

The Problem Interview Playbook: A Guide to Finding Problems Worth Solving

Objective: To systematically de-risk the "Problem" and "Customer Segment" boxes of your Lean Canvas by uncovering genuine, high-value customer problems.

Part 1: The Golden Rules of Problem Discovery

Before you ever speak to a customer, internalize these rules. They are the foundation of this entire process.

1. **Love the Problem, Not Your Solution.** This is the #1 rule. Your solution is not invited to this meeting. Your only goal is to understand their world, their struggles, and their goals. Be prepared—and excited—to find out your initial assumptions were wrong.
2. **You Are a Journalist, Not a Salesperson.** Your job is to uncover a compelling story. You are digging for the truth. Be curious, empathetic, and listen more than you talk.
3. **Ask About the Past, Not the Future.** Future predictions are worthless. Past behavior is evidence.
 - **Bad Question:** "Would you use an app to manage your finances?" (Speculation)
 - **Good Question:** "Tell me about the last time you tried to figure out your budget. What did you do?" (Story about past behavior)
4. **Talk Less, Listen More (The 80/20 Rule).** You should be listening 80% of the time. If you are doing most of the talking, you are failing the interview. Use silence; people will often fill it with valuable insights.
5. **Ask Open-Ended Questions.** Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Your goal is to elicit stories.
 - **Bad Question:** "So, is managing your team's tasks difficult?"
 - **Good Question:** "Walk me through how your team decides who works on what each week."
6. **Dig Deeper with "Why?".** When you hear an interesting statement, don't just move on. Gently ask "Why was that important?" or "Can you tell me a bit more about that?" to get to the root cause of the behavior or frustration.
7. **Look for Workarounds and "Hacks".** When people are using spreadsheets in unintended ways, duct-taping three different apps together, or have created a complex manual process, it's a massive signal that they have a real problem and that existing solutions are inadequate.
8. **Don't Take Feature Requests Literally.** Customers will often suggest solutions ("You should add a PDF export!"). Do not write this down as a feature to build. Instead, treat it as a clue and dig deeper: "That's an interesting idea. What were you trying to accomplish when you wished you had a PDF export?"

Part 2: The Problem Interview Template & Script

This is a flexible guide, not a rigid script. Use it to structure your conversation.

Phase 0: Pre-Interview Preparation

- **Review Your Lean Canvas:** Be crystal clear on the top 1-3 riskiest assumptions you are testing.
- **Know Your Goal:** What is the #1 thing you need to learn from this specific customer?
- **Do Your Homework:** A quick search on the person or their company can provide valuable context.

Phase 1: The Introduction & Setting the Stage (2-3 minutes)

The goal is to build rapport and make them feel comfortable, not defensive.

You: "Hi [Name], thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it."

You: "Just to give you some context, I'm currently exploring [your general area of interest]. For example, **Senior Talent**, you could say, '...how founders of scaling companies navigate major strategic challenges.'"

You: "I'm in learning mode and have no solution to pitch or sell today. My only goal is to learn from your experience. Is that okay?"

Phase 2: Understanding Their Worldview (The Core: 15-20 minutes)

The goal is to get them to tell you a story about how they deal with the problem space today.

A. Find the Trigger:

- "Can you take me back to the time you first started thinking seriously about [the problem space]?"
- "What was going on in your life or business that made this a priority?"

B. Explore their Journey & Existing Alternatives:

- "After that trigger, what was the very first thing you tried?"
- "How did that work out?"
- "Walk me through your current process. How do you handle [the job-to-be-done] *today*?"
- "What tools (if any) do you use? (e.g., spreadsheets, WhatsApp, a specific app, pen and paper?)"

C. Listen for Friction and Pain:

- "What's the most frustrating or hardest part of that whole process?"
- "What do you love about your current system? What do you hate?"
- "How much time or money would you say you spend on this?"
- "Have you ever looked for another solution? What did you find?"

Phase 3: The Wrap-Up (3-5 minutes)

The goal is to confirm your understanding and get permission to continue the relationship.

A. The "Magic Wand" Question:

- "This has been incredibly helpful. Thank you. Just one last question: if you could wave a magic wand and fix anything about [the problem space], what would it be?"

B. The Hook (Optional, but recommended for strong signals):

- "Based on what I'm learning from parents like you, we're exploring a way to [Your UVP, e.g., 'help kids learn financial responsibility without parents having to nag']. Is that a problem you'd be interested in solving?"
- (If yes) "Great. Would you be open to seeing an early demo in a few weeks to give us feedback?"

C. The Ask for Referrals:

- "This conversation was fantastic. Do you know one or two other [Founders/Parents] who also think a lot about this stuff? A referral would be a huge help."

You: "Thank you again for your time. Your insights have been invaluable."

Part 3: After the Interview - Synthesize Immediately

The learning is lost if it stays in your notebook. This is a mandatory step.

1. **Fill Out a Customer Forces Canvas (5 mins):** While the conversation is fresh, map their story onto the four forces (Push, Pull, Anxiety, Habit). This visualizes their struggle.
2. **Review Your Notes:** Pull out 2-3 direct, powerful quotes that capture the essence of their problem.
3. **Update Your Lean Canvas (Crucial Step):** Go back to your riskiest assumptions. Based on this interview, are they more or less likely to be true? Use a green marker for validation and a red marker for invalidation. If an assumption is invalidated, it's time to brainstorm a new one. **This is validated learning.**

Repeat this process until you see clear patterns emerge across multiple interviews.