



# Understanding your customers

Jim Newbery, CodeBase

Creative Bridge

jim@thisiscodebase.com  
@roots101

Hi, I'm Jim 🙌

**Currently:** CodeBase mentor, engineering management coach and product dev enthusiast

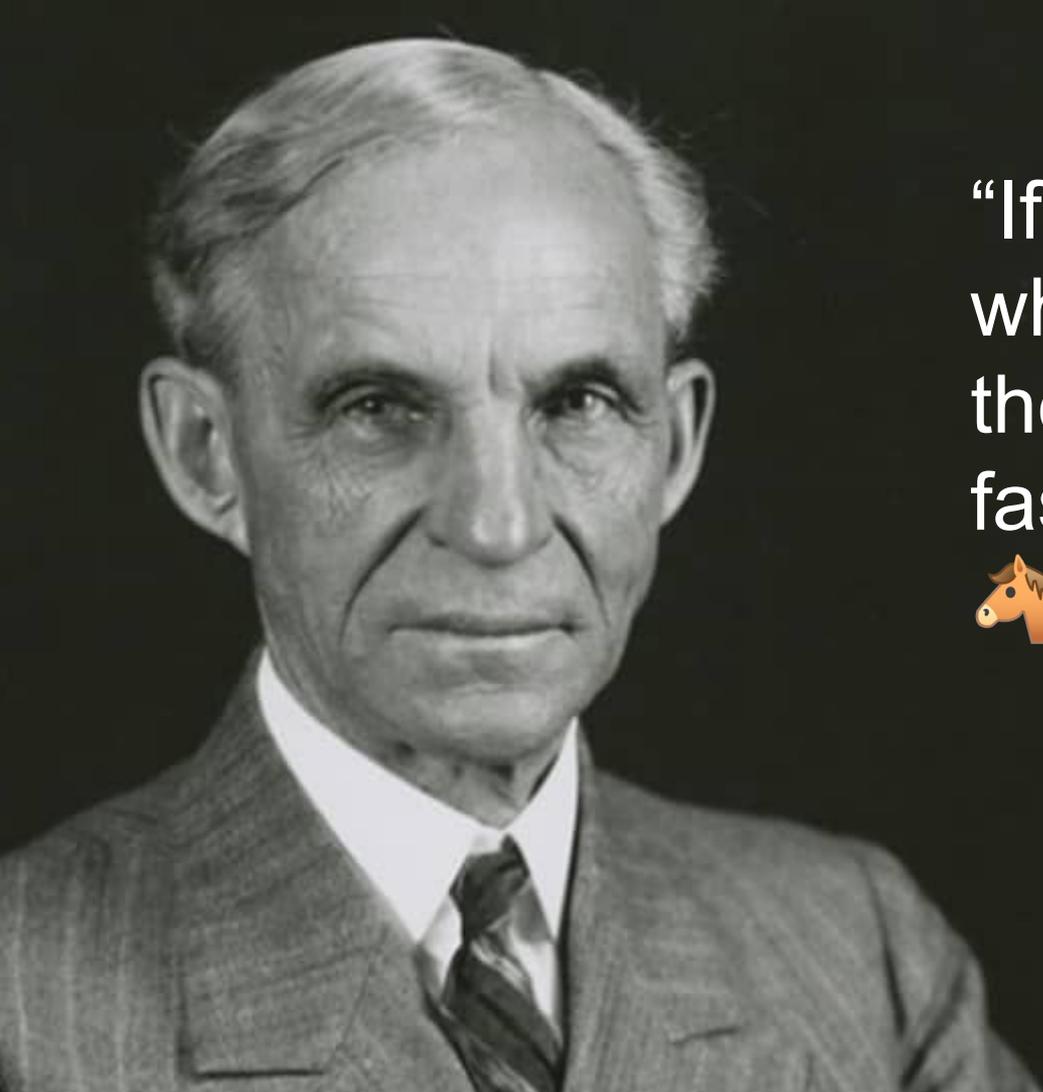
**Previously:** Psychology grad, web developer, early (unicorn) startup employee, freelancer, failed designer



“Customers are all arseholes”

– *Jamie Coleman, Chairman, CodeBase*

Understanding your  
customers is vital to success,  
no matter what success  
means to you.



“If I had asked people  
what they wanted,  
they would have said  
faster horses.”



*(almost certainly never said by)*

***Henry Ford***

<https://www.thehenryford.org>

~~The customer is always right~~ ❌

The customer is the expert ✅

It's easy to mis-understand  
your customers:

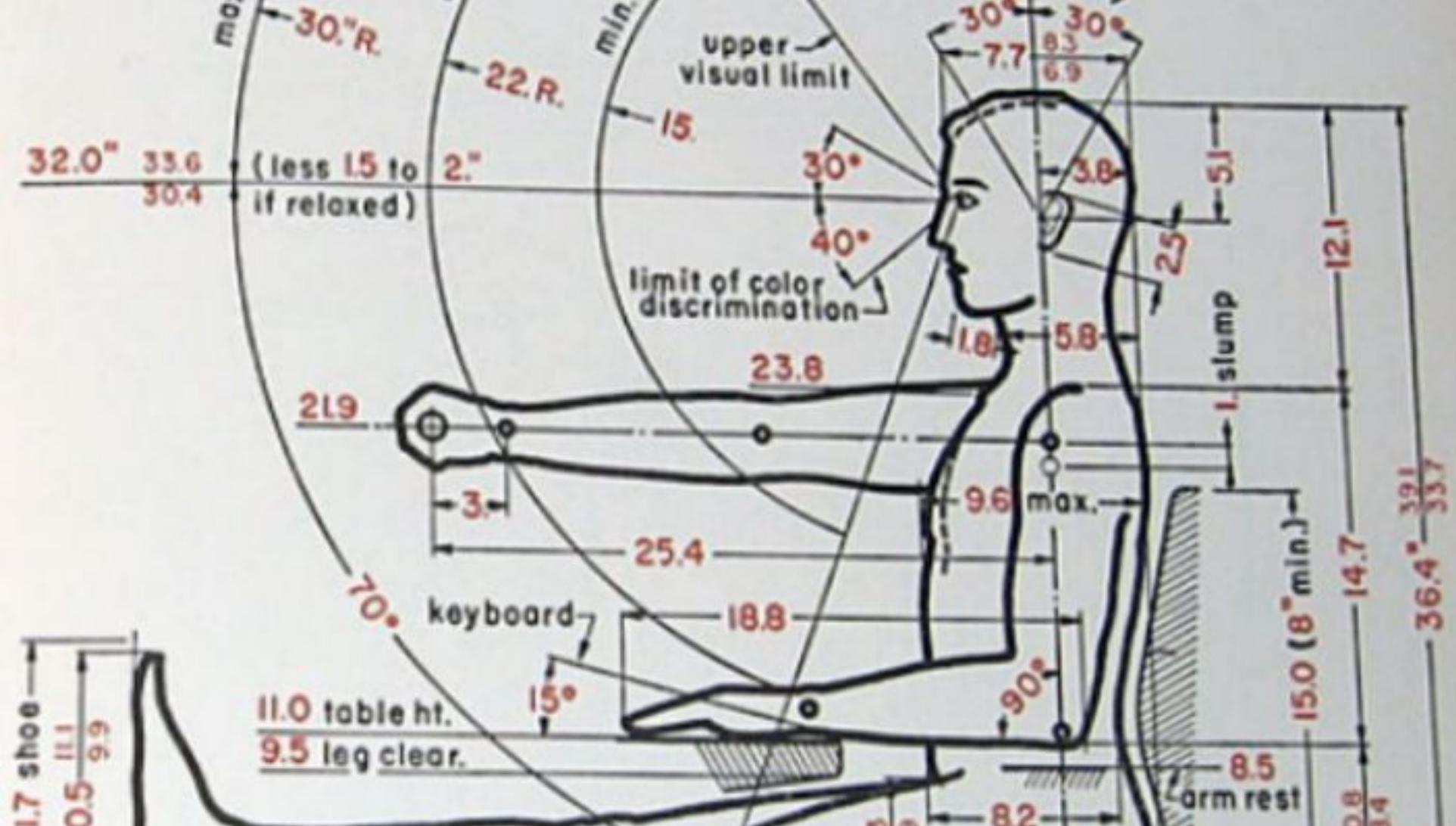
Assumptions, personal  
experience, demographics,  
surveys, focus groups...

“If there was an app for your favourite dentist, would you be likely to use it? **Yes/No**”

“Get out of the building”



**Do more & better research**





<https://uxdesign.cc/6-lessons-from-establishing-a-usability-at-a-startup-115b06840bfb>



# Early customer research methods

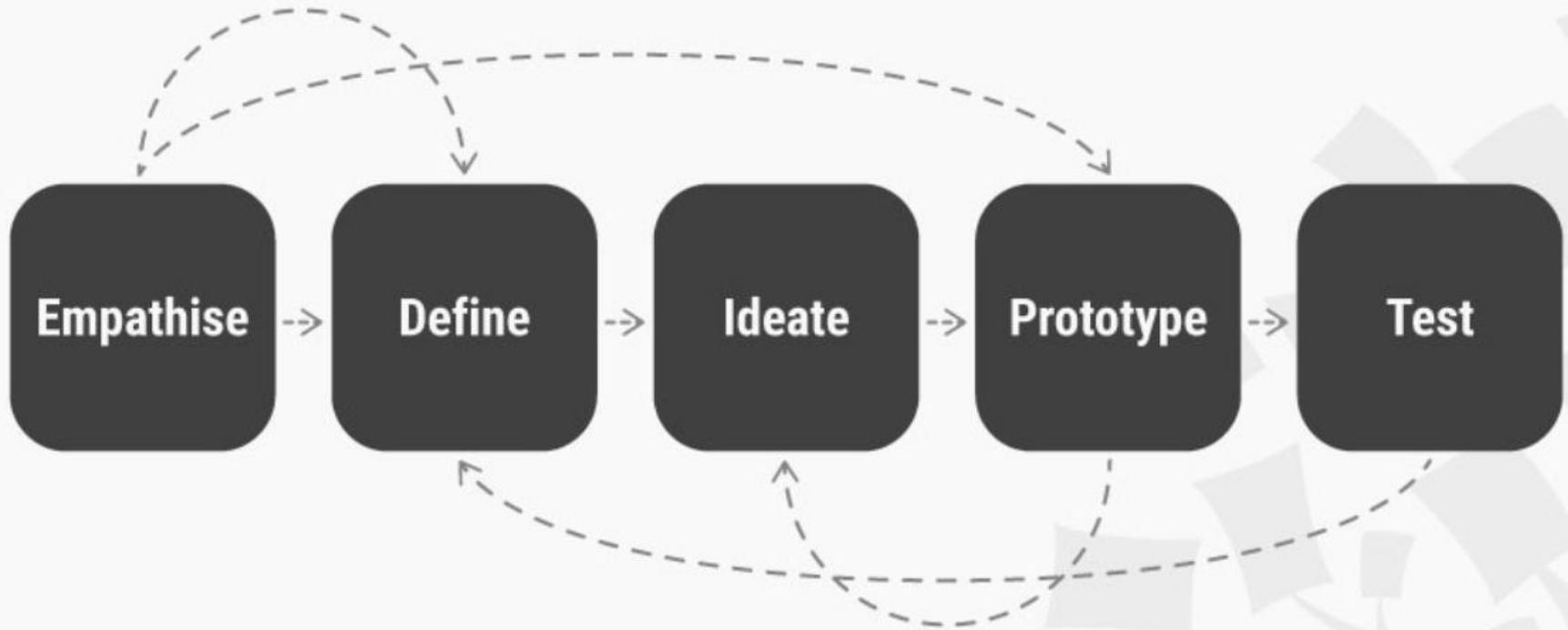
**Best**      Become your customer

**2nd best:** Observe them in context

**3rd best:** Have insightful conversations

Empathy-first approaches

# Design Thinking



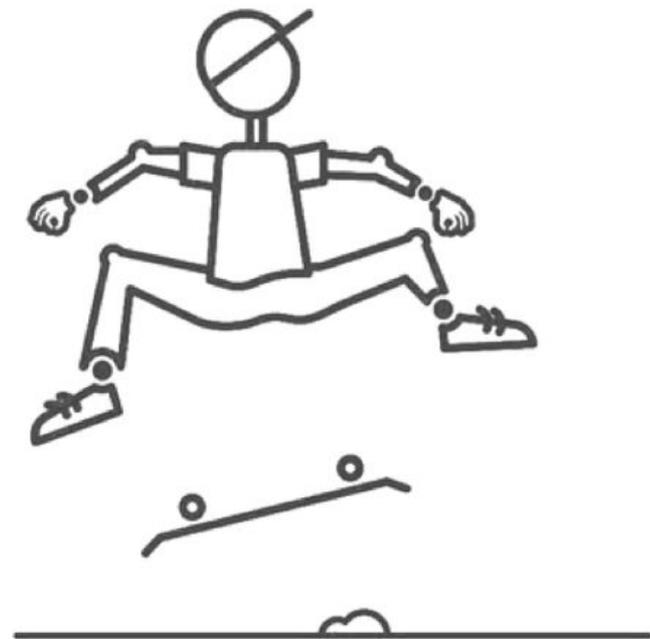
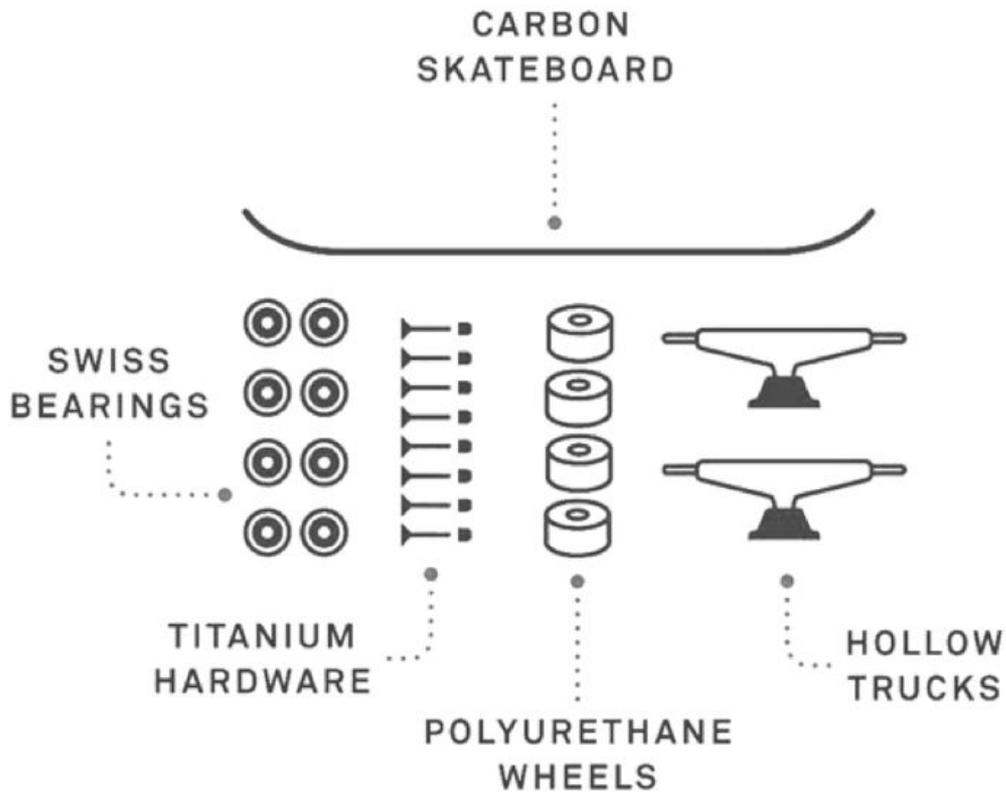
<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/5-stages-in-the-design-thinking-process>

**Jobs To Be Done**

Motivations not demographics

Even though customers buy this...

...they *really* want this.



“Upgrade your user, not your product.  
Don’t build better cameras—build  
better photographers.”

– Kathy Sierra

A ***Job*** is your struggle to  
make a change for the better

The ***To Be*** part denotes that overcoming that struggle is an evolutionary process; it happens over time

The change is ***Done*** when you overcome that struggle and have changed for the better; there are things you can do now, that you couldn't do before

What's the JTBD that dog-walking services aim to fulfill?

Your goal for early research is  
to uncover and deeply  
understand your customers'  
Jobs To Be Done

# Three customer interview exercises

1. Planning
2. Interviewing
3. Analysis and review

# **Exercise 1**

Planning customer interviews

Based on your idea, mission, values and business canvas,

1. **Who** are you going to talk to?
2. **How** will you reach them?
3. **What** big assumption are you going to investigate?

# **Exercise 1 presentations**

# 1. Who will you talk to?

Trait-based vs demographics

E.g. 'likes dogs and predictability' vs  
'40-50 year old suburban  
professional'

'Earlyvangelists'

## **2. How will you reach them?**

Online / in person?

Groups, events, organisations

Friends, family, colleagues

### **3. What big assumption are you going to investigate?**

#### **Problem-based?**

“We believe [type of person] experiences [type of problem] when [situation].”

#### **Job-based?**

“When [situation], we believe [type of person] wants [motivation] so that they [outcome].”

THE LEAN SERIES

ERIC RIES, SERIES EDITOR

Cindy Alvarez

# LEAN

## CUSTOMER DEVELOPMENT

Build Products  
Your Customers Will Buy

O'REILLY

A hypothesis-driven approach to understand:

1. **Who** your customers are
2. What **problems** and **needs** they have  
(or JTBD...)
3. How they are **currently behaving**
4. Which **solutions** customers will pay for
5. **How to provide** solutions that work with  
how your customers decide and buy

**Inductive**

**Deductive**

# The cycle:

1. Form a hypothesis
2. Find potential customers to talk to
- 3. Ask the right questions**
4. Make sense of the answers
5. Figure out what to build to keep learning

## Good conversational prompts

- Tell me about how you do [ X ] today
- What tools / tricks / apps / approaches do you use to get [ X ] done?
- Last time you did [ X ], what you doing just before you started? Once finished, what did you do afterwards?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what one thing would you change about [ X ] today?
- Is there anything else about [ X ] that I should have asked?

# Guidelines

- Listen and dig in. Listen for:
  - How do customers behave today?
  - What constraints affect their choices?
  - What frustrates or motivates them?
  - How do they make decisions and spend money?
- Abstract up a level
  - “How do you keep your dog healthy?” not “How do you decide which dog walker to use?”
- Focus on actual behaviour, not hypotheticals
  - “I’ve tried [x] before” vs “I want to do [x]”
- Take lots of notes!

# Break!



# Exercise 2

## Interviews

- Each team - find someone from another team who is close to your target customer to interview
- Identify up to two interviewers
- Remaining team members take notes
- 15 minute interviews

# Exercise 2 discussion

## Interviews

- What worked well?
- What did you struggle with?
- What would you improve for the next interview?

# Practicalities

# Notes and summaries

- Put together in one file
- Create a summary of each interview
- Discuss insights and impacts with team

How many interviews?

What if they don't go well?

When can I start building  
the product?

# Validated hypothesis =

1. They confirm there is definitely a pain/job
2. They have actively invested in it already
3. No barriers to change beyond their control

# Exercise 3 (10 minutes)

## Evaluate and update assumptions

1. Review notes and summarize what you learned on PostIts (one idea per note)

Look for:

- a. Things that validate your hypotheses
  - b. Things that invalidate your hypotheses
  - c. Anything that is a surprise or full of emotion
2. Sort into themes
  3. Discuss how do these impact your business canvas

# **Exercise 3 presentations**

Evaluate and update assumptions

# Summary

- Understanding your customers motivations and circumstances is vital to success, whatever that means for you
- You can't rely on customers to tell you what they need, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't treat them as the experts
- For early product development, you should avoid deductive or biased approaches like surveys, focus groups and using your own assumptions
- For digital and social products, observation and interviews are great research techniques, provided you do them well
- The goal is to build empathy for your users and customers
- The Jobs To Be Done approach is a useful way to frame customer motivations and behaviour that doesn't predispose you to repeat existing solutions
- Customer Development is a iterative, hypothesis-driven approach to understanding your audience and how to turn them into customers
- The goal of Customer Development is to validate or invalidate your customer-centric hypotheses, formulate others and drive product development for further learning
- Customer development interviews should be iterated over time as you learn
- Learn from interviews by taking lots of notes, summarising them and discussing insights as a team

# Resources

 *Lean Customer Startup: Building Products Your Customers Will Buy* - Cindy Alvarez  
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Lean-Customer-Development-Building-Customers/dp/1492023744>  
A really useful, practical guide on planning and running customer development interviews

 *Primer: What Is Jobs To Be Done (JTBD) Theory?* - Taylor Conant  
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/primer-what-jobs-done-jtbd-theory-taylor-conant/>  
Succinct and accessible introduction to Jobs To Be Done

 *Badass: Making Users Awesome* - Kathy Sierra  
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Badass-Making-Awesome-Kathy-Sierra/dp/1491919019>  
How to research, design and build products that focus on making its users a better version of themselves, and not just on shipping a heap of features.