Startup Survivor

Challenge 1 | Customer Discovery

Innovation doesn't start with an idea, a widget, or a prototype. Innovation starts with a **problem**.

In Challenge 1, we want you as founders to *forget about your solution*. Most of the time, founders come to The Forge with solutions but very often change these solutions after they do proper customer research. We want you to keep an open mind and avoid jumping to a solution. This challenge will teach you customer discovery methods to help you understand the problem you are trying to solve on a deeper level – through the eyes of your customers.

For example: The entrepreneurial journey for Airbnb founders Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia started in 2007 when they were attempting to travel from New York to San Francisco for a conference.

The problem? They could not find a cheap hotel room. All the affordable, inexpensive hotels in San Francisco had been quickly snapped up leaving only premium establishments at a minimum cost of $300/night – completely out of their budget. As Brian and Joe asked other conference attendees about their journey to find a hotel, they discovered a strong pattern.

Goals for this Challenge

- Identify what is the problem

- Who is having this problem

- Understand whether this problem is important

- Identify patterns that cross from one customer to the next

Instructions

1. Attend Startup Survivor Workshop to learn about the **Customer Discovery** process.

2. Based on your current knowledge about the problem you wish to solve, fill in the template '**Problem Statement Canvas**' in the Excel file.

Ask yourself:
- When does the problem occur?
- Who has the problem most often?
- What is the root cause of the problem?
- What is the measurable impact of the problem?
- What do customers do now to solve the problem?
- What are the disadvantages of the alternatives?

It's okay if you don't know the answers to some of the above questions. Customer interviews will help you answer them!

Instructions (continued)

3. Review the Problem Statement Canvas and **identify assumptions** you are making about the problem.

    These assumptions should mainly focus on your problem for now. In the future, you will be testing assumptions about every aspect of your business. An assumption represents a risk to your future business. An assumption about the problem might be as simple as: *people actually experience the problem I presume exists.* If this assumption proves to be false, then you do not have a market. As an entrepreneur, we need to make assumptions. If we aren't making assumptions, we aren't really innovating. Fill in your top ten assumptions in the template 'Assumptions' list in the Excel file. Your riskiest assumptions should rank highest on the list.

4. Use the assumptions you identified to help **create an interview guide** – a list of questions that you will ask customers. These questions will help you gather data to eventually validate or invalidate your assumptions.

    Avoid introducing bias into your interviews. Don't talk about your solution. Ask lots of open-ended questions. We're provided samples of interview guides in the 'Helpful Resources' section.

5. **Brainstorm list of stakeholders** who are impacted by the problem. Stakeholders include customers such as end users and buyers.

    Example: If you're looking to solve a medical problem with a novel medical device, your stakeholder list can include patients, caregivers, doctors, nurses, hospital administrators, procurement officers, insurance providers, disease awareness groups, etc.

6. **Conduct customer interviews and transcribe them to the Customer Discovery Record.**

    The minimum number of interviews you need to complete is outlined in the "Interview Matrix" table on the next page. Record answers to the questions you've asked in the template 'Customer Discovery Record' in the Excel file.

7. Analyze information you've gathered in your interviews. Review interviewee answers and identify patterns. **Record your insights** in the template 'Customer Discovery Record' in the Excel file.

    If you don't see patterns in your data, interview more customers. Go beyond the minimum! Use the information gained from customer interviews to **update your 'Problem Statement Canvas'.**

8. **Submit the online** Startup Survivor Application Form before the deadline of March 29, 2026.

Customer Interview Matrix

Business Model	Minimum Number of Interviews	Industry Exceptions	Notes & Examples
Business to Consumer (B2C)	**15** Interviews	No exceptions	B2C refers to the process of selling products directly between a business and an individual consumer who is *typically* the end-user of its products. **Netflix** is a B2C company. They sell subscriptions to a range of movies, TV shows and more to consumers. **Casper** is a B2C company. They are an e-commerce business that sells mattresses directly to consumers.
Business to Business (B2B)	**5** Interviews	**2** Interviews for Military/Government	B2B refers to business that is conducted between companies, rather than between a company and an individual consumer. **CATL** is a B2B company. It's the world's largest electric vehicle battery maker and supplies auto manufacturers with their product to use in their manufacturing process. **Longan Vision** is a B2B company. They sell an Augmented Reality headset enabling firefighters to see through smoke and debris when rescuing victims from emergency situations.
Business to Business to Consumer (B2B2C)	**15** Interviews (5 B2B + 10 B2C)	No exceptions	B2B2C combines B2B and B2C for a complete product/service transaction. Popular examples are online marketplaces. **Amazon** is a B2B2C company. B2B: Amazon developed an online platform where retailers set up virtual stores. B2C: Consumers use Amazon to search for and buy products from retailers. Amazon takes a hefty fee from retailers. **Uber** is a B2B2C company. B2B: Uber developed a mobile app where drivers offer rides. B2C: Passengers use the mobile app to request rides. Uber takes a hefty fee from drivers.

NOTE: If you're unsure about how many interviews you must conduct at minimum, contact Mariya Leslie (mariya@theforge.mcmaster.ca) for guidance.

Tools for Challenge 1

Application Part 1 of 2: Customer Discovery Record Excel file

Application Part 2 of 2: Online Application Form: https://wkf.ms/4tkV7mS

Video conferencing software (Eg. Zoom or Microsoft Teams) on a laptop or a phone.
Optional: AI scribe to capture interview transcript and Microsoft Copilot to help arrange transcript into proper format for Excel file.

Helpful Resources

The following resources may be useful to you as reference/research while completing this challenge.

Note: Click the icon beside each tool to open.

Sample Customer Interview Guides

PDF copies of popular startup books about Customer Discovery.

Submit the following deliverables for review:

1 Online Application Form with uploaded Customer Discovery Excel File

Challenge 1 Deadline & Key Dates

Application Form must be submitted by 11:59PM on March 29, 2026. **(There are NO exceptions)**
Judging will take place March 30 - April 9.
Semi-finalists will be called for virtual interviews between April 13 - 15.
Top 10 finalists will be notified by April 16.
Startup Survivor program runs May 4 - August 28.

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