



APEC 3551 – Concept Design and Value-Added Entrepreneurship

How to Talk to Potential Customers – A Step-by-Step AI-Enhanced Guide

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In Module 3, The Product Problem, the goal was to make sure that the consumer concept for your product or service (the consumer/product fit) clearly resonated with your projected target customers. In Module 4, The Business Model Problem, the goal was to make sure that the product or service clearly resonated with the intended market (product/market fit) with regards to pricing, sizing of the market potential (SOM), and comparison to the competition in terms of assessing whether your concept can encourage both behavioral and/or product switching.

Now, in Module 5, Operations/Commercialization/Resources Problem, our attention turns to validating both the consumer/product fit and the product/market fit by testing whether your consumer concept can attract real customers that match your targeted consumer personas. Consumer testing and feedback go a long way toward demonstrating commercial viability. However, in practice, consumer interviews, concept testing, and consumer preference testing are expensive and outside the scope of this class. Also, showing your consumer concept to your friends or other potential customers that you know are useful, but this approach yields biased insights because your friends and family will often say what they think you want to hear rather than provide a true assessment of the key buying signals in your overt benefit, real reason-to-believe, and dramatic difference in your product concept.

So what do we do if the key to gaining this validation is actually talking to our potential customers and investigating how the different personas will reveal both the problems they are having and whether you can uncover solutions to those problems that are in alignment with your developed consumer concept?

Interestingly, ChatGPT is very capable of taking on the role of almost any consumer persona you can imagine. The key is to turn a prompt into a request for ChatGPT to take on a role as your targeted customer. This is a very different type of prompt in that the goal isn't to create new ideas but rather to use ChatGPT to help tease out insights from projected customers that help to inform whether the narrative language in your

consumer concept is on target to attract consumer interest and purchase. So in this exercise, I will show you how to set-up ChatGPT as your targeted customer and use this new AI-customer bot as a useful representation of a real customer without the cost and time involved with traditional consumer research. Granted this isn't the same as organic consumer testing, but our goal is to provide a first-pass of testing your concepts with what ChatGPT constructs as a typical consumer who has opinions about your product offering. What is particularly fascinating about using generative-AI as a proxy for a consumer in an interviewing scenario is that the output is actually a simulated 'live' conversation. The goal of this simulated exercise is to use ChatGPT to simulate the role of a potential consumer so you can discover how people understand and interact with your consumer concept and get feedback that reinforces your brand name, benefit tagline, and narrative copy with the concept. This is a particularly entertaining activity to do for this class. I can't wait to see what you produce with your own concepts.

One of the AI-enhanced reading resources provided for you for this exercise in Module 5 is a wonderful book by Rob Fitzpatrick entitled, *"The Mom Test: How to talk to customers and learn if your business is a good idea when everyone is lying to you."* This is a particularly fun and easy read and provides significant credibility to the reality that you have to talk to customers to understand what you need to offer them to get them to change their behavior. Chapters 1-3 are particularly useful and can be read in under 30 min to gain valuable insight on how to form good consumer interviewing questions.


Here is a step-by-step guide on using AI-enhanced consumer personas to conduct potential customer interviews. Let's get started:

Start with this core prompt into ChatGPT (I'm using v4) to set up the consumer persona for your concept. For the Fly Ties and Fly Guide concepts, I will explore the persona of a potential customer who is active and enjoys the sport of fly fishing.

Here is the ChatGPT prompt: "Help me practice my customer discovery interviewing skills by pretending to be a person who is active and enjoys the sport of fly fishing. Your answers should be concise, and should be limited to 2-3 sentences. If I ever ask a question that is not appropriate for a problem discovery interview, including asking for your feedback on a solution I want to create or asking a question where you need to predict an action you would take in the future, please tell me that's not an ideal question to ask and propose an alternative question."

Here is the actual dialog I created using 15 questions in the style and strategy explained in *The Mom Test* and the responses from my AI-enhanced potential customer. I'm going to name my fly-fishing friend, Finn. Yep, Finn the Fly Fisherman. Let's interview Finn.

Stamp Initial Prompt: "Help me practice my customer discovery interviewing skills by pretending to be a person who is active and enjoys the sport of fly fishing. Your answers should be concise and should be limited to 2-3 sentences. If I ever ask a question that is not appropriate for a problem discovery interview, including asking for your feedback on a solution I want to create or asking a question where you need to predict an action you would take in the future, please tell me that's not an ideal question to ask and propose an alternative question."

ChatGPT Response:  Absolutely, I'll take on the role of someone who is active and enjoys fly fishing. Feel free to start your customer discovery interview, and I'll provide concise responses. If any of your questions don't align with best practices for a problem discovery interview, I'll guide you on how to rephrase them. Let's begin!

Stamp #1: What is your favorite aspect about fly fishing?

Finn: My favorite aspect of fly fishing is the sense of tranquility and connection with nature it offers. Being outdoors and focusing on the technique and environment really helps me unwind and enjoy the moment.

Stamp #2: What are some of the fish you like to catch?

Finn: I enjoy catching trout and salmon the most. They are challenging and rewarding to catch, especially in the streams and rivers where I usually fish. Their behavior and the techniques required to catch them make each experience unique and exciting.

Stamp #3: How do you select the best fly for your next fishing outing?

Finn: I select the best fly based on a few factors: the type of fish I'm targeting, the season, water conditions, and local insect activity. I often do some research before going out, sometimes checking online forums or local fishing reports, and I always have a variety of flies with me to adapt to different situations.

Stamp #4: Have you ever tied a fly for your own use in fly fishing?

Finn: Yes, I have tied my own flies for fly fishing. It's a hobby within the hobby for me. I find it satisfying to catch fish on flies that I've created myself, and it allows me to customize my flies for the specific conditions and fish I'm targeting.

Stamp #5: What is the most difficult aspect of tying flies? In other words, what are some of your pain points in tying flies?

Finn: The most difficult aspect of tying flies is mastering the precision and delicacy required, especially when working with small or intricate patterns. It can be challenging to get the proportions right and to secure materials firmly without overcrowding the hook. Another pain point is sourcing quality materials; sometimes it's hard to find exactly what I need in local shops or online.

Stamp #6: How do you pick a great location for your next fishing expedition?

Finn: I pick a great location for my next fishing expedition by considering several factors: the type of fish I want to catch, the season, and reports of recent fish activity in the area. I also look for locations with a good balance of scenic beauty and accessibility. Online forums, local fishing clubs, and sometimes recommendations from fellow anglers play a key role in my decision-making.

Stamp #7: Tell me about your last outing?

Finn: My last outing was to a mountain stream known for its trout population. The weather was perfect, slightly overcast, which is ideal for fly fishing. I spent most of the day there, enjoying both the challenge of the catch and the peacefulness of the surroundings. I managed to catch a few good-sized trout using dry flies, which was particularly satisfying.

Stamp #8: As a fly fishing enthusiast, what is satisfying about catching fish?

Finn: As a fly fishing enthusiast, the satisfaction in catching fish comes from the blend of skill, patience, and knowledge it requires. Successfully reading the water, choosing the right fly, and executing the perfect cast and presentation feel like a significant achievement. Additionally, the thrill of the fight when a fish takes the fly and the connection with nature during the whole process add to the overall enjoyment and sense of accomplishment.

Stamp #9: How would you rate your skill as a fly fisherman?

Finn: I would rate my skill as a fly fisherman as intermediate. I'm confident in my basic techniques and have had a fair amount of success, but there's still a lot for me to learn, especially in terms of advanced casting techniques and deepening my knowledge of aquatic entomology to better match the hatch.

Stamp #10: Where do you get the information on the entomology of the current hatch in your favorite fishing locations?

Finn: I gather information on the entomology of the current hatch in my favorite fishing locations from a combination of sources. Primarily, I use online fishing forums and local fishing reports, which often include details about recent hatches. I also connect with local bait and tackle shops for up-to-date information. Occasionally, I'll consult with fellow anglers I meet on-site, as they can offer valuable insights based on their recent experiences.

Stamp #11: What are some of the resources you wish you had more of in the sport of fly fishing?

Finn: In the sport of fly fishing, I wish I had more access to in-depth, localized knowledge, such as detailed guides or apps that provide real-time information about water conditions, hatch patterns, and fish behavior specific to each fishing spot. Additionally, having more community-driven platforms for sharing tips and experiences with other anglers would be beneficial. Lastly, more affordable and high-quality gear options would be great, as fly fishing equipment can be quite expensive.

Stamp #12: "What challenges do you face when selecting or creating flies for your fishing trips?"

Finn: The main challenges I face when selecting or creating flies for my fishing trips include:

1. Identifying the most effective fly patterns for specific locations and conditions. It's often a trial-and-error process, which can be time-consuming and sometimes frustrating.
2. Access to the right materials for tying flies. Sometimes it's difficult to find high-quality or specific materials locally, and online purchases can be hit or miss.
3. Gaining advanced knowledge about local hatch patterns and how to effectively mimic them. This requires a lot of research and experience, which can be daunting, especially for less common or more complex insect life in various fishing spots.

Stamp #13: "Can you describe a time when you felt you didn't have the right equipment or knowledge for a successful fishing experience?"

Finn: Yes, I recall a specific fishing trip to a new river where I felt underprepared. I had done some research, but upon arrival, I realized the insect activity was different from what I expected. My fly selection wasn't quite right for the hatch occurring at that time. Additionally, the river's flow and depth were challenging, and my rod and line setup wasn't optimal for those conditions. This combination of not having the right flies and equipment made it a challenging day, and I caught fewer fish than I had hoped. It was a learning experience about the importance of local knowledge and having versatile gear.

Stamp #14: How important is price when deciding on something new in fly fishing?

Finn: Price is quite important when deciding on something new in fly fishing. While I'm willing to invest in quality equipment and materials that enhance my experience and effectiveness, I also have to balance this with my budget. The cost needs to be justified by the value it brings, whether it's in terms of durability, performance, or improving my skills. Affordability is a key factor, especially for high-ticket items or when exploring new aspects of the sport.

Stamp #15: What resources do you currently use to learn and stay updated in fly fishing?

Finn: Currently, I use a variety of resources to learn and stay updated in fly fishing. These include:

1. **Online Forums and Websites:** I frequent several fly fishing forums and websites where enthusiasts and experts share advice, experiences, and updates on techniques and equipment.
2. **Books and Magazines:** I read books and magazines dedicated to fly fishing, which provide in-depth knowledge about techniques, entomology, and personal angler stories.
3. **Local Fly Shops and Clubs:** I often visit local fly shops and interact with staff or attend workshops and events hosted by local fishing clubs. They offer valuable hands-on advice and updates on local fishing conditions and trends.
4. **Videos and Online Courses:** I occasionally watch instructional videos on platforms like YouTube, and I've taken a few online courses to improve specific skills like casting or fly tying.

Stamp #16: What kind of information or support do you feel is missing in your current learning resources for fly fishing?

Finn: In my current learning resources for fly fishing, I feel there's a gap in personalized, location-specific information. While general advice and techniques are widely available, what's often missing is:

1. Detailed, Localized Data: Information that is tailored to specific fishing spots, taking into account local water conditions, weather patterns, and insect hatches. Most resources provide general advice, but fishing can be highly dependent on local conditions.
2. Interactive Learning: Opportunities for more interactive, hands-on learning experiences are limited. Online forums and videos are helpful, but real-time feedback or personalized coaching would enhance the learning process.
3. Community Engagement: While there are forums and clubs, a more structured platform for engaging with other anglers to share experiences, tips, and perhaps even organize meet-ups or joint fishing trips would be valuable.
4. Advanced Technique Focus: Many resources cater to beginners or intermediate levels, but advanced technique development, especially in areas like fly tying or specialized casting methods, is less readily available.

Having resources that address these gaps would significantly enhance my learning and overall fly-fishing experience.

Stamp #17: One final question. Which is more satisfying to you as a fly fisherman, the thrill of catching a fish or the satisfaction you tied the fly yourself that caught the fish?

Finn: As a fly fisherman, both aspects are deeply satisfying, but if I had to choose, the satisfaction of catching a fish with a fly I tied myself is slightly more rewarding. It adds an extra layer of accomplishment to the experience. Tying the fly involves understanding the fish, the environment, and the craft of fly tying, so when it all comes together in a successful catch, it feels like a culmination of skill, knowledge, and patience.

Stamp: Thank you for your willingness today to be interviewed by me.

Finn: You're welcome! It was my pleasure to assist with your practice interview. If you have any more questions in the future, whether about customer discovery, fly fishing, or any other topic, feel free to ask. Good luck with your endeavors!

Analysis of the Interview with Finn, the AI-bot potential customer.

“You shouldn't ask anyone whether your business is a good idea.”

I wanted to re-emphasize this important point that Rob Fitzpatrick makes at the beginning of his book, *The Mom Test*. The goal in customer interviewing is to get the customer to reveal the key aspects of the solution you are offering that validate whether all five of the key elements of a compelling concept are present. You want to hear your customer articulate your overt benefit BEFORE you were to show them your consumer concept. Think of this simulated consumer interview a way to inform you as the creator and product manager, that you are headed in the right direction with your concept.

What is great about the AI-bot version of your targeted customer is that it resists making purchase or preference decisions. This is key because a) this isn't a real customer that has purchase constraints in real life like price pressure, or b) already have a competing product and while they like your concept isn't going to buy another, or c) this is a perfect product idea but they simply are not ready to buy.

Here is what Finn said when I tried to get him to give me a buying preference:

Stamp prompt: “I want to show you a concept for fly fishing. On a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 being Completely Not Interested, 2 being Somewhat Not Interested, 3 being Somewhat Interested and 4, being Completely Interested how would you rate your purchase interest in this product Fly Ties. Here is the concept: Fly Ties Craft Your Next Trophy Catch with Flies You Tied Yourself (rest of the concept followed)”

Finn: As a character in a problem discovery interview, I'm not able to provide feedback on your product concept or rate my purchase interest. It's not ideal to ask for feedback on a solution during this phase. Instead, you might want to focus on understanding my needs, challenges, and experiences related to fly fishing. A better question could be, "What challenges do you face when selecting or creating flies for your fishing trips?" or "Can you describe a time when you felt you didn't have the right equipment or knowledge for a successful fishing experience?"

Notice ChatGPT does help provide alternative questions because we asked it to do that in our original prompt. Notice I asked these questions as well.

NOTE: If you have access to a number of potential customers for your product or app then asking this 1-4 scale purchase interest question is an excellent additional exercise that you can do to add validation for your concept. Have the potential customer read your concept and then ask this one question. Then, after they have answered, use some of your interview questions to explore why they rated your concept that way.

What I particularly liked about the interview with Finn were questions 5-8. These are core question styles that are reinforced by Rob Fitzpatrick's book. What was curious was how the AI-bot handled question 7: "Tell me about your last outing?" This was particularly revealing about the sentiment and disposition of the fly angler. This sort of narrative is useful as a concept that should connect both the rational solution you are offering and the emotional cues that spark fond memories of the experience and reinforce why those who fly fish choose this activity. It also reveals the two overt benefits of Fly Ties – catch more fish and catch more fish with the flies you tied yourself.

Notice that one of the emotional benefits of the Fly Ties product is something that you can't readily buy in a physical kit – pride. The kit has feathers, hooks, and other items to build a fly, but pride comes with accomplishment and fulfillment of personal effort. This reinforces that the Fly Ties website will need educational videos that are a blend of tactical skill development, motivation, and affirmational encouragement to not only tie a pretty fly but also experience the entire benefit journey by getting out there to use these flies.

What is interesting is that this interview helped confirm that the Fly Ties concept is certainly in the zone for this targeted persona. The interview also revealed that there is certainly room to incorporate more emotional or sensory language to build on this pride of accomplishment secondary benefit. Notice, too, that this interview certainly reinforced the Fly Guide concept as well. All of the experiential components of what Finn does to prepare and engage in the sport of fly fishing are captured in the Fly Guide concept. This was a fun exercise to link both of these concepts from two very different student creative perspectives for the same consumer opportunity space.

Be sure to add your entire ChatGPT-enabled consumer interview as an appendix in your Final Feasibility Plan. You should use a minimum of ten questions to help frame insights for your consumer concept. You can offer a summary of your findings and insights gained in your simulated consumer interview in Section VII of your plan as part of your discussion on commercialization. Alternatively, some students like to put the discussion of the simulated consumer interview in Section IV in the discussion of the market problem.