One Sentence, Five Questions

Find out if your idea solves a real problem before you spend a dollar.

Who's told you your idea is great? Your spouse? Your buddy at the gym, who'd "totally buy that"? Bless them. Compliments are free, and they aren't data. So put the idea down for a minute and pick up the problem. Write it in one sentence, the way your customer would say it. Then ask five people five questions and see how close you came.

Write your guess

Fill in the blanks in your customer's voice, not yours. One customer, one problem, one feeling. Then mark each blank. "Know" means you've seen it in other people, not just in yourself.

1 **I'm...** _____ , _____ **and** _____ ☐ Know ☐ Guess

Who they are. Three traits, so you could pick them out of a crowd.

1 **I want to...** _____ ☐ Know ☐ Guess

What they're trying to get done. Leave your idea out of it.

2 **but I can't because...** _____ ☐ Know ☐ Guess

What gets in the way. That's the surface problem.

3 **because...** _____ ☐ Know ☐ Guess

Why it gets in the way. That's the root problem.

4 **which makes me feel...** _____ ☐ Know ☐ Guess

Name the feeling. People pay to fix feelings.

All guesses? That's normal. Every business starts as one. The green numbers show which question on the back tests each blank.

Read it out loud

- ☐ **One breath.** Can you say it without coming up for air?
- ☐ **One of each.** Two customers? Two problems? Pick one. The other will keep.
- ☐ **No solution in disguise.** "There's no app for that" isn't a problem. It's a solution wearing a problem's clothes.
- ☐ **The nod test.** If your customer heard it, would they say, "That's me"?

FUZZY

"Small businesses need a better dashboard."

Which small business? And who said "dashboard," them or you?

SHARP (A MADE-UP EXAMPLE)

"I'm a shop owner, with six on the crew and no bookkeeper. I want to see where I stand on Friday, but I can't because my numbers run a month behind, because I only do the books at month-end, which makes me feel like I'm driving blind."

Got a team? Have each person fill this in alone. No peeking. Put the sentences side by side. The gap between them is your first finding, and it's how **Before You Build** starts: coachingup.us/before-you-build

Turn it over for your five questions.

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Go ask five people

Find five people who fit your sentence. Not your mom. Not your best friend. They love you, and that's the problem. Don't pitch, and don't mention your idea. You're there to hear their story.

	ASK	IT TESTS	LISTEN FOR
1	**"Tell me about the last time you tried to…"**	Your customer and what they want	A real day and a real place. No last time? Wrong person, or no problem.
2	**"Walk me through it, step by step."**	Your surface problem	Does your problem come up on its own? Don't say it for them.
3	**"Why do you think that happened?"** Then ask why again, and again.	Your root problem	The cause under the cause. The first answer looks exciting. The root is what helps.
4	**"How did that feel? How did it show up the rest of your day?"**	Your feeling	Their word, not yours. Problems that follow people home matter most.
5	**"What have you tried? What did it cost you?"**	Whether it's worth solving	Money, hours, a rigged-up fix. Nobody tried anything? It doesn't hurt enough.

ON YOUR WAY OUT

"What question didn't I ask that I should have? Who else should I talk to?"

NEVER ASK

"Would you buy this?" Hypothetical question, hypothetical answer. Ask about the last time, not the future.

Keep score

Draw your line before you start. If fewer than ____ of 5 have tried to fix this, I'll change my customer or my problem.

Who	Real last time?	Problem came up on its own?	Tried to fix it?	Spent time or money?	Their best line, word for word
	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Lots of checks
The problem's real. Your next question: will they pay for your answer?

Last times but no fixes
That's an annoyance. People live with annoyances for decades.

No last times
Wrong customer or wrong problem. Change one and go again.

Either way, you found out for the price of a few cups of coffee.

Stuck? Send me your sentence.

Go to coachingup.us/problem, or email it to coach@coachingup.us. I read every one myself, and I'll send back the one question I'd ask if we were sitting across a table. Fair warning: it'll be a question, not an answer. That's the job.

Bill Murray
Innovation coach
Author, *Enquire to Inspire*

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