3 discovery exercises that are a waste of time - and what to do instead

Discovery exercises are an essential tool for any startup, but without the right approach they don't always add value to your product. James Zhao, co-founder of Thought&Function, looks at how to really get the most from this process.

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Before you launch into developing your MVP, you'll need to go through a rigorous discovery round. Without properly understanding who your customers are or how to add the most value to your product, it's all too easy to waste time and money exploring a development dead end.

But not all discovery exercises are created equal, and you'll need to tackle this phase with a pragmatic, targeted approach to build the strongest foundation for your business. With that in mind, here are three common discovery round traps and how to avoid them.

Following proto personas and not real users

The key to a product's success is the customers using it, so creating user personas to understand the target market is a natural early step for startups - and it will become the basis of all future decisions. But the problem is that we often use proto personas, which are ultimately made-up profiles, and don't always reflect how real customers will take to your idea.

We often see people use proto personas without any evidence, research, or a single conversation with these people. They are completely made up by the founder, and will contain a lot of bias.

That's not to say proto personas are entirely pointless. At the very beginning you need to have an assumption of who your customers are going to be to form the foundation of your ideas and decisions. But when it comes to developing your MVP for launch, a profile of a hypothetical user will only get you so far. And when it comes to making user-centric decisions for the product, having a completely made up persona is not useful.

Your first step before creating a user persona is to find your potential users. Think about where your customers may be, either physically or virtually, and seek them out. For example, if you're building an app for coffee drinkers you'd almost certainly have to visit a coffee shop and speak to customers on the ground there.

Then you'll need to conduct unbiased, quantitative and qualitative research. You can make sure that you're not biased by focusing on their pain points instead of your proposed solution. E.g. Don't ask 'would you use this' or 'is this feature good or bad', but instead ask something along the lines of 'what did you find most difficult?'

If possible, stay in contact with those who display interest. That way you can build a relationship with them, base your user personas on real personalities, and later you can go back to them to ask their opinion once you've iterated on your product. They can even be your first customers!

Investing too much time into a full business plan when a one-pager will do

When you're a startup founder looking to tempt investors, needing a fully

detailed business plan seems like a given. But more often than not, something simpler like a Lean Canvas will be more than enough.

A Lean Canvas is a stripped down version of the business model canvas, a one-page business plan that deconstructs your idea into its fundamental elements. The advantage is that it makes you consider all areas of your business plan, but keeps it lean and flexible enough so that you can frequently update it. Being able to iterate quickly at this early stage is more valuable than having a 30 page plan full of assumptions.

If your idea is compelling and the numbers you have so far are sound, then that might be enough for investors at the pre-seed stage. A flashy presentation and detailed business plan can help, but it won't be enough to sell your business to investors if, ultimately, the potential behind the core idea isn't actually proven.

As well as saving you time, a Lean Canvas can also save you some potential headaches later on. They're particularly suited to startups because they facilitate adaptability better than a traditional business plan. If you need to pivot your idea early on for any reason, a Lean Model Canvas lets you do so without having to rework a whole business model.

Defining a long list of features

There's little point in dreaming up a lengthy list of features until you've learned where the real value to customers is. When you're deciding what to build for your MVP, it's important not to let future possibilities distract you from what will bring value to users right now.

The key is to get something of value out there, even if it's feature bare. Once that's out on the market, you can start to learn from your users behaviour and you can iterate accordingly. This is far better than creating a flashy feature-laden product that leaves little budget for iteration.

Pin down what makes the most value for your product and for your customers. Take the research you've conducted with customers and the core elements laid out in your Lean Model Canvas, and build what is the most valuable part of your product first.

Try not to get fixated on implementing everything at once. If the core idea is solid and meets users' needs, then extra features like social media integration or multiple login options can wait. In fact, this can even save you from making the costly mistake of building in complex features that users don't actually need.

But what if you can't find early features that offer value? What if you need to build out a rich set of features to compete on the market? Well, then you need to make certain the idea has a large enough audience and potential for investors to be interested. You want to validate as much of this upfront as possible before you invest yourself.It's going to be a fund sinker up front, so you'll need to ensure you have what you need to get to your first feature-rich iteration.

To help your team with keeping focus, try to set priorities rather than restrictions. Asking "what do we need to build first?" rather than saying "we can't build this" helps to keep everyone honed in on the same goal without losing motivation for the project as a whole. Once your MVP is in the hands of customers, their user behaviour will inform what features you should include in the next iteration.

James began his career as a software engineer - and quite a successful one - working for Barclays, KPMG, and on various projects for McLaren, Aviva and the Metropolitan police. Four years ago he co-founded Thought&Function where he brings commercial and product expertise together - along with an understanding of the start-up process - to give start-up founders the start they need: advising on strategy, handling marketing and sales, all while still dabbling in the build process.

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