



**HUMAN SCALE**  
BUSINESS

# Notes from The Mom Test

Excerpts from Rob Fitzpatrick's essential business book with annotations

# Introduction

*The Mom Test* is short, actionable, and useful. It's one of the few business books to which I refer regularly. I can't make a stronger recommendation.

"They say you shouldn't ask your mom whether your business is a good idea, because she loves you and will lie to you. This is technically true, but it misses the point. You shouldn't ask **anyone** if your business is a good idea. It's a bad question and everyone will lie to you at least a little. It's not their responsibility to tell you the truth. It's your responsibility to find out."

I read a lot of business books. When I find one that really engages me, I pull out my highlighter and start writing annotations in the margins. Occasionally, I'll organize my notes for easy reference and sharing. *The Mom Test* is a book worthy of memorialization.

Although I preach the gospel of *The Mom Test*, I'm a sinner. I still spend too much time trying to be right when I should be seeking the truth. Even so, seeing my copy of Rob Fitzpatrick's book on my shelf serves as a useful reminder of the imperative to get better at creating truly useful customer conversations.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dave Bayless, Co-founder of Human Scale Business

# Excerpts and Annotations

## Chapter One - The Mom Test

The measure of usefulness of an early customer conversation is whether it gives us concrete facts about our customers' lives and worldviews.

We find out if people care about what we're doing by never mentioning it. Instead we talk about them and their lives.

The big mistake is almost always to mention your idea too soon rather than too late.

### The Mom Test

Customer conversations are bad by default. It's your job to fix them.

- Talk about their life instead of your idea
- Ask about specifics in the past instead of generics or opinions about the future
- Talk less and listen more

*The urge to seek affirmation of our ideas is overwhelming. It's also dangerous. We're better served by actively seeking disconfirming evidence. It's the proven route to revealing truth faster.*

## Chapter Two - Avoiding Bad Data

In short, remember that compliments are worthless and people's

approval doesn't make your business better.

If you've mentioned your idea, people will try to protect your feelings.

Anyone will say your idea is great if you're annoying enough about it.

There are three types of bad data:

- Compliments
- Fluff (generics, hypotheticals, and the future)
- Ideas

When someone starts talking about what they "always" or "usually" or "never" or "would" do, they are giving you generic and hypothetical fluff. Follow The Mom Test and bring them back to specifics in the past. Ask when it happened last, for them to talk you through it, how they solved it, and what else they tried.

While using generics, people describe themselves as who they want to be, not who they actually are.

Keep the conversation focused on the other person and ask about specific, concrete cases and examples. Once someone detects that your ego is on the line, they'll give you fluffy mis-truths and extra compliments.

*Earlier in my career, I was involved with screening consumer product inventions for development. My colleagues and I quickly learned that traditional consumer panel conversations were a waste of time. People tend to be too nice and too willing to speculate. Seek valid evidence of real world behavior. It's hard and uncomfortable but worth the effort.*

## Chapter Three - Asking Important Questions

Every time you talk to someone, you should be asking a question which has the potential to completely destroy your currently imagined business.

You're searching for the truth, not trying to be right. And you want to do it as quickly and cheaply as possible. Learning that your beliefs are wrong is frustrating, but it's progress. It's bringing you ever closer to the truth of a real problem and a good market.

Some of the most informative (and thus best) responses you can get are along the lines of, "Umm, I'm not so sure about that" and "That's pretty neat." Both are lukewarm responses which tell you they don't care.

Always pre-plan the three most important things you want to learn from any given type of person...Don't stress too much about choosing the "right" important questions. They will change. Just choose the three questions which seem murkiest or most important right now. Doing so will give you firmer footing and a better sense of direction for your next three.

Start broad and don't zoom in until you've found a strong signal, both with your whole business and with every conversation.

*The real competition for your product or solution is the status quo. Getting people to change their behavior by buying your gizmo is bloody hard. You'll know when you're close when people start grabbing you by the throat.*

## Chapter Four - Keeping it Casual

Learning about a customer and their problems works better as a quick and casual chat than a long, formal meeting. Over-reliance on formal meetings can cause us to overlook perfectly good chances for serendipitous learning.

If it feels like they're doing you a favor by talking to you, it's probably too formal.

Give as little information as possible about your idea while still nudging the discussion in a useful direction.

*Formal meetings tend to devolve into pitches. If you keep your*

*"three most important" questions in mind at all times, you'll be better prepared to take advantage of chance encounters, and you'll learn faster.*

## Chapter Five - Commitment and Advancement

It's not a real lead until you've given them a concrete chance to reject you.

In early stage sales, the real goal is learning. Revenue is just a side-effect.

- Commitment - They are showing they're serious by giving up something they value such as time, reputation, or money.
- Advancement - They are moving to the next step of your real-world funnel and getting closer to a sale.

A meeting has succeeded when it ends with a commitment to advance to the next step...I never consider rejection to be a real failure. But not asking certainly is. This can happen because you avoid the scary question or because you haven't figured out what the next steps should be.

It's worth noting that you need to know your next steps...If you have to say, "Let me have a think about that and get back to you," then you've ruined a perfectly good meeting.

Kickstarter is so wonderful because it forces customers who say they would buy it to actually pull out a credit card and commit.

When someone isn't that emotional about what you're doing, it's pretty unlikely that they're going to end up being one of the people who is crazy enough to be your first customer. Keep them on the list, but don't count on them to write the first check.

Whenever you see the deep emotion, do your utmost to keep that person close. They are the rare, precious fan who will get you through the hard times and turn into your first sale.

*"Run the damned experiment," is what two of my longtime business partners are fond of saying. Why engage in abstract research about your product when you can make a few and then attempt to sell them? Also, don't underestimate the value of rejection. It gives you the chance to ask, "Why?"*

## Chapter Six - Finding Conversations

Warm intros are the goal.

For marginally more effort than attending an event, you can organize your own and benefit from being at the centre of attention...Nobody ever follows this recommendation, but it's the first thing I would do if I got moved a new industry or geography.

I once heard a brilliant hack from a guy who wanted to sell to top-tier universities like Stanford and Harvard...His solution was to organize a semi-monthly "knowledge exchange" call between the department heads of 3 top universities to discuss the challenges around his topic of choice. Furthermore, it was set up as a conference call where any other universities could dial in and listen to the best practices of the big 3...By simply organizing the call and playing host, he immediately absorbed all the credibility of the top universities and got direct phone access to a pile of great leads.

Spend the time to teach.

Even when I had no audience, I still found blogging to be helpful. When I sent cold emails from my blog email address, folks would often meet with me because they had checked my domain, seen my industry blog, and figured I was an interesting person to talk to.

Sometimes a proper meeting can't be avoided...In those cases, the right explanation and framing can do wonders.

*See the book for illustrations of the author's Vision / Framing /*

## *Weakness / Pedestal / Ask methodology.*

Phone calls end up sounding more like scripted interviews than natural conversations, because they are. It's a constraint of the medium.

Don't go into these discussions looking for customers. It creates a needy vibe and forfeits the position of power. Instead, go in search of industry and customer advisors.

If it's not a formal meeting, you don't need to make excuses about why you're there or even mention you're starting a business. Just have a good conversation.

If it's a topic you both care about, find an excuse to talk about it. Your idea never needs to enter the equation and you'll both enjoy the chat.

Keep having conversations until you stop hearing new stuff.

*Our friend Jake Cook at Tadpull, the digital marketing agency, uses a tool he calls 3 x 5 x 10 conversations. He writes down his hypothesis (e.g. a product concept, business idea, or value proposition) on a 3 x 5 inch card. Then, he has a conversation and writes the takeaways on the other side of the card. After 10 such conversations, Jake will revise his hypothesis based on what he's learned and repeat the entire process. It's very similar in approach and effect to Fitzpatrick's "three questions" concept. In either case, multiple conversations are usually necessary to reveal the truth and provide valid evidence for evolving our hypothesis.*



The Mom Test - How to talk to customers

Rob Fitzpatrick

"Once for ounce, there's no better way to learn what customers want and will buy than this wonderful little book. If you want your new product or new business to succeed, start here."

*John Mullins, author, The New Business Road Test, Getting to Plan B, and The Customer-Funded Business*

Rob Fitzpatrick

a Founder Centric book



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# THE MOM TEST

How to talk to customers and learn if your business is a good idea when everyone is lying to you.

