

Justin Jackson

Marketing for Developers

Build, launch, and get your first 100 customers

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Choose the right market

Here's a truth that doesn't get talked about much:

Some markets are bigger, easier to reach, and more eager to pay than others.

If you're hunting for ideas, you should start in an environment that matches these criteria:

1. Customers are motivated to spend money to improve their lives.
2. You can acquire customers through affordable marketing channels.
3. The customer base is big enough to support your business.

Case study: Nathan Barry and ConvertKit

Nathan started ConvertKit in 2013, positioning it as "Email marketing for digital product businesses." During this time he specifically targeted beginners. Initially, he was able to grow to

\$5,000 in MRR (monthly recurring revenue), but a problem emerged.

"Beginner customers are more likely to churn," says Nathan. Churn refers to users who cancel their subscription. For a Software as a Service business churn is the enemy. If you're bleeding more customers than you're acquiring, your business can't grow.

At the beginning of 2014, a bulk of ConvertKit's beginner customers churned, and MRR dropped to \$1,337.



ConvertKit's MRR: January 2013 – May 2014

In October of 2014, Nathan made a big decision. He stopped working on all his other projects and went full-time on ConvertKit. The goal? Grow revenue and make the business profitable. He decided to change his target market from beginners to "professional authors." Nathan's full-time focus and new tagline helped! Revenue slowly began to grow again.

But ConvertKit's major inflection point came in March of 2015. Nathan decided to radically change the positioning from "Email marketing for authors" to "Email marketing for professional bloggers."

Other people in the industry made fun of him. "Really?" they said, "when are you going to target real businesses?"

However, the hunch paid off. In July of that year, revenue increased 48%. Growth continued from that point on. MRR went from \$5,000 in 2015 to over \$700,000 in 2017!

Nathan's story underlies an important point: target market and positioning play a significant role in a SaaS' success.



ConvertKit's MRR vs. positioning

"Positioning was key," Nathan later said, "we now serve one of the best markets in the world."

ConvertKit was improving their product along, but the real breakthrough came when they found their ideal customer.

"One of the truths of successful startups: the thing you set out to make is not usually what you end up making."

– Fred Wilson

How to find your ideal customer

There are two paths to building a profitable product:

1. Create your product first, and then find clients who want it.
2. Start with an excellent market, do your research, and make a product for them.

In this book, I recommend the second option. Here are some techniques for increasing your chances of choosing a profitable customer.

Start with people like you

Years ago, I met Mike McDerment from FreshBooks. FreshBooks is online invoicing software. Over 5 million folks use their platform to send invoices, accept payments, and track expenses.

Mike explained the genesis of FreshBooks [in this blog post](#):

In January 2003 I was running a four person design agency. I was using Microsoft Word to create our firm's invoices, and I was pulling out my hair because Word simply wasn't built to create good looking invoices efficiently or report on my business. One day I accidentally saved over an old invoice, and something in me snapped – I knew there had to be a better way. Over the next two weeks I coded up a solution for my clients, and eventually, we turned that side project into what is now FreshBooks.

I took a class from Mike on marketing strategies. He told us about all the different ways he was reaching potential customers. One thing stuck out for me:

Me: "Mike, it sounds like you're only going after web designers. Why not market FreshBooks to other niches?"

Mike: "Starting with web designers made sense for us. We were designers, we knew where they hung out, we knew they were online, and we knew they needed to manage invoices (because we had that problem ourselves). It would have been way harder, and expensive, to go after plumbers. Web Designers was a niche we could easily get to."

Since then, FreshBooks has expanded to serve all sorts of niches (lawyers, marketing agencies, therapists) but putting their initial focus on designers was key to their success.

Choose a market that is easy to reach

Mike also knew that web developers would be simpler to reach because they congregated in groups online.

In 2008 FreshBooks was running ads on TweetDeck and Echofon, two well liked Twitter clients. At the time, Twitter was still a relatively small network, made up largely of early adopters in the web community. It was the perfect place for FreshBooks to reach its niche.

Interest-based groups that congregate online are easier to connect than other types of folks.

I've consulted for multiple health startups whose biggest challenge has been to reach the medical doctors they wish to serve. The medical community is a closed community. They don't maintain social media accounts, and getting their email is challenging. These companies had to resort to cold calling and direct mail to reach their audience, which is significantly more expensive.

Find a market with buying power

You're looking for a customer who can buy your product easily. In Nathan's case, a professional blogger is the only person he needs to persuade to buy his product. There's only one decision-maker; they don't need to run their expenses by anyone else.

Many software products, like project management software, have to convince a whole team of people to make a sale. You need to talk to the CTO, the COO, the Product Manager, and the development team. Purchasing decisions made by committee increase the cost of every sale.

Purchasing power also refers to how much money people can spend to solve their problems.

A college student might have the autonomy to spend their money as they please, but they're generally cash poor. A business owner, on the other hand, has both spending authority and the budget.

Look for a market that has the desire to improve

You want the type of customer that is highly motivated to solve their problems. They're willing to spend money to overcome

obstacles and make progress in their lives or their business.

Professional bloggers make most of their money by building an email list. They are a great market for ConvertKit to target because email is the core of their business. Furthermore, if they're having problems with their existing service (like MailChimp), they'll be highly motivated to switch.

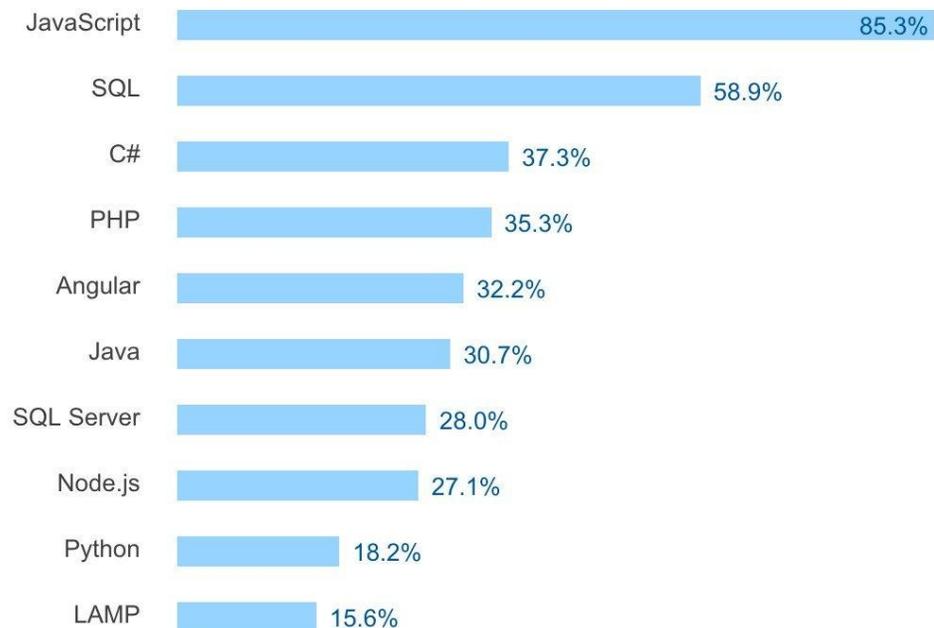
Desire is important. Certain types of business owners can spend money as they please, but they're cheap. They're not willing to pay to overcome certain types of problems. If you've ever been a part of a business' budget discussions, you'll notice that every business has certain non-negotiables. Phone service, website hosting, and email service are necessary for most businesses. But other applications are just "nice to have."

Pick a market that's "big enough."

To have a sustainable business, you need enough people in your target market with the ability and desire to pay you. If your market is too niche, it's going to be difficult to make a profit. However, if there are thousands (or millions) of people in that market, your opportunity to attract leads is greater. Choosing a niche is still important, but it has to be sizeable enough to support your business.

For example, my friend Adam Wathan wrote a book called *Refactoring to Collections*. It shows PHP developers how to use Laravel Collections to refactor their code.

Most Popular Technologies per Dev Type (Full stack)



Stack Overflow Developers Survey, 2017⁵

Adam's potential market size is much greater than someone who focuses on Python programmers. He had another advantage: PHP was sizeable and was being ignored by many publishers. They felt it wasn't "cool enough." These developers were hungry for good resources.

A trick for choosing the right market

Ask yourself this question:

Who is already paying you for your time and expertise?

My friend Francois was a web development consultant. Over time, he started attracting a specific clientele: Shopify store owners.

Eventually, he built a SaaS specifically for this group. They were already paying him as a consultant, so he knew they were likely to pay him for software.

A trick for determining if you have the right market

Here's a good way to evaluate whether a given customer type meets all these criteria.

If a market has a long-running conference or trade show, it's probably a safe bet. Conferences are expensive (\$500+) and require a significant mass of people who are highly motivated to attend.

Look at Nathan Barry's audience of "professional bloggers." The BlogWorld conference (now called NMX) has been running since 2001 which attract hundreds of conference goers every year.

The other benefit of events like this is you can register, and get a feel for attendees. Ask them questions:

- What tools do they pay for?
- What's the most recent software purchase they made? What triggered that purchase?
- What are they currently struggling with in their business?
- What workarounds are they using? (what tasks are they currently doing in Excel?)

Do you like them?

Another good reason to attend conferences, events, and meetups: you'll get a sense if you like the customer.

Before rushing to create a product you need to stop and ask: "Do I even want to serve this market?"

There's a lot of advice on finding product/market fit. My recommendation is that you get founder/market fit right first.

*“Product/market fit is a **good market** with a product that can satisfy that market.” – Marc Andreesson*

When Marc says “good market,” he means a defined group that can pay for products.

By that definition, dentists are a lucrative market. They run profitable businesses. They're willing to pay to save time, save money, or make money. But just because they have problems to solve, doesn't mean you're the person to solve them.

My friend Patrick McKenzie had that experience. He used to run a SaaS called Appointment Reminder. Before launching, our mutual friend Peldi asked him a question:

“Is optimizing the schedule of dentists' offices your passion?”

When Patrick answered “no,” Peldi was exasperated:

“Then why are you committing to working on that for the next several years?!”

Serving an audience, you don't like is one of the worst feelings in the world. You have to show up every day and answer their emails, fix their bugs, reset their passwords. To do customer

research, you need to hang out with them a lot. Want to get sales? You have to go to trade shows, make contacts, call them on the phone.

Put another way: if you don't like cats, don't start a feline rescue center.

Why product/founder fit matters

In September 2015 Marco Arment woke up to discover he had the #1 paid app in the App Store. He'd developed an early ad blocker for iOS called Peace.

He'd previously achieved success with other apps, like Instapaper and Overcast, but nothing to this level.

He should have been ecstatic; but instead, he was miserable. He described his inner conflict on his blog:

Achieving this much success with Peace just doesn't feel good, which I didn't anticipate, but probably should have. I still believe that ad blockers are necessary today, but I've learned over the last few crazy days that I don't feel good making one. Even though I'm "winning," I've enjoyed none of it. That's why I'm withdrawing from the market. I'm just not built for this business.⁶

Here's another example of why product/founder fit matters:

I was at a conference when I met Chris. He'd spent his whole life in the lottery business. He noticed a huge opportunity: China and India were just getting into legal gambling. He'd just inked

deals worth millions of dollars. He asked me if I wanted to join him.

I thought about it. I could see the potential: Chris had a product that governments overseas needed and wanted. Getting to that market first has huge advantages.

I declined the offer.

For me, gambling just doesn't fit. Working on a lottery product doesn't match my values. I don't gamble, or play games at all. The money was attractive, but I couldn't see myself working on it every day. It's just not right for me.

I'm not saying we should only build products that are "exciting." A lot of apps are boring and unsexy. That's OK. The key is to solve problems for a group of people you're passionate about. If you can make money doing that, without undermining your values, you're winning.

Market checklist

Selecting a target market for your software product is one of the most important decisions you'll make. Evaluate each potential market with this checklist:

- Are you familiar with this market? Have you worked with them before?
- Is the market easy to reach?
- Do they have the ability to pay for products?
- Do they have the desire to improve themselves / their business?
- Is the market big enough?

- Would you like to have them as customers?

5 insights.stackoverflow.com/survey/2017

6 marco.org/2015/09/18/just-doesnt-feel-good

Closing thoughts

I've been thinking a lot about makers; the people who put themselves on the line to create products that people use.

Most people don't create, they consume. **You're different.** You've sat at your computer day after day writing code, looking towards the day where you'd ship your product. Putting something out into the world takes guts. You've done it.

Secretly, we're all scared that our project will fail. We've poured our heart and soul into creating it, and we hope that people will receive it with open arms.

If your first attempt at marketing a product doesn't work, don't despair. **Keep making things.** Most of us have to try multiple times before we find something that works.

Stuart Butterfield was working on a game called [Glitch](#). He and his team had invested two years of development time in the project. They were hoping for a massive launch that would drive thousands of gamers to sign up in multiplayer mode. The launch failed: they just couldn't attract enough players.

Stuart and his team decided to pivot and launched a little internal chat app they'd been using. They called it [Slack](#). If

you've paid attention to tech news, you know that Slack has experienced incredible traction. At the time of writing, Slack is valued at \$2.8 billion dollars and has over 750,000 daily users.⁵⁴

Sometimes you just need another turn at bat. Keep at it. Keep shipping! Learn from the response you receive. Focus on getting better.

"I'm convinced...half of what separates the successful entrepreneurs from the non-successful ones is pure perseverance."

– Steve Jobs

At the beginning of this book, I told you about my goal: that more developers would earn an income from the things they create. Supporting independent makers is a purpose I'd like to pursue for the rest of my life.

I'm cheering for you! I'd love to hear about what you're making. You can reach me at words@megamaker.co.

Finally, I want to thank you. When you purchase a self-published work like this, you're supporting something bigger: a movement of independent makers who can make a living from the things they create. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Let's connect soon,

Justin Jackson

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