WEEK 4 · STARTUP SCHOOL

Customer Discovery

Know Your Customer

You cannot build for a customer you haven't spoken to.

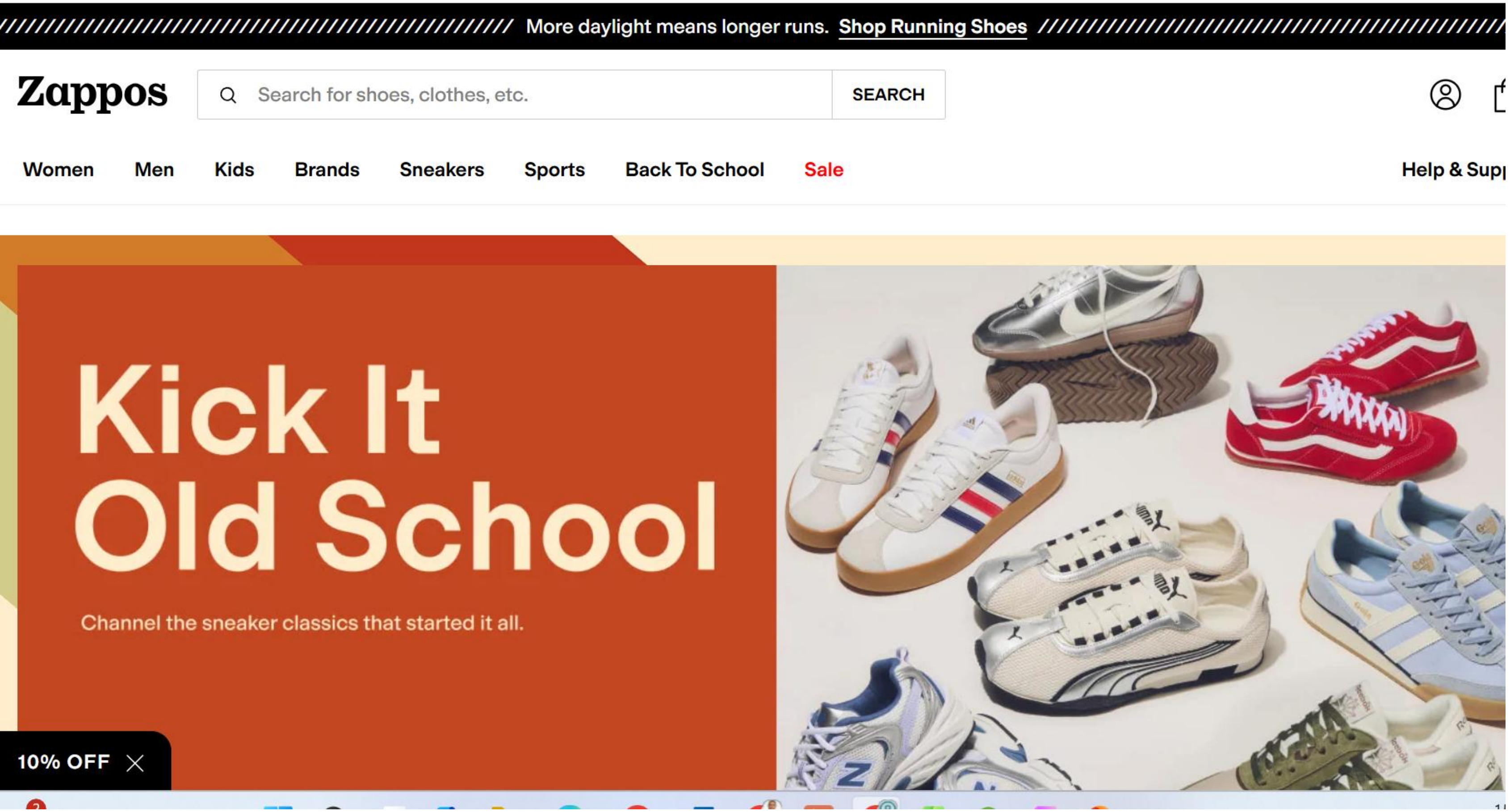
DATE	TIME	FORMAT
July 1, 2026	13:00 – 16:00	Lecture + Live Practice

WHAT WE COVER

Who exactly is the customer?

Most founders think they know. Most are wrong about at least one detail that matters: the urgency, the budget, the workaround they're already using.

This session is about replacing guesses with evidence — before you write a line of code.



Zappos — Nick Swinmurn, 1999Before building any inventory or warehouse, Swinmurn walked into local shoe stores, photographed their stock, posted it online, and only bought the shoes from the store (at full price, no discount) once a customer actually ordered. No real business, just a test of one core assumption: will people buy shoes online without trying them on first? Classic "do things that don't scale" customer discovery — validate demand before building supply chain. Zappos sold to Amazon for $1.2B in 2009.

01

Why the Customer Matters

The single idea every great company is built on

A FOUNDING PRINCIPLE

> ***“We're not competitor obsessed, we're customer obsessed. We start with the customer and we work backwards.”***

Jeff Bezos

Founder, Amazon

IN PRACTICE

Working Backwards

Amazon's first Leadership Principle is Customer Obsession. Every new product starts not with a feature list, but with a press release written before anything is built describing the customer's problem and how their life gets better.

Start with the customer → **Work backwards to the solution** → **Write the press release first** → **Only then, build**

THE LEAN STARTUP MOVEMENT

"There Are No Facts Inside the Building"

Steve Blank, father of the Customer Development methodology, built an entire movement on one blunt observation: founders who stay at their desks are guessing. Founders who leave the building are learning.

> ***"Get out of the building."***
>
> *— Steve Blank, creator of the Customer Development methodology*
>
> It's the same instinct behind everything you're practicing today: evidence over assumption.

Airbnb — Brian Chesky & Joe Gebbia, 2008
Before any platform existed, the founders rented out air mattresses in their own apartment during a design conference because hotels were sold out. That single, scrappy transaction was the discovery moment — proof strangers would pay to sleep in someone's home. Even after launching, they famously went door-to-door in New York photographing hosts' listings themselves because they noticed bad photos were killing conversion — discovery didn't stop at launch.

A HEALTHY TENSION

Listen Closely — But Don't Just Take Orders

"Get closer than ever to your customers. So close that you tell them what they need well before they realize it themselves."

— Steve Jobs

"You can't just ask customers what they want and then try to give that to them. By the time you build it, they'll want something new."

— Steve Jobs

RESOLVING THE TENSION

Listen to the Problem, Not the Solution

Jobs wasn't contradicting customer discovery — he was warning against a shortcut. Customers are the world's best authority on their own problems and frustrations. They are a poor designer of the solution. That's your job.

ASK THEM ABOUT

Their problems, frustrations, workarounds, and the last time it cost them time or money.

DON'T OUTSOURCE

The design of the solution. That synthesis is the founder's job, not the customer's.

A RETAIL LEGEND

“There is only one boss: the customer. And he can fire everybody in the company, from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else.”

Sam Walton

Founder, Walmart

FOUNDER-MARKET FIT

The Best Insight Is One You've Lived

Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn and early Airbnb investor, has a saying that shows up again and again in the founders he's backed.

> ***"The best products come from founders solving their own problems."***
>
> *— Reid Hoffman, Co-founder, LinkedIn*

Airbnb's founders needed an affordable place to stay and had a spare room. They didn't guess at the customer's pain — they were the customer.

02

Why Customer Discovery

The cost of building blind — and what it's costing you right now

THE PATTERN WE SEE EVERY COHORT

Build First, Ask Later

You just graduated. You're fast, capable, and itching to ship. So the instinct is: have an idea, build it, show people, hope they like it.

Idea → **Build** → **Launch** → **...Silence**

Months of work later, you discover the customer didn't have the problem you assumed — or had it, but wouldn't pay to fix it.

THE HIDDEN PROBLEM

People Are Lying to You. Not on Purpose.

Ask someone "would you use this?" and most will say yes. Not because they're dishonest — because they're being polite, and imagining a hypothetical future is easy to be wrong about.

Politeness

It's easier to agree than to disappoint you

Hypothetical optimism

We're bad at predicting our own future behavior

Ego & vision

People like to imagine the better version of themselves

03

The Mom Test

A framework for getting honest answers — even from your own mother

THE CORE IDEA

Could Your Mom Lie to You?

From Rob Fitzpatrick's book of the same name. Your mom loves you and wants to support your dream — which makes her the easiest person in the world to mislead, if you ask the wrong kind of question.

THE TEST

A good question is specific enough, and grounded enough in the past, that even your mother couldn't lie to you in her answer.

THE FRAMEWORK

Three Rules for Honest Answers

01

Talk about their life, not your idea

Don't pitch. Ask about how they currently live and work.

02

Ask about specifics in the past

Not generic opinions or hypothetical futures.

03

Talk less, listen more

You're gathering data, not validating your ego.

RULE 01

Talk About Their Life, Not Your Idea

The moment you describe your product, the conversation becomes about pleasing you. Stay in their world — their workflow, their last frustration, their workaround.

INSTEAD OF THIS

"Would you use an app that tracks your team's tasks automatically?"

TRY THIS

"Walk me through how your team tracked tasks last week."

RULE 02

Ask About Specifics in the Past

Future tense invites fantasy. Past tense forces memory — and memory is much harder to fake or sugarcoat.

FUTURE / HYPOTHETICAL

"Would you pay $20/month for this?"

"Do you think this would help your team?"

PAST / SPECIFIC

"What's the last tool you paid for to solve this?"

"Tell me about the last time this happened."

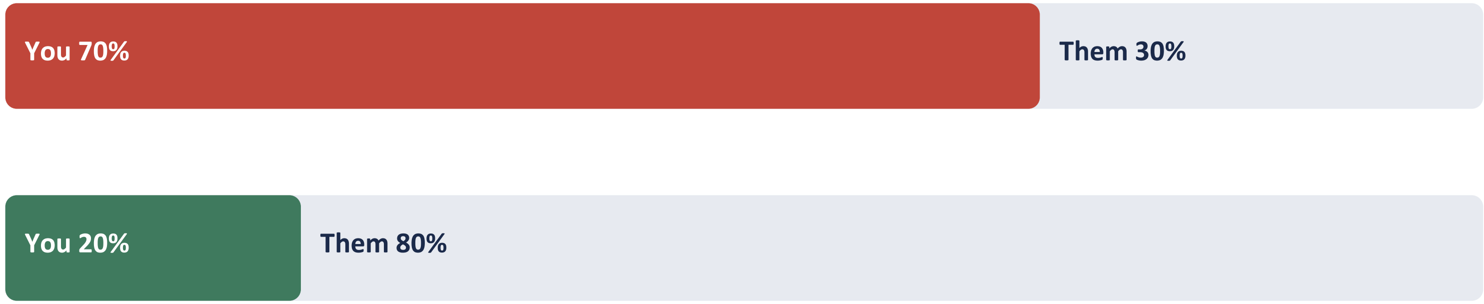
RULE 03

Talk Less, Listen More

A good interview feels lopsided. If you're talking more than a third of the time, you're pitching, not learning. Silence is a tool — let it sit.

Weak Interview

Strong Interview



Tip: after they answer, count to three before you speak again. Often they'll keep going — and that's where the gold is.

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

Phrases That Quietly Lead

"Do you think you'd..."	Invites a hypothetical, polite yes
"Don't you hate it when..."	Tells them how to feel
"Would it be helpful if..."	Everything sounds helpful in theory
"Most people we talk to say..."	Social pressure to agree

CRITICAL DISTINCTION

Facts vs. Feelings vs. Fluff

Not everything someone tells you carries the same weight. Learn to sort what you hear into these three buckets in real time.

Facts

What they actually did, paid for, or experienced. High signal.

"I tried three tools and cancelled all of them."

Opinions

What they believe or feel. Useful context, low predictive power.

"I think automation is the future."

Fluff

Compliments, hypotheticals, and vague enthusiasm. Discard.

"This is such a cool idea, I'd totally use it!"


88% drowning deaths of children
occur with an adult nearby

PR Exposure and Media

https://youtu.be/EZ_nkL1CBxE

Instagram Followers grown
From 1,400 to over 3,000
In the last 6 months

tps://www.cbsnews.com/miami/video/companies-are-
rning-to-ai-to-enhance-pool-safety/?intcid=CNM-00-
)abd1h

04

Asking Well

Turning the three rules into a real conversation

QUESTION DESIGN

Anatomy of a Good Question

Specific

Names a moment, not a category

Past-tense

Asks what happened, not what might

Neutral

Doesn't hint at the answer you want

Open

Can't be answered with yes/no

EXAMPLE

"What's the most annoying part of your current onboarding process — and what did you try last time to fix it?"

QUICK DRILL

Spot the Leading Question

In pairs: rewrite each leading question below into a neutral, past-tense version. 2 minutes.

1 *"Wouldn't it be great if expense reports filed themselves?"*

2 *"Do you struggle to keep track of your subscriptions?"*

3 *"Would you be interested in a faster way to do this?"*

A RELIABLE STRUCTURE

How to Open and Close an Interview

STEP 1

Warm Open

Build rapport, explain you're learning, not selling

→

STEP 2

Context Questions

Understand their role, workflow, current tools

→

STEP 3

Dig Into Pain

Find the last specific instance of the problem

→

STEP 4

Close & Next Step

Ask who else to talk to — never pitch at the end

TYPES OF BUSINESS / CUSTOMERS

B2B
Business to Business

A business sells products or services to another business.

BUSINESS → BUSINESS

EXAMPLES
Software companies, wholesale suppliers, industrial equipment manufacturers

Focus: Efficiency, Long-term partnerships, Scaling operations

B2C
Business to Consumer

A business sells products or services directly to individual consumers.

BUSINESS → CONSUMER

EXAMPLES
Retail stores, e-commerce sites, restaurants, consumer brands

Focus: Customer Experience, Branding, Volume

B2G
Business to Government

A business provides products or services to government entities.

BUSINESS → GOVERNMENT

EXAMPLES
Defense contractors, IT service providers, construction companies

Focus: Compliance, Trust, Long sales cycles, Contracts

D2C
Direct to Consumer

A brand sells directly to consumers without middlemen.

BRAND → CONSUMER

EXAMPLES
Online native brands, Subscription boxes, Digital products

Focus: Brand control, Customer relationship, Higher margins

B2B2C
Business to Business to Consumer

A business sells to another business that sells to the final consumer.

BUSINESS → BUSINESS (RESELLER) → CONSUMER

EXAMPLES
Manufacturers supplying retailers, SaaS platforms through partners, wholesale distributors

Focus: Partnerships, Enablement, Shared Growth

KEY TAKEAWAY | Understanding your business model helps you identify your customers, build the right strategy, and deliver value in the best way possible.