



SOLVING PRODUCT

Reveal Gaps, Ignite Growth,
and Accelerate Any
Tech Product with
Customer Research

—○ Étienne Garbugli

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Tech Product with
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Solving Product

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To my mother.
For giving me the
courage to follow my convictions.

Acknowledgement

During the writing of this book, I spoke to the world's leading experts on some of the customer research techniques discussed in this book, and many of the product leaders and entrepreneurs who use these techniques daily. The best ideas in this book are from them.

Many of the techniques and ideas covered here are detailed in full in their books, talks, and blogs, which I invite you to check out. You'll find links and references to their work at the end of the book.

Every component of this approach is well known to some particular field of research or industry. They have just never been put together into a coherent method before.

Preface

“If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.¹”

Abraham Maslow
Psychologist

Experience is a funny thing.

The more we acquire of it, the more we become partial to doing things in certain ways.

Consciously or not, we start prioritizing the strategies and tactics that have made us successful before.

Because of this, we rarely take the time to consider all options when working on products.

If we're used to using analytics to measure how features impact customers, then we'll discount the value of learning from small groups of users.

If we're used to interviewing customers to understand their needs and reasoning, experiments and quantitative research might get neglected.

Our experience—or our team's experience—creates our blind spots, and unfortunately, blind spots are where a lot of the magic happens.

When I joined LANDR, a SaaS music mastering service, the founders and the early team had done a great job validating the need, creating valuable technology, building a brand, and attracting capital. Now growth was expected.

There were just a few problems. It wasn't clear:

- who benefited the most;
- what was valued and what wasn't;
- why users bought or didn't;

- why users stuck around or didn't; or
- who the users really were in the first place.

The business was growing, but blind spots were hindering its growth.

The team was already stretched thin building the product, so a key part of my role became systematically seeking out information gaps, answering questions around product use, challenging assumptions.

No stone was left unturned.

The more we learned, the faster we grew. Less than two years in, revenue had grown by 4x.

Today, well after my time at LANDR, I often speak with entrepreneurs. Too often, when I ask questions about their users or the value that their product delivers, I get fuzzy answers.

It turns out that, despite it being a proven way to grow a product², most businesses struggle with systematically learning about their users and customers.

I wrote *Solving Product* to share a method designed to drive new growth, step by step.

The book was written to help product teams, entrepreneurs, innovators, and marketers uncover the gaps in their business models, find new avenues for growth, and systematically overcome their next hurdles.

It covers the five stages in the life cycle of a product business:

1. **Idea:** *Is this idea worth pursuing?*
2. **Startup:** *Will it work?*
3. **Growth:** *Can it scale?*
4. **Expansion:** *How big can it get?*
5. **Maturity:** *How can we find more growth?*

No matter the stage, we're always looking for growth.

Solving Product will help you unlock that growth.

How to Use This Book

“What is wanted is not the will to believe, but the will to find out, which is the exact opposite.”

Bertrand Russell
Philosopher

Solving Product is a different kind of book.

It has been structured in a way so you can put it on your desk and thumb through it when you're facing a growth challenge for your business.

You can read it from beginning to end, or jump around as need be.

The Table of Contents and the exercises in Chapter #2 have been designed to help you navigate to the appropriate content.

I hope you enjoy this book, I really enjoyed writing it. At the end, you'll find my email address, and I'd love to hear what you thought of it.

-Étienne

Inception

Introduction

“Learning and innovation go hand in hand. The arrogance of success is to think that what you did yesterday will be sufficient for tomorrow.”

William G. Pollard
Physicist

“It’s just not working.”

Julie was sitting in a dark office with her two co-founders.

She had called for an emergency, partner-only, meeting after another hectic day.

Now, well after working hours, the co-founders could hear their voices echo across Demoto’s empty 30,000 square feet office.

Eight months ago, they had raised a large funding round based on their impressive growth trajectory.

Ever since the raise, the partners had spent every waking hour recruiting and hiring the best people they could find.

It seemed like they were making all the right moves—hiring, marketing,

product—yet if you really looked under the hood, the business had barely grown.

Sure, they were able to acquire a lot more users than before, sales and revenue had grown significantly, but nothing they had done had really improved customer retention.

Even worse, a growing number of customers were cancelling their accounts.

At their current burn rate, and with 150 employees now on payroll, the partners knew they had to start thinking about the next round of funding. They also knew that, no matter how they positioned it, investors would see right through the issues.

For weeks, customer retention had been on their minds, but with all the new people coming in, they knew better than to sound the alarm. The last thing they wanted was for top talent and investors to get worried.

Quietly, they had asked key staff to dig into customer feedback, speak with users, research the competition, and read through years of support tickets.

To improve the product, they had also prioritized features they felt could improve retention.

The analysts had come back empty-handed. Customers loved Demoto's brand and product. Sure, there were bugs, but all products have them. It was unlikely that bugs were holding back growth this much.

The partners had met five years ago at Worktag, a now much larger technology company. They had joined early, helped the company find product/market fit (PMF), and decided to start their own business once Worktag passed \$30M in revenue.

Having been through the process before, they knew that Demoto had PMF. At Worktag, however, once the company had reached PMF, it just kept on growing.

The partners were at a loss for next steps.

Hockey Stick Growth is a Lie

“Whenever you hear anybody talk about ‘growth hacks,’ just mentally translate it in your mind to ‘bullshit’.³”

Paul Graham
Y Combinator Co-Founder

There are a lot of persistent myths in the technology industry, for example:

- You can raise funding based on an idea (you can’t⁴).
- The idea you choose to pursue is one of the most important factors in your success (it’s not⁵).
- The best companies are started by young entrepreneurs in their early 20s (they’re not⁶).
- Your business has to be based in such and such region to succeed (it doesn’t⁷).
- There’s such a thing as hockey stick growth.

For the past 20 years, every tech company’s pitch deck has featured some variation of the hockey stick growth chart:

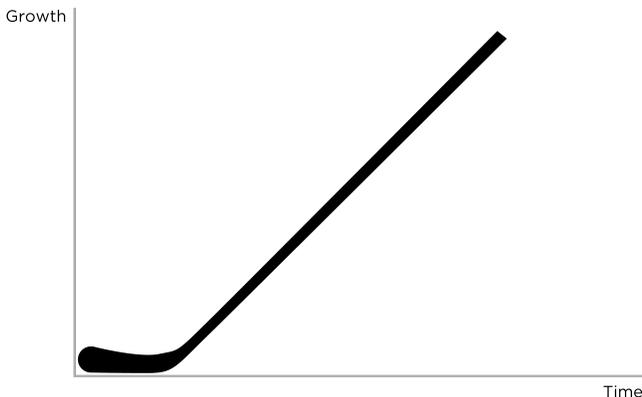


Figure 1.1 - Hockey Stick Growth

Exponential growth over time.

Don't get me wrong, I love hockey (I'm Canadian!), but this chart is more myth than reality.

Even in the rare cases where reality has matched projections, if you were to zoom in on the chart, you'd see series of tiny peaks, dips and plateaus.

Expecting never-ending growth—as Julie and her team might have—is misleading at best. Growing fast and creating predictable growth means constantly refining your growth recipe. It's rarely the result of a single action.

Why Growth Stalls

“You can only get so many quick wins before you've got to start doing the real work.”

Michael Sacca
Dribbble VP of Products

There are two reasons why growth stalls:

1. The business hasn't figured out the next thing it needs to learn.
2. The business attempts to grow with a flawed, incomplete, or outdated⁸ model of its product, users, market, or customers.

It *is* possible to grow (grow fast even) with a flawed, or partial understanding of your business mechanics.

Depending on the size of your market, growth can even go on for quite a while. But sooner or later, fundamental issues catch up.

If you don't figure out what makes your business *unique*, you're forced to rely on good ideas, great execution, *hacks*, emulating the competition, or any other ad-hoc tactics for growth. This can work for a time, but eventually growth will slow down and you will be left with little to no knowledge on how to truly grow your company.

All businesses are unique. They have their own cultures, founder DNAs, experiences, competitive advantages, management structures, goals, technical debts, strategies, and they compete in different markets striving to create value for different groups of humans. You can't simply copy another company's business strategy. To grow consistently, you have to figure out your own unique growth recipe.

Julie and her team's customer retention issues might have been caused by:

- misunderstanding why customers use and buy their product;
- having acquired the wrong users and customers;
- having created a product with too many unwanted features;
- all of the above; or
- something else completely.

Finding the core issue means first narrowing the list by uncovering which parts of the growth recipe are solid, and which aren't.

In the next chapter, we'll look at a way for you (and Julie's team) to assess a business.

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Isolating the Issues

“If you search around a room with a flashlight then you’re only seeing small pieces at a time. But if you replace that flashlight with a lamp, then all of a sudden you’re able to see more.”

Dan Touchette
Personio Group Product Manager

If you were to start painting today, you would be met with blank canvas.

Maybe you’d get inspired by an idea you had, by a memory from your childhood, or you would simply paint what’s in front of you.

As you worked on some parts of the painting, it would become clear which parts needed more work, and which parts were *good enough*.

Maybe the grass doesn’t look like grass. Maybe faces lack definition. Maybe there are still just rough outlines in the bottom half.

No matter your process, the painting would visually tell you which parts need more

work.

A painting has its own *built-in* feedback cycle. This makes it obvious to the artist when the work is incomplete, and when it's good enough.

In some ways, businesses are like paintings. Both start with blank canvases. Both need layers of clarifications and iterations. Both are made better by the sum of their parts.

But unlike paintings, businesses don't tell you when they're incomplete, they don't show you which elements are missing, and they rarely help you find the gaps.

Worse, businesses operate under changing conditions and environments. Because of this, product teams can never really get full clarity.

If you find yourself asking strategic questions that you only have general answers to, if you're in constant reaction mode, or if your business goals are unclear or disconnected, then your business most likely has gaps that it needs to address.

How Gaps Affect Your Business

"Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored."

Aldous Huxley
Author of *Brave New World*

The five sections in this book address the key stages of the business life cycle. Although the stages and challenges within them might not entirely map back to the evolution of your business, they will provide a clear overview of the ingredients of business success.

To help figure out which stage your business is at, ask yourself:

- *Have we identified and prioritized all expansion opportunities (features, markets, products, etc)?* If so, you might be at the Maturity stage (Stage #5);
- *Have we identified our funnel's friction points, why customers buy, and the best channels to scale customer acquisition profitably?* If so, you might have reached the Expansion stage (Stage #4);

- *Have we found PMF?* If so, you might have entered the Growth stage (Stage #3);
- *Have we validated the opportunity through pre-selling?* If you did, you reached the Startup stage (Stage #2);
- If you've not reached any of those milestones, it might be a good idea to start at the Idea stage (Stage #1).

Within each of these stages, there are challenges that your team must address:

Stage 1 – Idea

- A need has been found and a customer segment identified (Chapter #4);
- A competitive advantage has been identified (Chapter #5);
- A compelling value proposition has been created (Chapter #6);
- The product concept has been validated (Chapter #7).

Stage 2 – Startup

- The product has delivered the expected benefit (Chapter #8);
- Best fit* customers have been identified (Chapter #9);
- The product has met and exceeded customer expectations (Chapter #10);
- You've found PMF (Chapter #11).

Stage 3 – Growth

- Friction points across the entire funnel have been identified (Chapter #12);
- You know why customers have bought your product (Chapter #13);
- Users have been signing up for the same reasons that they bought and used your product (Chapter #14);
- You have found your best acquisition channels (Chapter #15).

Stage 4 – Expansion

- Engagement-increasing product improvements have been identified (Chapter #16);
- Adjacent customers segments have been identified (Chapter #17);
- Opportunities to improve customer acquisition have been identified (Chapter #18);
- Opportunities to create new products have been identified (Chapter #19).

Stage 5 – Maturity

- A rapid growth experiment process has been created (Chapter #20);
- The product's fit and effectiveness has been optimized (Chapter #21);
- Remaining acquisition opportunities have been identified (Chapter #22);
- Revenue and profitability have been optimized (Chapter #23).

Jumping ahead without properly addressing the challenges from previous stages is like trying to play professional sports without first learning the rudiments.

Whether it's premature scaling—trying to scale acquisition (Chapter #15) without clear signs of PMF (Chapter #11)—or optimizing (Chapter #12) a product without knowing if it delivers actual value (Chapter #10), growing a business without solid foundations is wasteful.

To get a sense of where your business is at, you first need to understand which aspects of your business are solid, and which aren't.

Visualizing the Gaps in Your Business

“Ignorance is never better than knowledge.”

Enrico Fermi
Winner of 1938 Nobel Prize in Physics

You might be able to grow a product business that has a few gaps, but the more gaps there are, the more difficulty you'll have in pinpointing the deeper reasons why your business underperforms.

Is growth slow because you're not acquiring the right customers, or because your product doesn't have the right features, or because you're not addressing the right need?

Ultimately, every part of your business model can be positioned on a simple scale. On one end, you have *Complete Guesses* and on the other, you have *Statistically-Validated Facts*:

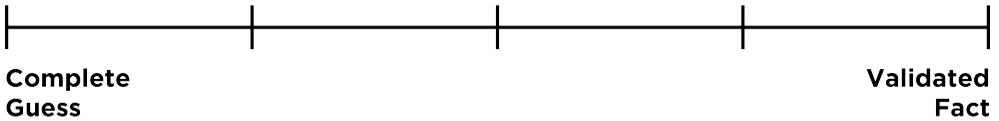


Figure 2.1 - The Certainty Scale

The difference between a guess and a statistically validated fact is the level of confidence you have in the information.

Positioning the elements of your business model on this continuum will help to reveal the gaps.

To assess confidence, *User Story Mapping* author Jeff Patton recommends thinking in terms of bets, asking how much you'd be willing to bet that the information is accurate⁹.

Whenever you learn new things about your business or your product, Jeff recommends asking whether you'd be willing to bet:

- A) Your lunch; B) A day's pay; C) Your house; or D) Your retirement savings (401k).

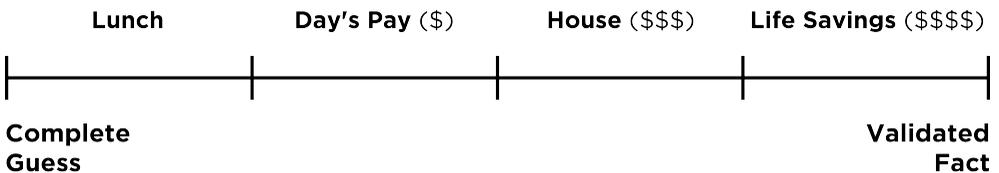


Figure 2.2 - The Certainty Scale With Bets

If you're not willing to bet more than your lunch, it's quite likely that, deep down, you know you are simply guessing. If you're willing to bet your retirement savings on an insight, you are most likely dealing with information that you can depend on.

Looking back at the 20 challenges listed above, *where would your answers fall?*

Go through the challenges one by one, and position your answers on the certainty scale.

How Clear Is Your Growth Recipe?

“People oftentimes will live in a world of assumptions, and they’ll treat assumptions as facts. And without explicitly calling out those assumptions then it’s really difficult to learn what the gaps are.”

Dan Touchette

Focus on the challenges from the stages *before* yours: *how much confidence do you have in your answers?*

Very quickly, you should be able to uncover:

- **Assumptions:** information you accept as true with little—or insufficient—proof;
- **Gaps:** challenges from previous stages that your team might have overlooked, or that might be worth re-visiting; and
- **Validated learning:** knowledge you can *reliably* build on.

You should be able to tell which parts of your growth recipe are clear, and which need more work.

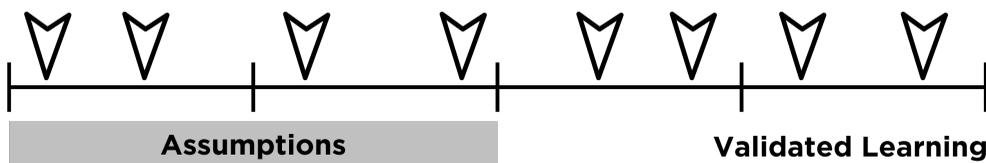


Figure 2.3 - Example of a Growth Recipe

Although your product might have reached the Maturity, Expansion, Growth, or Startup stages, it’s not uncommon to still be lacking insights into key

elements of your business model at those stages. If you've overlooked certain information, consider circling back to address the challenges you have skipped over.

Through this exercise, you should also be able to figure out what your next moves should be. *Where does confidence drop off? What's the next challenge on your list?*

As Peter Bevelin, author of *Seeking Wisdom* wrote: *"If we face two possible explanations which make the same predictions, the one based on the least number of unproven assumptions is preferable, until more evidence comes along."*

Rank the gaps that you've uncovered. In the next chapter, we will turn this assessment into actionable next steps.

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Asking the Right Questions

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”

Zora Neale Hurston
Author

The approach in *Solving Product* is based on five principles:

1. **There’s always an answer:** You might need to get creative, but there’s always a way to find the information you need to reduce the uncertainty of the decisions you need to make.
2. **The answers almost always come from the users:** Whether they are prospects, users, customers, or your competitors’ customers, a specific segment of people will ultimately—directly or indirectly—reveal the constraints you need to overcome.
3. **You can’t explore with blinders on:** Consciously or unconsciously, we tend to set limits on what we learn and how we learn it. To consistently overcome the hurdles you face, you have to be able to explore broadly. As you’ll no-

tice throughout this book, sometimes this might mean getting out of your comfort zone.

4. **Learning is about making progress:** Learning for the sake of learning is a waste. Businesses always have limited time and budget. To make real progress, you have to continually focus on the core risks, gaps, and assumptions.
5. **The best way to evaluate progress is against a goal:** Feedback and learning only matter if they are related to a goal. To make progress, you need to set goals and evaluate progress against these goals.

Questions, techniques, and goals will change as your business changes.

In every chapter of this book, we discuss the factors behind goal selection, and the customer research techniques you can use to make progress.

Based on the assessment done in the previous chapter, *are there gaps you need to address?*

If so, refer to Chapter #2, and jump to the appropriate sections.

If, like Julie, you're dealing with a problem that could be caused by different challenges, you should first clarify the issue to get to the heart of the matter. Read on.

Narrowing Down the Issues

"The scientist is not a person who gives the right answers, he is one who asks the right questions."

Claude Lévi-Strauss
Anthropologist

There are many ways to express customer retention issues: high churn, low engagement, low retention, low feature usage, low loyalty, customer downgrades, etc.

There are also many potential reasons for low retention: bad user experience, low product value, lack of funds, better solutions on the market, insufficient time to use the product, poor customer support, etc.

We can't achieve what we want if we don't understand what makes it happen. Addressing 'customer retention' means addressing a series of loosely defined problems. To make progress in addressing customer retention, first it's important to identify the core problem.

This can be done by answering the Five Ws and One H (5W1H):

- **What:** The problem. In this case, customers churn.
- **Who:** *Who is churning? What user profiles are churning?*
- **When:** *When do they churn?*
- **Where:** *Where do they churn?*
- **How:** *How do they churn?*
- **Why:** *What causes each of these user groups to churn?*

Analyzing *Who*, *When*, *Where*, and *How* helps you understand the composition of your churn rate. It will help you to decide which customer segments to focus on.

Why helps you understand what drives churn upwards or downwards for the segment you're exploring. Answering *Why* helps you generate hypotheses on how to address this problem.

Whether you're trying to reduce churn, get users to adopt a certain feature, or get them to come back more often, you should use a similar process:

1. **Narrow the issue:** Figure out exactly what you are trying to achieve.
2. **Understand the composition:** Figure out how behavior is affected by different roles and profiles.
3. **Understand causality:** Understand root causes and specific issues.
4. **Generate research and experiment ideas:** Once you know what drives the behavior, run experiments to test different solutions.

Once you know what your problem is, it becomes a lot easier to find the best techniques to solve it.

The sections in this book will help you find the best way to learn to overcome

the issues your business is facing.

If the work you end up doing influences a decision of any significance, then the cost of the book and the time to study it will be paid back many times over.

Let's get started.

That's It for the Sample, but There's a TON More to Check Out

No matter where you are in the product growth cycle—at the idea stage, at maturity, or somewhere in between—*Solving Product* will help you:

Solving Product offers a simple, unique, and wildly powerful business compass. It's a book you'll find yourself going back to, time and time again.

- **Gain clarity:** Reveal gaps and blindsides, know exactly what challenges you're facing;
- **Overcome blockers:** Lay out clear action plans to fix the most pressing issues and get your business moving forward, fast;
- **Ignite growth:** Find new approaches to get your product growing. The book contains **more than 25 case studies** and **actionable advice from hundreds of product leaders** and customer research experts.

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