

THE AI-NATIVE PLAYBOOKS · Nº 3

How to Talk to Customers

Getting the truth — not compliments — from the people you're building for

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CHAPTER 1

Why you can't trust what customers say

What people say and what they do are different things. The interview is how you get past the say to the do.

CHAPTER 1

Why you can't trust what customers say

The fastest way to build something nobody wants is to ask people if they'd want it. They'll say yes. They're being polite, they're imagining a better version of themselves, and they have no idea what they'll actually do until the moment arrives. Opinions are free, and they're worth exactly that.

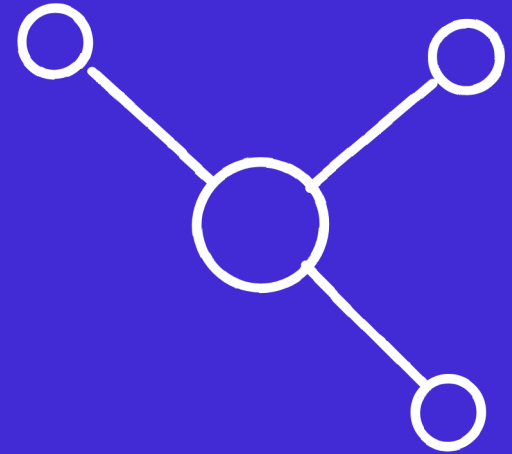
When I launched USERcycle in 2010, founders told me they wanted better analytics. They meant it. But the ones who actually switched weren't the ones with the strongest opinion about metrics — they were the ones who had just launched, watched their conversion rate disappoint them, and gone looking for a fix. The *behavior* told a completely different story than the *survey* did.

That gap is the whole reason this playbook exists. A customer interview isn't a survey, a focus group, or a sales call. It's a structured way to get past what people *say* and into what they

actually *did* — because past behavior is the only honest predictor of future behavior.

The interviewer's first rule. Never ask “would you use this?” People can't predict their own behavior, and they'll tell you what flatters you both. Ask “tell me about the last time you dealt with this” — and let the story do the talking.

Done right, talking to customers answers the only question that matters before you build: is this a problem real people already struggle with, badly enough to do something about it? This playbook walks the arc — **who** to talk to, **what** to ask, how to **make sense** of it, and how to turn a good conversation into a real **commitment** — and shows where LEANSpark takes the grunt work off your plate so you can stay on the listening.



CHAPTER 2

Who to talk to

A precise target beats a long list. You're hunting recent switchers, not opinions.

CHAPTER 2

Who to talk to

The quality of what you learn is capped by who you talk to. Interview the wrong people and you'll get clean, confident, useless data. The single best person to interview is a **recent switcher**: someone who hit the problem, went looking, and changed what they were doing about it — recently enough to remember the details.

Why recent switchers? Because they've already lived the whole story you need — the frustration that pushed them, the alternative they reached for, the anxieties they had, and what finally made them move. Someone who's merely *interested* in your space gives you opinions. Someone who *just switched* gives you evidence.

Cast wide, then narrow

Run discovery in two passes. **Broad-match** first: interview a wide range of people who've recently dealt with the problem, to find where the pain clusters and which segment feels it most. Then **narrow-match**: focus on that sharpest segment and go deep. You're not looking for a big sample — you're looking for a pattern. Stop when you stop being surprised.

A precise target beats a long contact list. “Founders” is not a segment. “Solo founders who launched in the last 90 days and are below their conversion targets” is — and so is “product leads whose team just churned off a workflow tool.” A real segment tells you exactly who to find, where they gather, and what story to listen for.

New to this? Each card gives you two ways to run it. Type the **In LEANSpark** line into the chat, or use the **Via MCP** prompt inside your own AI assistant. Either way, LEANSpark does the synthesis — the conversation with a real human stays yours to have.

Build your interview list

The job: find the right people before you waste a single conversation.

► IN LEANSPARK — YOU TYPE

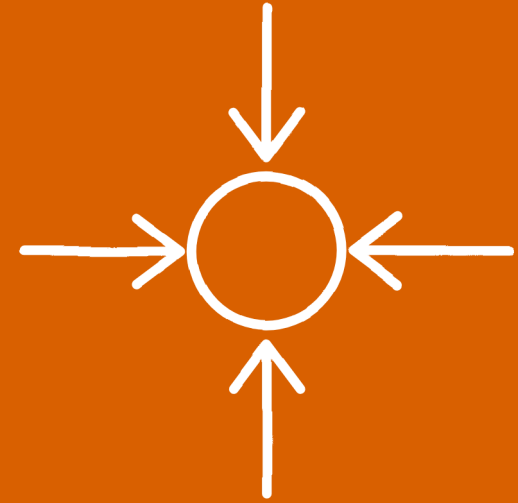
Find people to interview

Builds your prospect criteria from the canvas, then a ranked list of recent switchers to reach — with where to find them and what to say to get the meeting. You send the note and book the call.

RETURNS A prospect profile and a ranked outreach list, ordered by how close each person is to the problem — start broad, then re-run it narrowed on the sharpest segment.

► VIA MCP — PROMPT ANY AGENT

"Read `business_model://current` and `segments://list` . Define the recent-switcher profile most likely to have this problem acutely, where they congregate, and a short, non-salesy outreach message to land the conversation."



CHAPTER 3

What to ask

Mine the last time it happened. Map the forces. Don't pitch, don't lead, don't hypothesize.

CHAPTER 3

What to ask

A good interview is a guided story, not a questionnaire. Your job is to get the person re-living a specific, recent episode — and then to get out of the way. The structure that works is **three acts**: set the scene (what was going on when the problem showed up), walk the struggle (what they did, step by step, including the workarounds), and surface the switch — the switching trigger that made them finally change, and what almost stopped them.

Map the four forces

Underneath every switch are four forces. Listen for all of them:

1. **Push** — what was broken or frustrating about the old way.
2. **Pull** — the outcome they wanted and couldn't get.
3. **Friction** — the effort and worry of changing: migrating, learning, “will this even work for me?”
4. **Inertia** — the habit and comfort of the status quo: “it's not great, but I know how it works.”

The switch equation. People only switch when push plus pull outweighs friction plus inertia — and inertia is heavy, so a merely attractive pull rarely beats it. If you can't hear all four forces in the story, you don't yet understand why they did — or didn't — move.

The switching trigger. The four forces are the steady-state pressure. The **switching trigger** is the spark — the specific moment the old way failed badly enough to make them act (“the strap tore on the train”). It's the single most predictive thing in the interview: no trigger, and you're hearing a nice-to-have, not a switch.

When those USERcycle founders finally switched, you could hear all four: the *push* was a conversion rate that wouldn't budge; the *pull* was finally seeing *why* it wouldn't; the *friction* was ripping out analytics they'd already wired in; the *inertia* was the dashboard they already knew by heart. Miss one and you're guessing.

The three ways to ruin an interview

1. **Leading.** “Don't you hate it when...?” hands them the answer. Ask open: “Walk me through what happened.”
2. **Hypothetical.** “Would you use a tool that...?” invites a polite lie. Stay in the past: “What did you do the last time?”
3. **Pitching.** The moment you describe your idea, the interview is over — they stop telling you the truth and start protecting your feelings. Don't sell. Listen.

Look for workarounds, not "problems." Never use the word “problem.” Listen for struggles, pet peeves, and workarounds — calling three times to confirm a booking, waking up early to absorb delays. When someone goes out of their way, that effort *is* the problem worth solving.

Design the interview so it can't lie to you

The job: build a guide that mines past behavior, not hypothetical futures.

▸ IN LEANSPARK — YOU TYPE

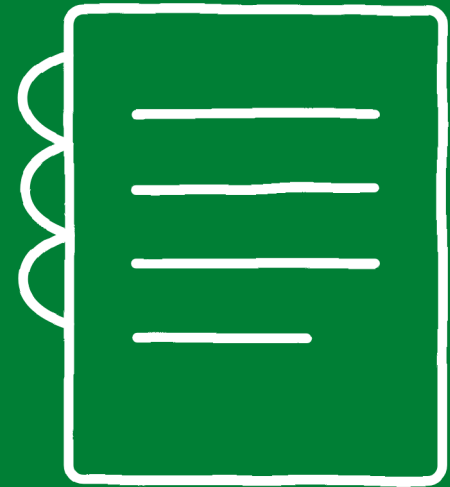
Design my interview guide

Builds your three-act interview guide and strips out every leading or future-facing question, so you mine real behavior — and gives you the follow-up probes for the moments most likely to surface a workaround. Then you run the conversation and listen.

RETURNS A three-act interview guide with the leading questions flagged and rewritten.

▸ VIA MCP — PROMPT ANY AGENT

"Read the customer forces in `business_model://current` . Draft a three-act problem-discovery guide for recent switchers. Flag any leading, future-facing, or socially-desirable question, and give a follow-up probe for the three moments most likely to surface a workaround."



CHAPTER 4

Making sense of what you heard

One messy conversation becomes one Customer Forces Story — and the pattern emerges across them.

CHAPTER 4

Making sense of what you heard

A 45-minute conversation is a pile of raw signal. The work is turning it into something you can act on — and the discipline that does it is the **Customer Forces Story**: a short synthesis, in your own words, of what pushed them, what pulled them, what they had to overcome, and what almost stopped them. Not a transcript. A book report.

The trap at this stage is hearing what you hoped to hear. After a few interviews, you start hearing what you came to hear — quietly building a confident case for the idea you already loved. Read your notes back and you'll catch yourself skipping every quote that didn't fit. The antidote is to force the disconfirming evidence into the light, side by side with the supporting evidence, and ask honestly which list the data actually backs.

What used to take all night, LEANSpark does in minutes

Writing up forces stories by hand, interview after interview, is exactly the kind of work that kept founders up past midnight. It's also exactly the kind of work AI is good at. Record the conversation, drop it into LEANSpark, and get the structured Customer Forces Story back — written straight onto your canvas, with the pattern across interviews already emerging. Your scarce energy goes into the listening and the judgment, not the transcription.

Turn recordings into evidence

The job: synthesize every interview into a Customer Forces Story, then find the pattern across them.

► IN LEANSPARK — YOU TYPE

Synthesize my interviews

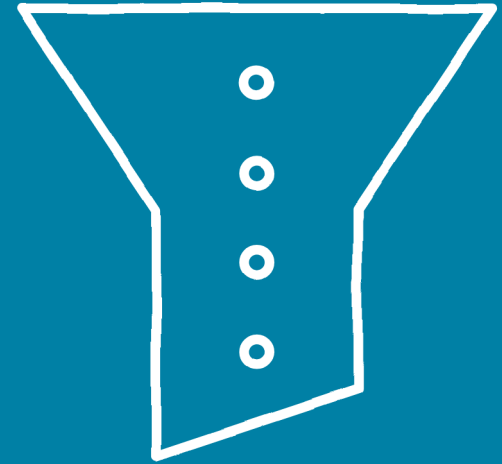
You record and upload; LEANSpark transcribes each one, extracts the four forces, and writes the Customer Forces Story — then synthesizes across the set and lays supporting evidence next to disconfirming evidence.

RETURNS A Customer Forces Story per interview — *Push*: “the booking system kept double-charging”; *Pull*: “I just wanted one dashboard” — plus the recurring stories across them and the two evidence columns, saved onto your canvas.

► VIA MCP — PROMPT ANY AGENT

"Read `interviews://recent` (use `list_recent_interviews` for the full set). Extract the four forces from each, synthesize the recurring stories, and surface the single strongest reason my problem hypothesis might be wrong."

Most markets have three to five stories. You're not collecting infinite data. Patterns emerge fast — a handful of recurring forces stories covers most of a market. When new interviews stop changing those stories, you've heard enough.



CHAPTER 5

From conversation to commitment

A 'yes' isn't evidence until someone gives something up for it.

CHAPTER 5

From conversation to commitment

A great interview tells you a problem is real. It doesn't tell you anyone will pay to solve it. For that, you need the other half of talking to customers: asking for a **commitment** — and watching what happens.

Talk is cheap, which is exactly why it's a weak signal. The strong signal is the moment a customer gives up something they value — time, money, reputation — to move toward your solution. A meeting booked on their calendar. An intro to their boss. A deposit. A signed letter of intent. "That's really interesting" costs nothing and means nothing. A fifty-dollar pre-order is worth more than fifty people saying "I'd totally use this." A commitment costs something, and that's what makes it evidence.

The commitment ladder. Escalate the ask. First, time (a follow-up, a referral). Then reputation (an intro, a public yes). Then money (a pre-order, a deposit). Each rung costs more — and each "yes" is worth proportionally more as evidence.

Ask for a real commitment

The job: turn an interested conversation into a costly, countable signal.

► IN LEANSPARK — YOU TYPE

Help me make the ask

Turns your validated forces into a focused ask anchored to the customer's real alternative, then tracks what people actually commit — money, time, a signed yes — so "interested" and "committed" never blur. You make the ask to a real person and log what they actually gave up.

RETURNS A drafted ask with the right next-rung commitment, and a tracker that scores your real commitment rate.

► VIA MCP — PROMPT ANY AGENT

"Read `offer://current` and `competitive://current` . Draft an ask anchored to the customer's existing alternative, and list the three objections I'm most likely to hear — and how to disarm each."



CHAPTER 6

Love the problem

The founders who win don't fall in love with their solution. They fall in love with the problem.

CHAPTER 6

Love the problem

It's tempting to treat customer interviews as a box to check on the way to building. They're not a phase — they're a habit. The best founders never run interviews as a phase and stop. They keep a standing slot — I still do one or two a month, fifteen years in — because the problem keeps moving, and listening is the only way to stay ahead of it.

Here's the mindset shift that makes all of it work: **fall in love with the problem, not your solution.** Founders who love their solution interview to confirm it — and hear only the yeses. Founders who love the problem interview to understand it —

and hear the truth, even when the truth says pivot. The solution is disposable. The problem, and the customer who has it, is the thing worth being loyal to.

AI changed what's cheap. LEANSpark will transcribe, synthesize, and structure every conversation you have. What it can't do is sit across from a real human, notice the workaround they didn't think to mention, and ask the question that makes them realize what they actually need. That's still your job. It always will be.

Go talk to your customers.



CHAPTER 7

Resources

Run your discovery on LEANSpark. Go deeper on the method.

CHAPTER 7

Resources

Run your discovery on LEANSpark

- **Customer Interview → Insights** — upload a recording, get back a Customer Forces Story, and watch patterns emerge across every conversation.
- **The Customer Forces Dojo** — train your ear on a real interview: catch the four forces and the switching trigger before you trust your own read.
- **Prospecting** — build a recent-switcher profile and a ranked outreach list, so you talk to the right people first.
- **The Campaign Designer** — turns validated discovery into a guided 90-day commitment test (the Mafia Offer), ending in real commitments.
- **The Lean Canvas + Assessments** — capture what you learn and pressure-test whether it adds up.

Go deeper on the method

- *Running Lean* and *The AI-Native Founder's Playbook* (No. 1 in this series) — where customer discovery fits in the whole journey from idea to traction.

- *Love the Problem* — the cohort program for founders and product leaders working through Problem/Solution Fit.
- *The AI-Native Coach's Playbook* (No. 2) — if you coach founders through this work.

The interview at a glance

STAGE	WHAT YOU'RE DOING
Who	Find recent switchers; cast broad, then narrow on the sharpest segment.
What to ask	Three acts; mine the last time; map push / pull / friction / inertia and name the switching trigger. Don't lead, hypothesize, or pitch.
Make sense	One Customer Forces Story per interview; find the pattern; face the disconfirming evidence.
Commit	Escalate the ask until someone gives something up. A commitment is the evidence.



*How to Talk to Customers is part of The AI-Native Playbooks,
a series from LEANSTACK / Ash Maurya. LEANSpark turns
your interviews into evidence.*

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