

CURIOUS for a LIVING

**How Asking Better Questions
Makes You Indispensable**

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Ordering Off the Menu

This is a book about creativity, curiosity, and finding satisfaction in your chosen vocation. It's about how to stop being an order-taker and start being a trusted advisor and co-creator – and the benefits of making that transition. I'll be making the case for asking more – and better – questions, and considering the motivations that underlie your most successful projects (so you can have more successful ones).

So obviously, I'm going to start by talking about food. Because I learned an important lesson about the power of asking good questions over an exquisite Italian feast.



I am one of those people with a laundry list of food allergies that makes eating out a bit of a pain: eggs, fish, seafood, quinoa, and kiwi fruit.

A typical restaurant experience for me goes something like this: I walk in, scan the menu for a dish that I can safely assume, from past experience, is devoid of things I'm allergic to (there are usually only one or two such options on a typical menu), and order that. I ask the server to double-check with the kitchen that it's safe for me to eat. And the next time I visit that restaurant, I'm very likely to order the exact same thing again, since presumably it didn't kill me.

My preoccupations are safety and predictability first. Flavour, novelty, and experiencing the chef's signature dishes are definitely lower on the list. Eating out, for me, is an enjoyable experience, but not often a wildly inspiring one – so when I get a chance to enjoy the creativity of a master chef at work, I'm over the moon.

A few years ago, I was visiting Seattle, and a friend recommended a sweet little Italian trattoria that specializes in family-style meals, where they bring platters of food to the table for everyone to share. There were seven of us, and I had called ahead to notify the restaurant that we had more than our share of food restrictions: mine, of course; a father and daughter who were both allergic to soy and peanuts; one vegetarian; and a Jewish companion who doesn't eat pork or shellfish.

I felt sheepish as I delivered the long list of foods to avoid – but when we arrived at the restaurant, we were ushered in warmly and simply asked to set a budget for what we'd like to spend per person. From that point on, the wine flowed, and plate after plate of ridiculously mouth-watering food arrived at our table, until we barely had room left for our (egg, peanut, and soy-free!) dessert and espresso.

Each one of us felt like royalty, and was treated to delicacies we'd never have dreamed could be prepared so that we could all enjoy them. (The vegetarian lasagne with cream sauce made our veggie friend's eyes roll back in pleasure.)



That night taught me an important business lesson: **If you want to experience masterful creativity, never order from the menu.**

I don't just mean that in the literal sense. Most of the experiences I have as a customer are purely transactional: I request a product or service that appears to fit my needs, and you charge me a price for it. It's a no-fuss, no-muss kinda setup, but it doesn't make my eyes roll back with pleasure – and it doesn't net you, as the seller, a premium price point.

Now, there are businesses that thrive on the systematic delivery of predictable, identical offerings. (Fast food franchises spring to mind.) But that's not what most small businesses are built on. Most of us are either tailoring our work to specific clients, or creating niche offerings.

You want to make your customers' eyes roll back, don't you? Well, then, you need to convince them to stop ordering from the menu, and start letting you do your thing in the kitchen.



Over the course of my web design career, I lost count of the number of times I told clients, “Just tell me the problem – don't worry about the solution.” That line became habitual, because I noticed that when clients were giving me feedback on designs, they would often default to trying to solve the problems they saw (“What if you changed the green to blue?” or “Could we move this element over here?”), rather than simply pointing out what wasn't working and asking the designer for help.

I don't know you, but I'm fairly sure you're an expert in something – and your expertise lies in solving problems, not in delivering the same meal to the same customer, night after night. And if all you got to do all day long is implement the solutions your customers come up with,

you'd be bored stiff; work is a lot more fun when we have interesting challenges to tackle.

But **humans are natural problem-solvers**, and lots of us tend to play it safe by telling the professionals we work with what kinds of solutions we think will work.

We order from the menu. It's how most of us are wired.

So how do you train your customers to let you do your best work? **You ask them better questions.**

You help them define the problem with as much clarity and detail as possible, so you can design a solution they'd never have dreamed up themselves. That's how seriously extraordinary results are achieved – and the customer relationships that go along with them.



Let's go back to that restaurant. Not only did I have a far more delightful, surprising, and well-rounded meal than I would have been able to plan for myself (I even got dessert, which is rare), and a superb experience that I've talked about for years since, but the restaurant benefited as well.

I've referred countless people to the restaurant - including many people with food restrictions, since they're always looking for places that cater to their needs. We spent more money than we might have otherwise, because we were given options (like the aforementioned dessert) we wouldn't have known were available to us. They gained repeat customers (which are the best kind to have, since they cost you nothing to acquire), and I like to think the chef might even have enjoyed the challenge we posed him or her.

Raving testimonials, word-of-mouth referrals, higher profits, repeat customers, and higher job satisfaction: Not a bad payoff for being a good listener, am I right?

On Customers and Creativity

When was the last time you did work that made you seriously proud? Where you knew you had made a real impact on people, and created something that reflected the very best of you?

In my years designing and building websites for organizations and individuals, I did a lot of work I was proud of, but I also completed my share of projects that, well, could have been better. And in reflecting on the differences between the two, I keep coming back to one thing: The kinds of questions we asked as we planned, designed, and collaborated with our clients.

Now, any designer, coder, architect, life coach, therapist – anyone who works with clients for a living – will tell you that their work is a two-way street: they can only produce work at the level their clients are willing to rise to. And that's true; we don't have the power to force our clients to ask (or answer) questions they don't want to face. But what is in our power is the ability to create a

generative space for our clients – one where there are no right or wrong answers, only deep curiosity and openness.

That open, curious space is where true creativity and innovation live.

Who Gets to be Creative?

This book is for everyone who does creative work – and I mean that in the broadest possible sense. My mother, for example, is a very creative accountant (and no, she doesn't work for the mafia). She runs a nonprofit housing foundation, and because of her financial wizardry, the foundation has expanded its portfolio of buildings substantially under her direction. Her depth of understanding in financial matters means that **she is able to see possibilities others might not see.** That's creative work.

Software programmers are often called “engineers,” a term that suggests they are master builders, but not necessarily creative in the same way as, say, architects. In my experience, coding is deeply creative, because it involves **understanding problems and designing solutions** (and experimenting with those solutions over and over, to see how they might be broken).

I worked for many years as a web designer, a role that has the luxury of being seen by most people as “creative,” but I have come to see the design process as universally applicable to **almost any person or organization that strives to be useful to other people.** (And that’s most of us.)

My working definition of a design process is: **A collaboration with the people one wishes to serve, to co-create better outcomes.** And every design process – be it teaching, coding, architecture, or what people in the startup space call “achieving product-market fit” – requires **creativity, empathy, and deep curiosity.**

Literally or figuratively, you are having a conversation with the people you want to serve, to discover who they are and how you can help them.

You’d better bring your best questions to that conversation.

What I Mean By Customers

I’m going to use the word “customers” throughout this book, for the sake of simplicity. The people you serve might be your customers, but they might also be people you think of as constituents, members,

donors, end users, or possibly sheep farmers. If “customers” doesn’t fit your work, feel free to substitute a word of your choice in its place.

A caveat: During my years as a designer, I sometimes risked being sidetracked into believing that my clients were the people I was there to serve. Not true: I was there to serve *my clients’ customers*, and provide them the best possible experience via my clients’ online communications. My clients hired me to help them better serve *their* customers, so I considered it my responsibility to advocate for those folks, even if they weren’t the ones paying my fees.

Got your customers in mind? Perfect – because the effectiveness of your creative work depends on your ability to focus relentlessly on what software developers call “end users”: the people who will ultimately buy, interact, and engage with whatever it is you’re making.

I Wrote This For You

Each of us has someone we’re accountable to, in our work life. It might be a client, a boss, a customer, a member, or a reader – whatever their role, their opinion of our work matters.

And we spend a lot of time trying to figure out exactly what they want from us, don't we? We learn to ask questions and listen so that we can give those people what they want.

But there's a dance, between giving them what they want and doing your most exceptional, highest-impact work. There are the things they know they want from you – and the things you would love to do for them, the things your most valued people intuitively get, but that others have trouble wrapping their heads around.

This book offers **a powerful framework for anyone who works with customers and wants to create something extraordinary for them.**

If you ever find yourself complaining that your customers don't get it... or that the soul of your project got crushed somewhere along the way... or you aren't getting the kinds of customer testimonials and referrals you'd like to see... or you're yearning to create something greater than you've created before...

Hello. This is for you. Thank you for being here.

Let's begin.

**Your Deliverables
Are Not Your Value.**

Drilling Down: What Fuels Design, Code, and Other Problem-Solving Endeavours

My father is a bit of a genealogy nut, and I remember the day he came home and joyfully announced that he had discovered a writeup about the Bacon family crest in some old history book. (Despite the porcine nature of our surname, there are a couple of famous Bacons: Kevin, of course, but also Roger and Sir Francis. And my personal favourite, tortured-genius artist Francis. So I don't blame Dad for finding the history fascinating.) "Want to hear our family motto?"

"Sure," we said.

"*'Mediocrity is safe.'* Wait, that can't be right!"

No kidding. **Worst family motto ever.** Am I right?



Maybe it's just my terrible family motto haunting me, but I've had a horror of mediocrity all my life.

I spent fifteen years designing and building websites, and being involved with open source software projects, and in that time I saw a lot of tech stuff – websites, software, you name it – that inspired people to do and be better, and a whole lot of other projects that fell flat.

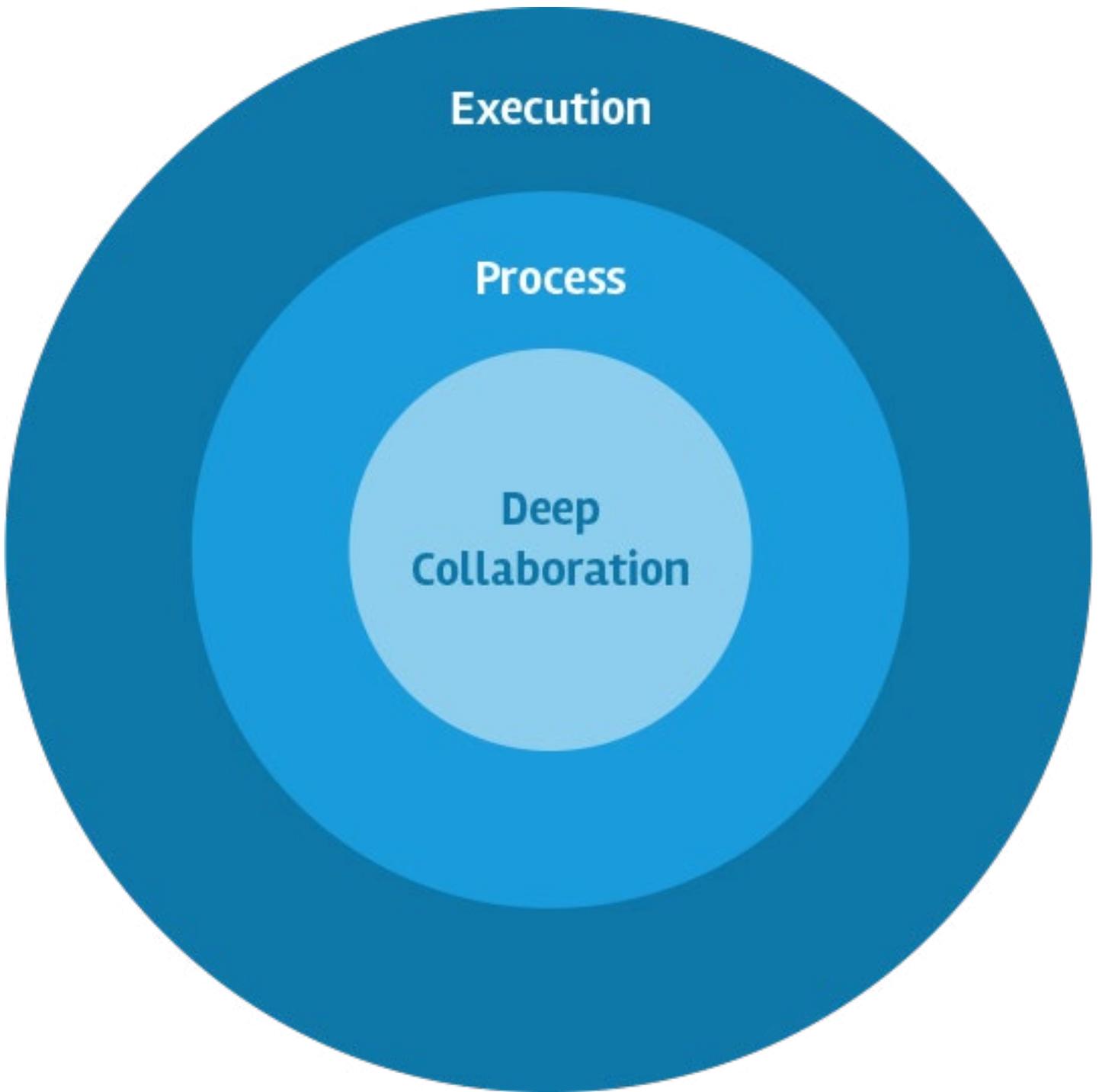
In my drive to produce the best possible results for my clients – most of whom were nonprofit organizations working to make the world a better place – I dedicated myself to understanding what made some projects soar, and others fail, or simply fizzle.

What I noticed was that the ones that caught fire weren't necessarily the best-designed, or the best-executed. There was something deeper going on. Eventually, I came to see every project – from the humblest blog to the most complex software – as having three layers.

1. Execution

On the surface, there's **externally visible work** – the tangible proof that the project is complete. For tech projects, this includes the code, graphics, widgets, gadgets, and bells and whistles. If you're an artist,

your finished canvases exist at this layer; for a fitness trainer, client sessions; for a nonprofit, program delivery; and so on.



When you produce deliverables, **there will always be some people who see this part of your work as the *real work*** – for whom the deeper layers of your work are invisible. And there will always be some customers who only want to pay you for what they perceive as the value of these tangible deliverables. **They see you as a builder of stuff.**

This principle applies to many creative fields: There's something that takes the form of a deliverable that constitutes the tangible expression of your work. Your deliverable might be a report, legal document, illustration, community outreach program or coaching session.

As a general rule, I suggest avoiding this kind of customer, because if you accept their terms you face several problems:

1. With rare exceptions, builders are replaceable (as anyone with a 3D printer will tell you).
2. Builders don't typically get a say in the drafting of blueprints.
3. Deliverables only account for a fraction of the effort and value you put into your work.

Unless you want to maintain a totally transactional relationship with your customers, don't let yourself get labeled a builder. It's too limiting, and you'll spend all your energy fighting pricing battles – because you'll be stuck competing on the equivalent of widget production. Of course, delivering on your commitments is crucial, and the quality of your deliverables matters a great deal – but when your customer relationship is defined entirely by the surface layer, you (and your customer) miss out on an opportunity for something much deeper.

2. Process

The second layer is where things start to get interesting: This is where **strategy, process, and consultation** come in. If you expend effort on developing your processes and your strategic services, customers may recognize you as an **architect**, who can help them plan and oversee the project, not just follow their paint-by-numbers instructions. This is more fun, and a lot more profitable, because the value of this kind of work is higher.

You need this layer, and the previous one, to be solid if you want to create something good. We all spend a lot of time refining our processes for these top layers, because they're our bread and butter.

But to create something great – and to become **irreplaceable** – you need to dig deeper.

3. Deep Collaboration

There's a third layer that's rarely discussed, and I call it the deep collaboration layer. Deep collaboration is where you dig into the motivations that drive human beings – your customers, yes, but even beyond that, the people who matter most to *them* – and explore the bigger “Why?” of your work.

Here, at this deep layer, is where extraordinary ideas are generated, profound connections are sparked, and your work of highest value is created.

Let's take a moment to consider where creative work comes from – and then we'll explore a practical and accessible framework for deep collaboration with your customers.

The Bigger Why

Beneath every creative project – and I stress that I use the word “creative” in the broadest sense, to include any work that could not easily be automated – there is a desire to fulfill, and/or express, one or more human urges.

I believe there are five universal drives that inspire creative work. These are the things that motivate us to want to connect online, use mobile apps, fall in love with art, make the perfect shoulder bag, even organize our finances.

Function

We want stuff that works and makes our lives easier.

Meaning

We’re always seeking meaning and story – trying to make sense of our world and our lives, and our roles in all of it.

Connection

We crave connection with other humans, be it a desire for friendship, romantic love, or a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves.

Delight

We love things that bring us pleasure and joy – from YouTube videos of baby pandas, to sharing a laugh with a friend.

Evolution

Ultimately, we are seeking to evolve, learn, and grow.

How is your project addressing these motivators? How will it make people's lives better? How will it serve our quest for meaning and delight? How will it help us connect with one another? How will it help us evolve?

Don't get me wrong: I'm certainly not suggesting that creative work can only stem from a mission to change the world. And you don't need to check all five boxes – you can skip numbers one, two, three and five, and focus on designing the world's most amazing shoes, if that's

your thing. (And hey, if that's your thing, tweet me some pics.)

But you must appeal to at least one of these five drivers. Dig beneath the purpose of your project, and decide which one(s) are critical to its success – and hold onto it like your life depends on it.

With this in mind, let's look at why deep collaboration offers the biggest opportunities for mind-blowingly successful projects, personal satisfaction, and – last, but certainly not least – profit.

Google is an outstanding example of a function-oriented service company (though their Google Doodles are a wonderful expression of delight – and to some extent, evolution).

Pixar consistently creates animated films that bring us meaning and delight. Social networks are built to support our drive for connection. Health coaches, teachers, and meditation apps like Buddhify are evolution-focused.

Become Irreplaceable.

Your New Job Title: Indispensable Advisor and Co-Creator

Concentrate on being consultative rather than getting trapped in a transactional mentality.

–David Baker, [Recourses.com](https://www.recourses.com)

From the customer's perspective, each of those three layers I mentioned has a pretty specific value attached to it – so there's a correlation between the role you play and the fee you can command. When you stay at the level of builder and/or architect, you're more replaceable, and your customers are more likely to seek out competitive quotes and perspectives.

The deeper you dig with your customers, the more indispensable you become to them. You become an advisor and a co-creator – someone who adds real value to their projects.

The Transactional Testimonial: “They Did Everything We Asked.”

At the builder/surface layer, the best customer review you can hope for is that you fulfilled the obligations of your contract. That’s not much of a recommendation – it’s not going to drive repeat sales (or other forms of engagement), and neither will it convince others to work with you.

It takes more work to dig below the surface-level requests and find out your customers’ real goals, but the results are worth it.

At the builder level, your customers’ satisfaction level relies heavily on them knowing exactly what they need, and asking you for it. They come to you for a WordPress blog; you give them a WordPress blog. They ask for a logo design; you give them a logo design. **The exchange is transactional.**

You’ve probably had business relationships like these, whether it’s watching the latest blockbuster movie featuring sure-thing stars, or a contractor who needs to be given explicit instructions about what you want them to do. You know what you’re getting, sure – but is the

experience wonderfully memorable? Is it one you'd care to repeat on a regular basis?

Put another way: When was the last time you took the trouble to write a Yelp review for a fast food joint?

Transactional relationships aren't negative per se, but they're shallow and disposable. You deserve better testimonials than "I got what I expected."

You Deserve Higher Praise

As you move down into the consultative layer, your happy customers will begin to share their appreciation for your guidance, your smooth operations, the fact that they felt well cared-for and listened to. These are all good things, and they set you apart from a good portion of your competition.

You'll get testimonials that reflect the professionalism of your service – the way the project came in on time and on budget, or the fact that you have a well-defined process that helped them understand how and when different parts of the project would be completed.

I personally find this layer very seductive, because I enjoy refining processes and systematizing things. It's very tempting for me to hang out here, because it's comfortable and predictable.

But here's the rub: The best work you do focuses relentlessly on results. **If the goal is to achieve results, and that goal isn't met, it doesn't matter how well-designed your process was.**

And this is why you have to drill down to the third layer: Because the third layer uncovers your customer's real goals.

The most powerful testimonial you can have highlights the impact of your work – for instance, “Our sales increased 150%,” or “My productivity is way up, and I have more energy and focus than I have in years,” or “The public's awareness of our environmental campaign tripled.” Those results certainly don't come from build-level transactions; but they don't always come from consultative relationships, either, for one simple reason: **Your customer doesn't always know how to achieve the results they want, so they aren't equipped to ask you for the best solution.**

To go back to my restaurant analogy, they are still ordering from the menu. They're picking the solution they think will solve their problem,

rather than entrusting you with the problem and letting you co-create the solution with them.

Of course, there are very few customers in the world who are self-aware enough that they'll admit they don't have the solution. What happens much more often is that they come to you with a set of specifications.

The trouble with that approach is that they are working with you **because you know more about how to solve their problem than they do.** They know that – and yet, it is human nature to believe we have at least the beginnings of a right answer. So your job is to listen respectfully to what they say they need – and then move their solution aside until you understand the problem.

You can take your cue from the heroes at my local Home Depot, who know better than to answer my initial questions (“Where can I find those little v-shaped hooks for hanging pictures?”), and always respond with, “What are you trying to do?” Invariably, it turns out my idea was ill-advised, and I walk out of the store both wiser and more confident.

A software developer friend of mine used a similar approach after he got fed up with coding apps to spec, and decided to risk a new

approach in an attempt to reignite his passion for his work. When prospective customers came to him with a set of specs, he began responding with questions like, “Tell me why you arrived at this decision that you need a custom constituent relationship management database,” or “Why do you think this e-commerce platform is right for you?”

Once he started digging underneath those layers, he had an “Aha” moment, when he realized that not only was this work much more fun for him, but it was also far more valuable for his clients. He told me:

At the end of the day, I don't want to hear my clients say, “Yeah, he did everything I asked for.” What I really want to hear is, “You solved a serious problem that improved our bottom line.”

When you take the time to figure out what the actual goal is, and then bring your expertise to the table and say, “Here's what I think is actually going to work for you,” rather than just taking the customer's ready-made solutions – that's when you hit the sweet spot of highly satisfying work that is also highly valued by your customers.

This is not to say that the quality of your deliverables, and the skill with which you implement processes and consultation, don't

matter. They do – but **your most effective work comes when solid processes and deliverables are layered on top of deeper inquiry.**

Good Design is Collaborative

When you make the effort to dig into the bottom layer and ask better questions, you enter into a deep collaboration with your customers, where your expertise is put to work on solving their most pressing challenges. You can't get there until you take the time to listen closely to what they have to say, and to understand what's going on beneath whatever their top-layer questions were.

I'm going to share my favourite questions in just a minute. But first, I want you to think about what deep collaboration looks like – because it's pretty different from that Expert-Customer relationship we're used to having, and it comes with some risks, along with some big, big rewards.

Many of us experts have a bad habit of approaching every project with preconceived notions of what success looks like. That's not inherently bad – it's just the result of having completed a lot of projects before. One of the not-so-great outcomes of that approach, though, is that we can forget just how much brilliance, expertise, and creativity our

customers possess – and how crucial their contributions are to a project's success.

We can start acting like a not-so-great doctor, who simply hands down prescriptions and referrals without bothering to look into the eyes of her patient and discern what's really up.

There's a helpful analogy in Blair Enns's *Win Without Pitching Manifesto*, which urges consultants to consider their expert advice in the light of how a good doctor works. A responsible health care provider would never take the patient's word for what's afflicting them; they inquire about symptoms, test for evidence, and then draw their own conclusions to make the wisest possible recommendations. So, says Enns, should all consultants “[diagnose before we prescribe.](#)”

I like his analogy, but would take it further to add that the most effective health care is an active and equal partnership between expert care provider and patient. Just as every patient must be an active participant in her own diagnosis and recovery, so must we respect our customers' expertise and autonomy.

They often do know what's at the heart of the issues they're facing, and while they may need outside help to coach them to a better

diagnosis – or solution – the diagnosis and prescription will be much more effective if they co-design it with us.

What's at Stake for You

Unless your process includes drilling down to the bottom layer, you will not get those hit-it-out-of-the-ballpark results you want. But I'll be honest: there is a risk here. The risk at the bottom layer is that you will discover that your signature process, or your standard offerings, will not achieve the results your customers are looking for.

You may well gain insights into problems you alone cannot fix – or that require a radical overhaul of your planned approach. Budgets may shift (up or down), timelines may need to be adjusted, and difficult truths may need to be told. This is a feet-to-the-fire place to work.

That's the risk. But to balance that out, there is a deliciously sweet reward available to you: If you can find a way to meet your customers' real needs, you will have a real success on your hands – not just a business-as-usual project and a lukewarm testimonial.

It's your choice: You can stay in the safe, comfortable waters of layers one and two, or you can dive deep into deep collaboration and give yourself the opportunity to get knockout, kick-ass results that take your work to a higher level.

I don't know about you, but I choose the latter.

Being an Expert Isn't About Knowing the Answers

Another side effect of deep collaboration is that in creating a more open, inquiry-oriented space for your projects, you'll need to loosen your attachment to traditional ideas of what expertise looks like. Whatever preformed ideas you have about how to solve your customers' problems are better off being set aside so that you can bring a truly curious mind to the table.

I'm betting that you're an expert in what you do, and you possess a lot of answers to challenging questions. Moreover, you probably enjoy answering questions about your area of expertise – and your customers likely come to you with questions that are nagging at them. The questions you hear might sound something like this:

“How can I get my business featured in magazines?”

“What’s the key to building a highly motivated team?”

“How do we solve the homelessness crisis?”

Whatever your particular expertise, people want to know the secrets that you, the guru of whatever-it-is-you-do, possess. And it feels delicious to deliver those answers – being able to do that is a big part of why you went into your particular field. To be helpful. To share useful tools. All those good things.

Here’s the tricky part: Being in the role of dispenser-of-advice is seductive, exciting, and frankly, pretty awesome. Our egos get stroked when people want to know our expert opinion on stuff. But what actually makes you an indispensable advisor to your customers is your ability to ask them questions in return – and to co-create solutions with them.

When you ask the right questions, you inspire connection, collaboration, and serious problem-solving – all essential ingredients to powerful relationships and outcomes.

Stop spitting out default answers. Every expert worth their salt knows there's no one-size-fits-all solution to offer, anyway.

Instead, dig deeper below your customers' questions to find out what's motivating them. You'll gain a wealth of new info, cultivate trust, and build the foundation for a deeper – and more profitable – relationship with your customers.

Stop Talking About Yourself

I've created websites for hundreds of clients ranging from high-rise condominium developers, to international nonprofits working to cure fatal diseases, to small businesses, artists, and journalists. I started off as a coder, graduated to design, and eventually built a successful eight-person digital agency.

There are way better coders than me, and far more gifted designers. What made me successful, I believe, is that I am a deeply curious person who enjoys collaborating.

In other words: **I ask a lot of questions, and I've learned how to listen.**

Not everyone is naturally inclined in those two directions, I know. But I am here to tell you that they can be learned. I know that from personal experience.

I'll be straight with you: I wasn't born a good listener. I love the sound of my own voice, and I can happily talk, talk, talk until the cows come home. But eventually, enough people told me that my monologue habit was aggravating that I learned to stop and ask other people about themselves – and to listen patiently to the answer instead of interrupting them halfway through to give them my two cents.

It turned out that people are pretty fascinating, so it turned into a habit.

Consultants have a chronic tendency to make the same mistakes I did in my teen years. Customers ask us questions, and we're quick to respond with advice. **We mistake having answers for expertise.** But customers don't often benefit from our first impressions, any more than you'd want an appointment with a surgeon to culminate with a diagnosis and surgery date after a cursory glance over your fully clothed body.

When we rush to a solution before understanding the real problem, we aren't actually working for our customers; we're focusing on ourselves.

We must go deeper – and not just because I said so, but because your livelihood depends on it.



I propose a challenge: The next time someone asks for your expert opinion, bite back the instinct to hold forth, and instead, answer their question with another question. (This technique won't annoy people if you only do it once.)

Want some questions to try out? Keep reading.

The Business Case for Curiosity

Asking good questions – and listening to the answers – aren't just good habits to cultivate for your personal growth; **they are essential to building a profitable business.**

1. Successful Projects

Stronger portfolio, testimonials, and referrals

The deeper your consultative process is, the more effective your projects will be – and the stronger your portfolio, testimonials, and referrals. The same is true for software developers, financial advisors, health coaches, you name it. You will have a larger collection of successful projects and happy customers – and those happy customers will be talking about you in far more powerful ways. Instead of telling people that you're fun to work with, or gave them reliable service, they'll say things like, "My sales went up by 150%," or "This app is the secret weapon in my productivity toolbox."

Those are some much more powerful testimonials to put on your homepage than “They met expectations.”

It’s also going to lead to a lot more referrals because any leader of an organization who sees those kinds of results is going to be sending other people your way, and that’s what you really, really want: To save your marketing budget, and rely instead on that golden word of mouth network.

2. Stronger Relationships

Exceeding expectations creates loyalty and retention

When you collaborate with your customers to design solutions that solve their deepest challenges, you will inevitably exceed their expectations (since so few people bother to dig into this stuff). That leads to strong customer loyalty and retention, which means that the next time they’re looking for help with a similar problem, it’s unlikely your customers will cast a very wide net – they’ll simply come to you.

It’s not rocket science: Powerful questions beget powerful results and strong business relationships. And strong business relationships are so, so, so beneficial to your business.

3. Profitable Work

Stop re-doing work for free

The other thing that happens rather organically is that when you communicate well with your customers, there tend to be very few unpleasant surprises when it comes time to hand off your deliverables. Your customers are already happy, and the deliverables are just the tangible extension of what is already a positive and mutually valuable connection. In concrete terms, this means you'll rarely need to redo work for free. So there's a tangible cost savings in this approach that has a direct and positive impact on your bottom line.

A customer who trusts and respects your opinion during the course of a project will save you enormous amounts of time (which, as we all know, is money).

Deep Collaboration

I've made my case for *why* you should ask better questions. Now let's dive into how to get your professional curiosity on.

It starts with ditching the questions you're used to asking (and answering) – and once you've purged those from your vocabulary, I'll share the most effective questions I've learned to ask to spark deep collaboration, seriously amazing customer relationships, and extraordinary results.

Ask Better Questions.

Stop Asking (and Answering) the Wrong Questions

It's often said that there are no dumb questions – but there are definitely differences in the quality of questions we might consider while working on a project. Some of them keep us stuck at the surface layer – the execution of the project – while others delve deeper into the elements that contribute most to a project's success: the driving factors of Function, Meaning, Connection, Delight, and Evolution.

I've learned over the years that when I'm faced with a surface-level question from a customer, it's often an indicator that a deeper-level question needs to be asked.

Questions Customers Ask

Customers frequently start by trying to solve their own problems with tactical decisions, when what they really need is to put strategic questions first. They'll ask questions like:

- Where will people find it?
- Where will they hear about it?
- Who will help us get the word out?
- When does it need to launch?
- How will it be built?

These aren't inherently bad questions, but they need to be asked at the right time. "How will it be built?" for example, should never be answered before you know why you're building it, and who you're building it for.

Become a Detective of Customer Happiness

Great consultants are detectives at heart. We need to ask better questions, to get to the core of what will generate the best results for our customers.

Go Ahead – Steal These Questions.

The pages that follow contain my favourite questions to ask when I'm embarking on any creative project. They are broad enough to be used

for just about anything – big or small, techie or crafty, business-related or world-changing.

I'm wide open to having the questions stolen, because the questions themselves are not what makes me an expert. Being able to ask the right question at the right time, and to help answer it in a meaningful way – that's what makes me valuable, and it's what's going to make your work more valuable, too.

1. Who is it for?

I have an undying passion for collaboration and community – so I always like to begin by understanding the human context for a project. We ask this question to better understand the people we in the tech industry call “end users,” their needs and drives, and where else they’re getting those needs met.

The main thing to bear in mind here is that **we aren’t talking about you**, and if you’re consulting for a client who’s building their own customer base, we aren’t talking about your client, either. This is about focusing on who you want to serve.

- **Who is the audience?**
- **Who’s the user base?**
- **Who are we trying to reach?**

With some of my customers in healthcare, for example, the goal was to reach people who are affected by particular chronic diseases. They might have particular demographic qualities: If

they're people at risk of colorectal cancer, then we know the highest-risk category for those people is males between the ages of 50 and 75, so that's who we want to target.

In other cases, it's not quite that simple. The user base is going to be built more around interests, passions, and commonalities of other kinds.

Tip: If a customer brings you a “when” request, ask some “who” questions. Who needs it done then? What's driving the deadline?

If you really want to nail this question, the approach I suggest is combining these two approaches – that is, **starting with the factual side of things** (“Women in Portland,” or “Young people with Android phones”) and **adding some psychographic details** about what they want or need (“...who need help understanding their options around fertility and pregnancy,” or “...who want a better way to share photos with friends and family”).

A tip of the hat to [Mark Silver](#) for refining my thinking on this front. For more on defining your “who,” I highly recommend his workbook, [The Heart-Centered Answer to “What Do You Do?”](#).

2. What is this project's purpose?

This is very, very important and one that a lot of my customers like to skip past, because it's tricky. It's also easy to dismiss this question as too obvious; but anyone who's worked on a project that didn't have a well-defined purpose can tell you it's worth articulating.

Now, you'll notice that in the pages that follow, I also suggest asking "Why are you doing this?" – and that's a subtly different question.

What I'm looking for when I ask about the project's purpose is a sense of clarity around high-level objectives. For example, if you're designing a new recipe management app, the purpose of the project might be to create a better way to manage and share recipes – or it might be something a bit more heart-centred, like supporting people in preserving and sharing their family traditions around food. Those are two distinct purposes, and it's important to articulate which one is more accurate.

Without a well-articulated goal, your project is pretty much doomed to mediocrity. Your purpose informs every decision along the way, so it's worth spending the time to clarify it now – you'll save yourself unnecessary effort later.

You might also have objectives that are financial, social, environmental, and so on. Keep it broad, here – we'll talk further on about defining concrete goals. “A group coaching program to support people in eating better for their health and the planet's” works just fine.

Clear, concise, and pulsing with the heartbeat of your specific goals? Good, then. You're ready to move forward.

3. Why are you doing this?

If you only use one of these questions, make it this one. Channel your inner two year-old, and ask: *Why? Why? Why?*

Every time you ask why, you dig deeper down through those layers and get closer to the core purpose. And when you get a good answer to this question, that answer will serve as your guiding light through the whole process.

Deliverables can shift, deadlines can move, processes can adapt to changing requirements, but so long as you're true to the **WHY**, you're on track. Get your project team clear on this, and the rest will fall into place.

Remember that bottom layer? That's the key to a satisfying answer to your **why**:

- What's the **function** you're providing?

- How are you supporting your customers in creating more **meaningful** and **connected** lives?
- What are you doing to make the experience of working with you (or using your product) a **delightful** one?
- How does your project help your customers **evolve**?

There's a second angle you can use to tackle this question, too – which is, “Why are **you** doing this?” What makes you uniquely qualified to solve this problem for your customer? What's inspiring you?

The answer you come up with here, when combined with your answer to “What is this project's purpose?” is your project's mission statement. Keep it close; refer to it often (especially when the project goes sideways, which it probably will at some point); and use it as a guide star as you bring it out into the world.

4. What do your customers really want?

Now it's your customer's turn.

Ideally, you've had an opportunity to talk to them directly and ask for their input – but bear in mind that it's often hard for customers to tell you what they want until they've seen it. So instead of asking them directly, try asking for their feedback on the solutions they're currently using – or to describe the challenges they're facing, in an open-ended way, so that you can find out what they're craving most.

You can also use your intuition on this – by taking the feedback you've received from customers, or the product area you're working in, and asking “why” a few times.

For example, if you were designing jewelry like my friend [Kate Barazzuol's](#), your internal dialogue might look like this:

What do my customers want? Hand-made, one-of-a-kind jewelry.

Why do they want my jewelry? Because it makes them feel beautiful and special. Because it's wearable art. Because it's heirloom quality. Because they love natural elements and find it powerful and healing to carry nature with them.

So... what do they *really* want? A tangible, powerful, connection to nature through wearable art.

Your answers to this question can be a springboard for new product ideas, partnerships with other businesses, marketing and promotions ideas. or even the inspiration for the catering at your next event. Carry this core concept through to everything you do, and you'll nurture a deep bond with your customers that few businesses can rival.

5. What are the three most critical things you want your customers to do?

This question and the one that follows are designed to raise to the surface any differences between the needs of the team working on the project and those of your end users. It is exceedingly rare that the answer to these two questions is identical.

Of course, you want your customers to have an experience that satisfies their needs – and there is also very likely something you'd like them to do for you in return, be that register for an account, make a purchase, donate, sign up for your email list, or sign your petition. Whatever those things are, write 'em down and rank them in order of priority.

Why three? Because any more than that and you cease having priorities; any fewer and you're probably not giving your customer enough freedom of choice. (There are exceptions, of course, such as sales pages – but I encourage you to start with three and see where you land.)

6. How will your offering benefit your customers?

Now that you've articulated your part of the value exchange, it's time to focus on what value you're offering your customers. We spent some time on this with "What do your customers really want?" – but here, we'll focus completely on the benefits of your offering.

For example: If I'm on the lookout for a health coach, my stated purpose might be to reduce my intake of processed foods, and figure out an exercise plan that I can commit to while looking after a toddler – but the **benefits I'm seeking** are increased health, energy, and vitality, as well as a sense that I'm taking good care of myself (which has the major bonus of helping me care for my kid).

As with defining your project's purpose, you can use the five universal drives – function, meaning, connection, delight, and evolution – as a jumping-off point here. See if you can describe at least one benefit for each.

Some additional prompts you can use for answering this question:

- This project will help our customers do _____ [more easily/quickly/painlessly/thoroughly]
- With this offering, my customers will stop feeling _____ and start feeling more _____ instead.
- By using this, my customers will free up [time/energy/resources] they can allocate to _____.
- Not only will my customer experience the personal benefit of _____, but they will also experience the joy of living their _____ [social/environmental/spiritual/etc.] values.
- This offering gives my customers what they need to reach their goal of _____.

Your ultimate aim here is, [as Tim O'Reilly famously put it](#), to **create more value than you capture**. So long as your customer values the benefits you provide more than the cost of your offering, you've got a solid offering.

7. What's the key message you want people to take away?

This could be something concrete – such as a piece of information you're trying to communicate – but sometimes this is just about the emotional state that you want people to experience.

There may also be a couple of layers to your message. (Though if there are too many, you'll lose clarity, so stick to one or two, max.)

For example, if you were designing a course like [Jennifer Louden's "Teach Now,"](#) your primary message might be, "This course will support me in growing as a teacher, no matter where I'm starting from." And the secondary message could be, "My teaching challenges are not unique, and they are surmountable."

Jen's unique offering not only helps teachers develop core skills, but also provides a nurturing and compassionate environment where it's safe to share the trickier sides of teaching work. Both messages – the pragmatic understanding of what's being offered, and the subtler "vibe" of the program – are essential.

Another way of putting this question is: “What I really want people to know is...” And potentially, “But the bottom line is...”

Get this right, and you have the foundation for a memorable brand, product, or campaign.

8. What will inspire people to choose you?

Beyond differentiating your offering from your competitors', you must also establish trust with your customer. What inspires trust in your prospective customers?

If you code custom software, your customers want to know that you've done solid work before; testimonials and a strong portfolio help with that. And they want to know you'll be sticking around to debug the code after it's been delivered; a warranty or service agreement might put them at ease.

Massage therapists need to make people relaxed enough, before the first appointment, that they're willing to strip naked and lie on a bed with just a sheet covering them. That's a pretty serious degree of trust – but so is parting with one's money, time, and attention.

How will you earn your customers' trust?

9. How do you want your customers to feel when they interact with you?

A lot of people think of this as a design question, but in fact, it applies to all kinds of decisions, from technical choices, to the language you use to speak to your customers, even the kinds of people you hire to provide customer service.

You can design an app in a very bare-boned, minimalistic way and still impart a feeling. The feeling comes through the content, and through the interaction layer, as well as the design. It's evoked by simple things, like the choices that are offered to me when I'm filling out a form, or what happens when I'm waiting for something to happen – is there a colourful little beach ball, or a black-and-white hourglass, for example? Or is a cute little cartoon character doing a little dance? All of these choices affect my emotional and mental states.

When I interact with [37signals' apps](#), for example, I feel smart, efficient, and streamlined, and that's a really good way to feel – but there are other ways you might want your customers to feel.

I always asked my clients this question when I was doing design work, and eventually I started asking slightly kooky variants on it, to try to get them to play with me a little bit and flesh this out. I would ask the things like, “If your organization were a room, what would be in the room? What would be on the wall? What would the furniture look like? What colours are the walls? How does it feel?” Of course, some people balked at the question – but a surprising number of people went with it, and I got answers like, “Well, I want it to feel like the Vancouver airport, because it's open and spacious; you can easily see what's going on and it's really a way-finding place. When people interact with our website, they're on their way somewhere, and we want to make it easy and efficient for them to get there, while making it clear that it's big, and there are lots of options available.”

Isn't that wonderfully descriptive? Here's another answer I got, for contrast – this time from a client who works with survivors of domestic violence: “The most important thing is for it to feel like a good therapist's office: There's a shelf of books on the wall, very comfy chairs... There's a Kleenex box nearby. You are completely safe. No

one can see you or find you here. You're protected and you're in a safe space and that's the number one thing we want people to feel. It feels warm... everything is soft. The colour on the walls is a soft yellow and you're just embraced."

Those are two very, very different answers – and do you get how your approach to building and designing a website to evoke those feelings would be different as well? Give some serious thought to what qualities you want your project to embody, and how you can translate them into the work you do.

10. Where does it fit into your overall organizational/brand/communications strategy?

This question is one of my favourites. If your customer can't tell you how what you're creating relates to their overall organizational (or personal) mission, keep pushing them until they figure it out. Because if they can't tie it to their overall strategy, it's unlikely they'll find the resources – financial, human, or otherwise – to keep it alive and thriving beyond launch. The project will not provide enough value to them to justify its continued existence.

For a while, around the time Facebook was becoming A Big Deal, practically every client I had wanted to build their own online community – because they thought that was what they needed to do to stay current. But my clients tended to be organizations that worked in niche areas – like academic research or local performances of classical music – that didn't lend themselves well to inspiring thousands of people to log in daily and participate

in yet another social network. So I advised most of them to pass on investing the big dollars that kind of project would entail, and to do something that was more central to their mission instead.

Frequently, that would lower their budget significantly – giving them the freedom to either reinvest the difference in further work with us, or to spend it elsewhere.

Save Now, Earn Later

You may be thinking, “Pardon me, but did you just tell me that I should talk my customers out of giving me money?” **Yes, I did** – because I don’t believe in selling people things they shouldn’t be buying. But while that may seem altruistic, I’ve found that often, forgoing a bad sale frequently nets you a bigger one down the road, for one of two reasons.

The first is that when you bother to take the time to find out what your customer needs, and sell them a solution that fits, **you build trust** with that customer, and they are far more likely to come back to you for advice on how they might spend the rest of their budget. (See how that works? You just went from being a vendor, to being a trusted

advisor who helps them spend their money wisely and increase their impact.)

The second reason is that nothing inspires people to spread the good word about you faster than refusing to sell them stuff they don't need.

In other words: **Odds are high that you will make up any loss in immediate sales down the road, either with the same customer or via their friends.**

11. Who are your competitors?

Who else does the kind of stuff you do?

Another way of putting this – which is more helpful if you do something totally unique, such as managing welfare programs for the government – is, *Who else does my customer think of when they're seeking solutions to the challenges I help them with?*

Who is serving your prospective customers now? What are they doing for them?

How are you differentiating yourself from all of the other folks who play in your space?

What are you offering that's special and different, and are you just doing this because your competition is doing it? Or are you doing it because you know there's something you can bring to the table that's going to be unique and/or better?

How will you design your project in a way that highlights these distinctions, and helps your customers understand when and why they should come to you?

12. How will you measure success?

If you can get this question answered at the outset of any project – from a large-scale, multi-year endeavour to hosting a dinner party – your life is going to be so much easier. If your customers tell you, “Our main measure of success is we want to have 1,500 new Facebook fans within 30 days of launch,” that’s going to push your approach in a different direction than if they’d said their number one goal was to get an upswing in sales.

Now, there are lots of people out there who like all their goals to be measurable. I like hard metrics, I do. But I also think it’s OK to have some success measures that are intangible. For example, it’s totally legitimate to want to redesign your website because *you just can’t freaking stand to look at that horrible website you’ve got right now*. No problem. Put that on your list.

But looks alone probably won’t wow you six months after launch, when you’ve been looking at the new site every day and the

new-website sheen is fading a little. So let's add some metrics to the mix, shall we?

Figuring out the right metrics for your project is a book-worthy subject in itself, but a great place to start is to ask yourself, "What is the bottom-line result I am looking for?" It might be a dollar value, a percentage-based upswing in qualified leads, a decrease in support calls, or simply reclaiming a certain number of hours a week that you're currently spending doing stuff you don't enjoy doing. It's quite possibly a combination of things.

List them all down – and while you're at it, clarify which things on your list are mission-critical, and which would be nice to have. There's always room for a good stretch goal.

13. When it launches, how will you maintain and develop it further?

Turning the **when** question around is always tricky. Most of us are so focused on delivering what we were hired to do, that we have trouble seeing beyond that metaphorical “finish line” and seeing that it’s actually the beginning of a whole new path. But if you can shift your perspective to thinking like your customers, and recognize the need for evolution, growth, and refinement, you will once again put yourself in the position of being a valuable long-term partner, not just someone who can meet a deadline.

Instead of focusing on when you’re going to hand off your final deliverables, try asking yourself, “When this phase of the project is complete, how are we going to maintain it? What’s the maintenance plan?” For a website or an app, this might involve designing an ongoing content plan, or figuring out a strategy for adding new features. For a consultant, it might mean setting up a quarterly check-in meeting with your customer, brainstorming

further project ideas, or building alliances with other consultants who provide complementary services.

This question represents a huge missed opportunity for many of the business owners I know. We have an unfortunate tendency to focus on attracting new customers and creating new products, rather than asking ourselves **what else we can offer to our best customers: the ones we already have.**

It's natural to find yourself distracted by the notion of growing your business by growing your number of customers, but the fact is, there's plenty of growth available by simply offering more to your biggest fans. (Think box sets, concert t-shirts, and VIP tickets for music audiences.)

I've been known to recommend to my clients that they reallocate budget to account for ongoing support – for example, to take 20% of their website redesign budget, which is entirely focused on one deliverable and one launch date, and allocate it to the following 6 or 12 months of iterative development.

This may sound counter-intuitive – and you can always pitch a budget increase rather than a redistribution – but I know that within the first 30-60 days after launch, my clients will get user feedback, and ideas

from people in their organization who weren't involved in the design stages. They're going to get all kinds of great ideas, and if they've blown their whole budget, they won't be able to act on them.

I'd rather see them move a couple of "must have" features to their post-launch wish list, and then evaluate them 30 days post-launch to see whether they're actually the most critical features to add, or if users are actually clamoring for something else.

And if that doesn't make enough sense on its own, I'll throw this business argument in for good measure: **Once you shift your customers' mindset to that of an ongoing relationship, rather than a one-time transaction, you are much more likely to get repeat business.**

In other words: "What are we doing after launch?" is your prerequisite for recurring revenue.

Whew.

Tired?

Good. These aren't easy questions. (I know – I've used them to plan my own projects, and answering them requires deep engagement.) But they are the best ones I know of to clarify and galvanize a team around a project that has real purpose and a solid shot at connecting deeply with customers.

Now, before we pop the champagne and toast your awesomeness, a caveat. There are some sneaky ways that you may find yourself (or your customers, depending on your business model) *seeming* to answer the questions without actually answering them.

Turn the page and let's look at a couple of examples of misguided – well, let's just cut to the chase and call them *wrong* – answers, so you'll know how to identify them in the wild.

Right & Wrong

Answers

How to Spot a Non-Answer From a Mile Off

So far we've talked a lot about your role as an indispensable advisor and co-creator, and what we can do to drive projects and customer relationships deeper into solving real customer needs. But of course, our skill in engaging the deeper questions is a huge part of the equation – as is your customers', if you're a consultant. **If we get bad answers to our good questions, they don't give us much to work with.** So let's look at how we can coach ourselves (and our customers) into giving better answers, too.

It's not that there are *right* answers to the questions – but there are definitely approaches that don't pass muster, because while they appear to be answers, they actually dodge the questions in important ways.

Here are a few quick examples of non-answers that deserve to be rejected.

The Wrong Answer to... “Who is it for?”

The Wrong Answer: “Everyone,” or Death by Demographics.

There are a couple of ways to go astray with the big Who question. You can claim that your customer base is “Everyone” – which is quite simply insane, unless you are controlling the market on oxygen, water, or maybe the rays of the sun – or you can define your audience in the narrowest, driest, most soul-deadening way possible (“25-30 year-old males who are on Facebook and interested in video gaming,” anyone? I’d like to see the video game that doesn’t appeal to a single player outside that definition. Or on second thought, maybe I wouldn’t.)

So there is a just-right place you want to land with this question, somewhere between the non-answer answer of “everyone” and overly prescriptive demographic segmentation.

Rigid demographics might work for you if your product is seriously niche. For example, if your video game takes 1,000 hours to play, then I think it's fair to rule out anyone with children, and possibly anyone with a full-time job. That's totally legit.

But in general, I think demographics are best used in tandem with descriptions of the preferences, needs, and desires your customers possess. So, to continue with our video game example, you might want to limit your target market to fans of first-person shooter games.

I'm also a fan of customer personas, which are profiles of imaginary customers that you can create when you're in the initial stages of cooking up your idea, and before you begin showing it to real customers for feedback. A basic persona might include a name, and some details about their life and personality that provide them with some flavour – for example, what magazines or blogs they read; what they might order at a bar; what they do for exercise; and so on.

A persona gives you a fully formed, human image of the people you're trying to connect with. I encourage you to try this out the next time you're working on a project.

If I were to do this for our fictional, epic, shoot-'em-up video game, I might create a persona named Clint (in honour of a game designer

friend of mine), who let's say is a coder, and works in a very tech-centric urban city – let's say Austin – and drinks a ton of coffee, and so on and so forth.

I would argue that our fictional game designers might make very different decisions if they take the time to ask, “How would Clint want this to work?” rather than just designing for faceless, generic “users.”

And besides, it's way more fun.

After descriptive demographics and customer personas, the third thing I'd suggest playing with is a concept that people in the tech industry call “user stories.” This is basically the notion that rather than describing what it is that you're creating for your customer, you describe how your customer will interact with you, *from the customer's perspective*.

For a website, this might mean that rather than saying, “We need to build a blog and it's going to show the latest ten posts on the landing page, with titles, tags, date, timestamp, and author name, and the author name is clickable through to this...” – instead of viewing it that way, through the developer's lens, we view it through the user's lens, like so: “The customer comes to the blog. They see the latest ten posts.

They're able to click on the title, to get to the full post, they're able to click on the author to see all of the user's posts."

It may seem simple – telling the story from the customer's perspective – but it can be truly transformative. You'll uncover motives, priorities, and decision points you may not have anticipated – and shine a light on your own assumptions that might warrant testing with real, live customers prior to launch. And furthermore, the practice of consistently framing your work from the customer's perspective will help ensure you maintain focus on their needs and desires – which is what good business is all about.

The Wrong Answer to... “Why are you doing this?”

The Wrong Answer: “Because everyone else is.”

Ugh. This is the response I most dread hearing when I ask the big Why question. It’s the worst possible reason to do, well, anything.

There was a time in my web design career when it seemed like every client I had wanted one of those image-based slideshows on their home page, and almost invariably, the reason they’d proffer was that they saw it somewhere else and thought it looked attractive.

When I’d ask them what content they wanted to feature in the slideshow, things got foggy. “Um, I’m sure we can find some nice pictures to put in there.”

No. No, no, no, no, no.

I have nothing against slideshows – but **there must be a deeper driving force behind such a project-defining decision than, “I saw it somewhere else.”**

Whether it's crowdfunding a project, redesigning a logo, or launching an e-book, we all experience customers asking us to take on a project just because it's trendy. None of these examples is necessarily a bad solution, so long as it has an actual purpose.

Here are some better answers to the big why:

- Because it serves our business goals.
- Because it's our #1 user-requested feature.
- Because it increases the function/meaning/connection/delight/evolution factor(s).

When I ask you why you want a slideshow, I want to hear you say that there's a business reason behind it, or maybe that it's something your customers are clamouring for. (That last one's hard for me to imagine, but hey, they're your customers.) If you're going to add something to your project, please do it because it gets at that lower layer of customer desires: because it makes it more delightful, meaningful, functional, because it makes people feel like they're evolving as human beings, or connecting with each other.

As a consultant, your job is to help your customers move down the layers to the essence of their project. You can inspire them to give you better answers by digging beyond their first answer. Think of yourself like a customer therapist: “...And how does that make you feel?”
Kidding. But seriously, **keep asking why.**

The Wrong Answer to...

“What’s the key message you want people to take away?”

The Wrong Answer: “I’m sold! Sign me up.”

That’s not a message; it’s a decision. (And ideally, you want people to simply decide and act, not take that thought away and mull it over.)

Of course you want people to get enthusiastic and take action. That’s a given. Let’s get beyond that and talk about a real message.

Your offering ought to communicate something besides its own value. Look to the customer benefits you’ve outlined: There’s likely a message or two hidden in there. Same goes for your answer to “Why are you doing this?” – those five universal drives will point you in the right direction.

Your customer isn't just looking to buy something; they're looking for benefits, value alignment, and a message that resonates. "You should buy this" isn't a resonant message; it's a ubiquitous imperative that gets tuned out. "We can help you _____" is something you can build on. "You already have the capacity to _____; let us help you boost it" is even better.

Remember, your customer doesn't care about helping you reach your sales targets – so instead of focusing on what you want them to do, shift into the language your customers actually use, and craft a message that resonates with their needs and desires.

The Wrong Answer to... “What will inspire people to choose you?”

The Wrong Answer: Data, or An Emotional Response.

Do your customers care more about facts, or feelings?

That’s a trick question. I’ve noticed a tendency to lean too heavily on one side of this polarity or the other, when the reality is that one without the other is a recipe for a lukewarm reception. Sure, some customers will make a purchase decision based entirely on emotional response and spend no time at all evaluating their rationale – and others will methodically compare specs and prices until they find an objectively perfect fit for their purchase criteria. But most of us fall somewhere in the middle. So your value proposition needs to appeal to both logic and emotion.

You want to make it easy for your customer to choose you. Don't make them do the logical legwork; give them enough data to feel confident they're making a smart, informed decision.

And at the same time, be consistent in designing every aspect of your project to evoke the emotional responses you're hoping to trigger.

Get these two things right, and you smooth your sales process substantially.

The Wrong Answer to... “How will you measure success?”

The Wrong Answer: “Increased sales.”

Everyone wants to increase sales. That’s not a strategy, that’s an outcome. And it’s not nearly specific enough.

Your objectives should be measurable in some respect. If you’re looking for an upswing in sales, tell me how much of an upswing, in what timeframe, and what strategies you’re looking to employ. (Increase sales by 20% in three months, by improving the interface on your shopping cart? Great.)

It’s a cliché, sure, but SMART goals are your friend:

Specific

Measurable

Attainable

Relevant

Time-bound

When you don't have measurable goals, you don't have much of a chance of getting great testimonials, overjoyed customers, or a sense of having succeeded – because there's nothing you can point to and say, “We surpassed that!”

Find something you can measure, so that you can follow up after a certain period of time, and hold the actual results up against the goals you set. Once you have real data to work with, you can refine and test your ideas, to further improve your numbers.

If you're still getting non-answers...

It happens sometimes: You coax, nudge, and cajole your team to the best of your ability, and you're still not satisfied with the answers you've got. So where do you go from here?

Here are a few things that have worked for me.

“What’s important about that?” is a magic question, when you’re digging into whys and purpose. Use it liberally, for questions like “What’s the project’s purpose?” “Why are you doing this?” and “What do your customers really want?” It can even do wonders with the questions about benefits, key message, overall strategy, and measures of success. If you’re getting surface-level answers, throw it at ‘em and see what happens.

Don’t be afraid to be the dumbest person in the room. Loosen your hold on what you think you know, and ask questions that may seem to have obvious answers. Restating the fundamentals can have a galvanizing effect on your sense of purpose.

“What else?” can draw out unexpected factors that might otherwise hide behind more obvious ones.

Allow space for silence – even the uncomfortable kind. Deep thinking takes time.

“How would our customers want us to answer this question?” can pull you out of navel-gazing ruts and into creative, empathy mode.

Remember, too, that you may not need great answers to every one of these questions to do extraordinary work. The point is not to be pedantically thorough in mining the depths of every question, but rather to ask the questions in the first place, consider them thoughtfully, and then – well, make something wonderful.

In closing...

What happens next

Once you've worked with your customer to drill down to the bottom layer – when you've figured out *why* you're tackling the project, what needs and desires you're fulfilling, how you'll measure success, and so on – you'll have a wonderfully well-described problem.

Now. *Now*, you're free to solve it, with all the genius you can muster – with every tool in your toolbox and neuron in your mind.

You are no longer fulfilling orders from the menu. You can get to work on a masterpiece – with the confidence that comes with knowing you are doing work with real purpose and value.

It will be a collaborative process, of course. And there may well be compromises along the way. But you now have the fundamental parameters of your project defined in such a way that you can steer your customer away from choices that would clash with their stated goals.

Document the answers you get. Share them with your customer. Revisit them as often as you need to. When they are tempted to propose a solution that you don't believe will work, you can point out the tension between their idea and the answers they've given you. (That doesn't mean the customer is never right – it just means they are being held accountable for the answers they've given you.)



Here's what is happening now: You're no longer stuck in implementing your customers' ideas. You're educating them about the value of your work. They are unlearning the habit of proposing half-thought-through solutions without checking them against their deeper goals. You're designing great solutions.

You're no longer a builder; you're an indispensable advisor and co-creator.

(And your customer, by the way, has very likely become a source of real inspiration to you. Isn't that a sweet bonus?)

Get curious. (Your customers will thank you.)

Behind every creative project is a drive to connect – to connect with our deepest drives and purpose, and to connect with other human beings.

Great software applications, from productivity software to mobile meditation apps, help us **remember what's most important to us, and focus on it.**

High-impact environmental campaigns connect us to **the world that supports our existence**, and help us understand what we can do to restore its health.

The best websites transcend bytes and pixels and convey **the soul-flavour of the humans and organizations** who created them.

The most brilliant financial planners, clothing designers, copywriters, business consultants, fitness trainers, chefs, and

landscape architects are the ones who understand, intuitively, exactly who their customers are and know how to connect with them.

The key to making these essential connections – within ourselves, and with others – is to become a skillful conversationalist. I don't mean you need to be extroverted, or become adept at striking up discussions with people at cocktail parties, or hone your wit so it rivals Dorothy Parker's. But **we become more creative by becoming more curious.**

And here's the flip side: **Mediocre products and failed projects result from a failure of curiosity.** This is as true of a local cafe that's closing its doors as it is of Google Wave or a website that isn't meeting its traffic targets.



Asking better questions is a core skill that sets highly successful creative professionals apart from the herd.

Asking “why,” and digging beneath the spec to discover your customers' deeper goals allows you to contribute your intelligence and wisdom to the process, thereby making you indispensable rather than replaceable.

And that is my wish for you: That you experience creative joy, successful projects, financial ease, and customer relationships that light your fire.

Thank you for reading.

Your Better Question Cheat Sheet

I meant what I said about stealing these questions. Seriously, be my guest. Here's a quick recap of my favourite questions on one page, for you to use as you see fit. Print it out, stick it on your wall, whatever floats your boat.

1. Who is it for?
2. What is this project's purpose?
3. Why are you doing this?
(Function • Meaning • Connection • Delight • Evolution)
4. What do your customers really want?
5. What are the three most critical things you want your customers to do?
6. How will your offering benefit your customers?
7. What is the key message you want people to take away?
8. What will inspire people to choose you?
9. How do you want your customers to feel when they interact with you?
10. Where does it fit into your overall organizational/brand/communications strategy?
11. Who are your competitors?
12. How will you measure success?
13. When it launches, how will you maintain and develop it further?

Curiouser and Curiouser

My deepest hope is that this little book has given you a big idea or two. If it has, and you're feeling generous, I'd be grateful if you would spread the love around. Here are a few ways to do that – and to stay in touch with me, should you be so inclined.

Share on Social Media

(Just copy one of these blurbs and paste to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, or wherever you like to hang out online.)

The questions in @laurenbacon's Curious for a Living are already revolutionizing my work. Powerful! <http://bit.ly/curious4living>

“Go ahead. Steal these questions.” I'm on it. Thanks, @laurenbacon.
Get Curious for a Living: <http://bit.ly/curious4living>

The real secret to brilliant testimonials & profitable projects? Ask better questions. Curious for a Living <http://bit.ly/curious4living>

Rethinking how I co-create with my customers, thanks to @laurenbacon's Curious for a Living. <http://bit.ly/curious4living>

My new job title: Indispensable Advisor and Co-Creator. Thanks, @laurenbacon! Curious for a Living <http://bit.ly/curious4living>

Connect With Me Online

- Get on my mailing list at www.laurenbacon.com (or just check out my blog posts).
- Follow me on Twitter: [@laurenbacon](https://twitter.com/laurenbacon)
- Come find me on Facebook: www.facebook.com/curiositylabs
- More of a visual person? I hang out on Pinterest, too: www.pinterest.com/laurenbacon/

What Did You Think? Let Me Know.

I welcome your feedback. You can reach me by email at lb@laurenbacon.com or on Twitter, where I'm [@laurenbacon](https://twitter.com/laurenbacon).

Fired Up About This Topic?

I would love to hear your thoughts. Write a blog post and send me the link. Interview me for your blog or podcast. Run a brief excerpt from this book on your site (with a link to the download page, please: <http://bit.ly/curious4living>). Shoot me a testimonial I can add to the book page. Share one of my blog posts on your blog or social networks.

Work With Me

I offer business coaching to entrepreneurs to help them align with their purpose, gain clarity on their values, and amplify their impact, success, and joy. My work is informed by 12 years at the helm of a successful digital agency, many years of experience convening events for small business owners, and my bestselling book for women entrepreneurs – along with a huge passion for helping people narrow the gap between where they are and where they want to be. And as you know from reading this book, I am insatiably curious, and I like to get to the heart of things.

If this sounds like a fit for you, you can learn more at www.laurenbacon.com/coaching.

Speaking Opportunities

I'm one of those rare specimens who genuinely enjoys public speaking.
No, really.

Got an event you'd like me to speak at? Get in touch:
lb@laurenbacon.com.