps you learn what is going on in a customer’s world: interviews, observation and records. Validation Patterns helps you test whether people act on a specific offer: landing pages, pre-orders, concierge tests and more. Use discovery to decide *what* to test, then validation to see whether people *commit*.

How long it takes

A first round fits in one week: five to ten interviews of an hour each, one small demand test and half a day to make sense of the results. Pair it with the free Demand Test Worksheet, which has the plan, the interview script and the notes pages ready to print.

The evidence ladder

Every customer conversation produces signals. Ask what each one cost the person who gave it, and weigh it accordingly.

SIGNAL	WHAT IT COSTS THEM	EXAMPLE	HOW FAR TO TRUST IT
1 Compliment	Nothing	"That's a great idea. I'd totally use it."	Treat as noise. A warning sign if it ends the meeting.
2 Story about the past	A few minutes of recall	"Last month our supplier was late and I lost a day fixing it."	Real facts about their life, though memory is imperfect. Check against records when you can.
3 Time	Calendar space and attention	Books a second meeting, tries a trial for two weeks, gives feedback on a draft.	A genuine, modest commitment. Count it, but do not confuse it with demand.
4 Reputation	Their standing with other people	Introduces you to their boss, joins a pilot with their team, agrees to be a named reference.	Strong. They are risking their credibility on you.
5 Money	Cash they can lose	Pre-orders, pays a deposit, buys a paid pilot, signs a purchase order.	The strongest answer to "will they pay?" for this offer, at this price, in these conditions.

Four questions, four kinds of evidence

QUESTION	STRONG EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE	START WITH
Does this group really have the problem?	Recent, specific stories with consequences and workarounds	Customer interviews, observation (Discovery Patterns)
Can we reach them?	Eligible people responding through a channel you can use again	Find the watering hole, test ads, a landing page
Will they act on this offer?	A counted action: booked, started, signed up, committed	Fake door, landing page, concierge (Validation Patterns)
Will they pay this price?	Actual payment, or a deposit on clear terms	Dry wallet, pre-orders, a paid pilot

Whether people can *use* your design is a fifth question. For that, see the free usability testing guide at ui-patterns.com/blog/usability-testing.

A signal is not a verdict

Even a payment answers only the question you asked. Two people who pay for a pilot show that two people bought *this* offer in *these* conditions. They do not show your maximum price, whether they will renew, or that a whole market behaves the same way.

Step 1. Write a hypothesis that can fail

Interviews and demand tests only teach you something if you decided in advance what would count as being wrong. Write it down before you talk to anyone.

The hypothesis template

We believe that *[one specific group] [has this problem / will do this]*.

We will test it by *[method and offer]*.

We are right if *[number] of [how many people we reach] [take this observable action] within [time]*.

If we are wrong, we will *[stop / change the segment / change the offer]*.

Example (invented, to show the shape)

We believe that hospital nurses on night shifts struggle to find a healthy meal during the shift and will pay for a delivered one.

We will test it by interviewing eight nurses about their last night shift, then offering a one-week meal plan for EUR 45 to 25 nurses reached through ward chat groups.

We are right if at least 6 of the 25 pay within 10 days, and at least 5 of the 8 interviewees describe skipping or regretting a meal in the past month.

If we are wrong, we will not build the delivery service. We will first ask the non-buyers why, then test a different segment, such as paramedics, before changing the offer.

Hypothesis checklist

- ✓ **Specific.** One group, one problem, one offer.
- ✓ **Observable.** An action you can count, not a feeling.
- ✓ **Testable now.** With the time, money and people you have this week.
- ✓ **Falsifiable.** Some result would prove you wrong.
- ✓ **Decided in advance.** The threshold and the next step are written down before you look at any result.
- ✓ **One change at a time.** Otherwise you cannot tell what caused the result.

Weak: "People want a meal service." Better: "At least 6 of 25 nurses we reach this week pay EUR 45 for the first week." The second one can fail, and that is exactly what makes it useful. Record the plan on the Demand Test Worksheet or on the free Experiment Sheet.

Step 2. Find the right people

The cheapest way to waste a week is to interview people who love you. Friends, colleagues and fans are polite, and politeness is the enemy of learning.

Who to talk to

- **People who recently had the problem.** Not people who might have it someday.
- **People who pay or decide.** In a business, the user, the budget holder and the approver are often three different people. Interview each.
- **People who cope without you.** Include some who do not seem to have the problem. Their exceptions are data.
- **Strangers, mostly.** A group that is hard to reach for an interview will be hard to reach with an offer.

Test whether you can find them: five people who are in

Before you plan anything else, name five real people who fit your segment and would take a call. If you cannot, the market may be too small or too hard to reach, and that is worth knowing early.

Screeners questions: ask about behavior, not identity

WEAK SCREENER	STRONGER SCREENER
Do you work night shifts?	When did you last work a night shift, and what did you eat during it?
Are you interested in healthy food?	What did you do about food the last time you could not leave the ward?

Where to find them, and what to say

Go where the group already gathers: forums, communities, events, comment threads, professional groups. Learning Loop's Find the Watering Hole card shows how. Keep the first message short, honest and free of any pitch:

"Hi [name], I'm researching how [role] handle [topic] and I'm not selling anything. Could I ask you about the last time it came up? About [30 / 60] minutes, whenever suits you. If it helps, I can send [a gift card / a summary of what I learn]."

Plan for no-shows

Book more people than you need and confirm the day before. Offer a small thank-you in proportion to their time.

How many?

Plan five to ten interviews per segment, then stop and review before you book more (Step 8). No count certifies a market: match the evidence to the cost of being wrong.

Step 3. Run the problem and solution interview

A strong interview feels like a conversation about their life, not a demo of your idea. Plan about 60 to 75 minutes, with a second person taking notes so you can listen.

TIME	STAGE	WHAT YOU DO
3 to 5 min	1. Introduce	Say who you are and why you are researching the topic. Keep your idea out of it. Ask permission to take notes.
5 min	2. Set the context	Collect only the facts you need to compare people later: role, team size, how often the topic comes up.
2 min	3. Build rapport	Be human. Find common ground. Ask how their day is going, and listen to the answer.
8 to 10 min	4. Explore the problem as a story	"Tell me about the last time..." Follow the sequence of events. Ask what happened next, who was involved and what it cost.
8 to 10 min	5. Rank their problems	Ask which of the problems they mentioned matter most, and which they would not bother fixing. Let them order them in their own words.
15 to 20 min	6. Dig into the top problem	Ask "why?" until you reach the root. Ask what they have already tried, what they use today and what that costs in money and hours.
10 to 15 min	7. Show the offer and ask	Only now, describe what you plan in two or three sentences, with price and conditions. Ask what is missing, then ask for a commitment (Step 5).
5 min, straight after	8. Write it up	Capture the three most important things you heard, with quotes, while memory is fresh. Do not postpone this.

Why the offer comes last

Once people hear your idea they start reacting to it, and their answers drift from their real lives to your pitch. Early in the interview you want facts about the past. Late in the interview you want a decision about the future. Keep them apart.

Step 3 continued: openings that work

The first five minutes set the tone. Read the opening out loud, in your own words, in every interview, so everyone hears the same promise.

A sample opening to say out loud

"Hi [name], thanks for making time. I'm [your name] and this is [colleague], who'll be taking notes so I can concentrate on listening.

We're researching how [people like you] deal with [topic]. We're not selling anything today, and you can't hurt our feelings. Honest, even blunt, answers help us most.

There are no right answers. I'm more interested in what actually happened than in what you think should happen. This will take about [60] minutes. Is it OK if we take notes [and record audio, only for our team]?

Anything you'd like to ask before we start?"

Prompts for each stage

Seek stories

- "Tell me about the last time you [did the thing]."
- "What was the best, worst or most memorable time?"
- "Walk me through how you decided that."
- "What would surprise me about how you do this?"

Go to feelings and stakes

- "How did you feel when that happened?"
- "Why does that matter to you?"
- "What did it cost you, in time or money?"

Find the workaround

- "What have you tried to fix this?"
- "What did you not like about it?"
- "What do you use today, and what does it cost?"
- "Who else is involved when this happens?"

Close well

- "Is there anything I should have asked and did not?"
- "Who else should I talk to?"
- "Can we [specific next step]?"

Habits of good interviewers

- **Ask "why?"** even when you think you know the answer. Answers surprise you.
- **Stay quiet.** A pause invites a deeper answer. Count to ten before you fill it.
- **Watch for contradictions.** Where what they say and what they do differ, there is usually an insight. Probe gently.
- **Notice body language and emotion,** then ask about it: "You paused. What are you thinking?"
- **Interview in pairs** or record audio with permission. Nobody can listen well and write everything down.

Step 4. Ask questions people cannot answer politely

If your mum can lie to you to protect your feelings, so can a stranger. Good questions make a polite lie hard, because the honest answer is just a fact about last week.

INSTEAD OF ASKING	ASK	WHY IT WORKS
"Would you buy this?"	"When did you last try to solve this? What happened?"	Past facts, not hypotheticals
"Do you usually...?"	"Tell me about the last time you..."	A real occasion replaces a generic claim
"Don't you think this is frustrating?"	"How do you feel about it?"	No built-in right answer
"Would you pay EUR 20 for that?"	"What do you spend on this today, in money and hours?"	Real budgets and real alternatives
"Would a feature like X help?"	"What have you tried, and what did you not like?"	Reveals the need behind the idea
"Is that a problem for you?" (yes or no)	"Tell me more about that."	Open questions start stories

Deflect compliments

"That sounds great" is the sound of someone being nice. Thank them, move on and ask about the last time it happened.

Anchor fluff

"Always", "never", "I would definitely" and "someday" are generic or hypothetical. Ask: "When did that last happen?"

Dig into ideas

When they suggest a feature, ask why they want it, what they would do with it and how they cope today.

Three biases that bend interviews

- **Confirmation bias.** You hear what you hope to hear. Write your hypothesis down first, and note every answer that contradicts it.
- **Courtesy bias.** People adjust answers to please you. The more your ego shows, the more flattery you get. Keep it neutral and curious.
- **Order effects.** What you ask first colors later answers. Vary the order of topics between interviews and compare.

Do not suggest answers, even during silence, and do not sell. If they ask what you are building, give a two-sentence answer and return to their story.

Step 5. Ask for a commitment

A meeting does not “go well”. It succeeds or it fails. It succeeds when the other person gives up something of value or moves to a clear next step. Everything else is a compliment.

The test for every conversation

Before you say goodbye, ask yourself: **what happens next, and who agreed to it?** If nothing, you may have a zombie lead: someone who is pleasant, keeps taking meetings and never buys. Ask for a decision, even if the honest answer is no. A clear no is a strong data point; not asking is the only real failure.

Three currencies, with sample asks

CURRENCY	WHAT YOU CAN ASK	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Time	“Can we book 30 minutes on Tuesday so I can show you a first version and hear what is missing?” “Would you try it with real work for two weeks?”	They think it is worth attention. Not yet that it is worth money.
Reputation	“Who else would need to say yes? Could you introduce me?” “May we list your team as a pilot partner?”	They would risk their credibility on you, and you learn how the decision is made.
Money	“The pilot costs EUR 49 for two weeks. If I send the invoice today, can you start Monday?” “Would you put down a refundable deposit?” “Would you sign a letter of intent to buy at this price once it is delivered?”	The strongest answer to willingness to pay. A letter of intent is non-binding, so it counts for less than payment.

Rules for asking

- **Earn the ask.** Ask after they described a costly problem, not at minute five. Asking too early produces false negatives.
- **Match the ask to the stage.** A stranger asked for a purchase order is a stranger who leaves.
- **Make it specific.** A date, a price, a name.
- **Ask for the decision-maker.** Enthusiasm without budget is a compliment.

When you hear a stall

- “Sounds good, send me something.” Ask: “What would you want to see to decide?”
- “Let’s talk after the holidays.” Ask: “What happens if you do nothing until then?”
- “I need to check with my boss.” Ask: “Could we speak with them together?”
- “Maybe later.” Ask: “What would have to change for it to matter now?”

Log each ask as **commit**, **stall** or **no**, with what they gave. The Demand Test Worksheet has a tracker for this.

Step 6. Choose a demand test

Interviews show you what to test. A demand test shows whether people act when you put an offer in front of them. Choose the cheapest test that answers the one question that would change your decision.

TEST (CARD)	WHAT PEOPLE DO	WATCH FOR	CARD EVIDENCE
Comprehension Test	Explain your message back in their own words	Run it first, so a confusing message is not mistaken for no demand	25
Spoof Landing Pages	Read an offer and take one step, such as leaving an email	An email address is interest, not a purchase	30
Run Test Ads	Click an ad that states the offer	Clicks measure the ad. Compare messages with the same audience	20
Fake Door Testing	Click a button for a feature you have not built	Needs an existing audience. Be honest on the next screen	25
Dry Wallet	Go through a “pay now” experience that stops short of charging	Intending to pay is not paying	25
High Hurdle	Complete a deliberately harder sign-up	Friction filters out the casually curious, and some serious people too	25
Letter of Intent	Sign a non-binding agreement to buy under stated conditions	Best for business buyers; not revenue	10
Sales Pitch and Follow-up Meeting	Hear the pitch, then agree to a next step	Pleasant meetings with no next step prove nothing	5 and 10
Concierge	Receive the service, delivered by hand, and pay or return	Personal attention a product will not give	80
Collect Pre-orders	Pay for something not yet available	Delivery duty, refunds and cancellations	75

“Card evidence” is the evidence strength rating printed on each Validation Patterns card, on a scale from 0 to 100. Read each card at learningloop.io/plays for the full steps.

A sensible order

1. Interview to learn the problem and the words people use.
2. Check the message is understood.
3. Test action: landing page, ads or fake door.
4. Test payment: dry wallet, a paid pilot or pre-orders.
5. Deliver by hand (concierge) before you automate.

Be honest with people

When you test with something that does not exist yet, say so as soon as they act, and offer a clear way out. With pre-orders, state that the product will only be made if demand is real, and refund promptly if not. Consider a crowdfunding platform, which has the communication built in.

Step 7. Run the test without fooling yourself

Most failed demand tests are not failures of the idea. They are failures of the test: vague goals, warm audiences and results that were reinterpreted after the fact.

Before you launch

- ✓ Write the threshold and the next step down.
- ✓ Define who is eligible, and how many you will reach.
- ✓ Fix one offer, one price, one measure.
- ✓ Set a time limit and a budget cap.

While it runs

- ✓ Do not tweak the page to improve the number. You are measuring demand, not copywriting.
- ✓ Prefer cold traffic. People who know you will inflate the result.
- ✓ Record anything unusual: discounts, personal help, outages.

Count each step separately

COUNT	EXAMPLE	WHY KEEP IT APART
Reached	25 nurses saw the offer	This is your denominator
Understood	22 could explain it back	Rules out a message problem
Asked for more	9 requested the menu	Interest, not a purchase
Gave time or reputation	3 booked a call, 1 introduced a colleague	A modest, real commitment
Paid	4 paid EUR 45	The answer to “will they pay?”

Reading the example (invented numbers)

The rule was 6 paid out of 25. Four paid, so **the test missed its threshold**. It did not show that nobody wants the service, that EUR 45 is too high, or that other groups would behave differently. Nine asked for more information: that is a separate signal, so do not add it to the four and call it “13 interested customers”.

Decision from the rule: do not build yet. Call the 21 who did not pay and ask what stopped them: price, timing, scope or trust. Run a second round with the revised offer.

- **No threshold afterwards.** A goal chosen after seeing the result is a story, not a test.
- **Small samples point, they do not prove.** Twenty-five hand-picked people do not give you a conversion rate for a market.
- **A zero is useful.** A cheap test that finds nobody interested saved you a build.

Step 8. Make sense of it and decide

After five to ten interviews, stop and look at what you have. Sense-making is where the learning happens, and it is the step most teams skip.

Pause and review

1. Write each interview's top three findings on separate notes, with a quote.
2. Group notes by segment, then by theme: problem, workaround, trigger, obstacle.
3. Ask why people answered the way they did, and what it says about each segment.
4. Separate **what you observed** from **what you think it means**.
5. Ask: should we redefine the problem, or talk to a different group?

Choose one of three outcomes

- **Continue.** The evidence supports the next bounded investment. Write down the risks it did not address.
- **Revise.** The result points to a fixable cause in the segment, offer, price or channel. Plan one new test.
- **Stop or change direction.** A critical assumption keeps failing and more testing is unlikely to repay its cost.

Common mistakes

- | | |
|---|---|
| ✗ Interviewing friends, fans and colleagues | ✗ Mixing different offers in one conversion count |
| ✗ Pitching in the first ten minutes | ✗ Ignoring the people who disappear |
| ✗ Treating a compliment as a commitment | ✗ Calling a click a customer |
| ✗ Choosing the success threshold after the result | ✗ Leaving without a next step |

Keep going

Print the Demand Test Worksheet to plan your round, run the interviews and record the result. Free at learningloop.io/resources.

Browse the Discovery Patterns and Validation Patterns cards, with step-by-step plays, at learningloop.io/playbook-collections/validation-patterns. Record your plan on the free Experiment Sheet and what you learned on the Learning Sheet.

Get one practical idea a week in Product Weekly at learningloop.io/newsletter.

Sources and credits. This guide draws on Rob Fitzpatrick, *The Mom Test* (compliments, fluff, commitment and advancement); the Kromatic team, *The Real Startup Book* (hypotheses, customer discovery interviews, smoke tests); David Bland and Alexander Osterwalder, *Testing Business Ideas* (test cards and experiment design); and Learning Loop's Discovery Patterns and Validation Patterns. Examples are invented.