

CHECKLIST: PROBLEM



Your idea equals your solution, your problem equals your market. Many entrepreneurs are obsessed with their idea: that's a mistake, because startups are market-driven, the result of an intimate relationship between a team and a market with a problem. So what's your problem?

IS YOUR PROBLEM REAL?

Fake problems are problems that only the entrepreneur sees. Be careful not to think that your bubble is reflective of the outside world. BUT never use traditional market research methodologies such as a market study or going to a market expert. Those are based on the assumption that exploring a market means asking what people want. But people do not know what they really want until you push it to them, such as was seen with cars, TVs and cellphones. There is a huge gap between what people say, what people think, and what people really think. The question, "Does my problem matter or not?" is a very good clue of your project's long-term value.

CAN IT BE DEFINED?

If you have a well-defined problem that you are trying to solve, your "why" will be obvious ([watch the TED video "Start with the why"](#)). By the way, you should always explain the problem and not the solution because that's how you'll connect with people.

IS IT BIG?

The present market is not the reference, the future market is: you can become as big as you can make the market grow. That means you have to conquer the existing market AND create a market that does not exist yet. It's that latter opportunity that is key.

IS IT DIFFICULT?

Be ambitious: the more difficult a problem seems, the more valuable the solution will be if you succeed. In the European paradigm, difficult problems are the one that create big companies on the long term. You have 2 choices as an entrepreneur:

- Do things that lots of people are trying to do - this will be quick and mainly consists in execution, as you'll need to be the best to succeed in a very competitive landscape;
- Choose a very long-term approach and work for the next 10 years on a problem that is not obvious - within 10 years you can become an expert in any field, and that path never fails.

IS IT OBVIOUS? THAT IS TO SAY, HAS IT BEEN SOLVED?

Obvious problems are already solved. But has it been solved the right way? There is always room for competition, but the more a market has been solved, the more impressive the new solution must be.

IS IT GETTING WORSE?

There are 2 kinds of problems:

- those that are naturally improving, meaning that the market is decreasing;
- those that are getting worse and more painful, which means ever-bigger opportunities to offer a game-changing solution. Remember, it's much easier to sell painkillers than a vitamin ;)

UNDERSTAND YOUR MARKET

All of the above questions should help you truly understand your market. Markets are alive: they are like animals, they all have their personality traits and they are very unequal, and something that applies to one market is dead wrong for another. That's why early-stage startups should not talk together about their businesses.

FOCUS FIRST ON THE TARGET MARKET

Markets are too big to be conquered at once, so first find your problem (the big vision). Then, as a second step, narrow your vision and find the small segment of that problem that you will solve - that is your target market.

FORGET THE COMPETITION

Comparing your inside with the outside of your competitors will only distort your decision-making.

UNLESS IT'S FOR INSPIRATION

Still, it's better to look at other industries for inspiration and adapt it to your situation, since when you look at your competitors you never know if you are looking at winners or losers (and then you take the risk of copying mistakes).

INSPIRATION IS EVERYWHERE

You can read blogs and Techcrunch, watch how-to videos, but the most important source of inspiration remains the outside: movies, novels, biographies of non-entrepreneurs, your Facebook newsfeed, and your own history. One life changing article you should definitely read: The Cook and the Chef: Musk's Secret Sauce. A Cook is someone who follows a recipe, a Chef is someone who reinvents cooking.

IT TAKES TIME

It takes time to know your problem, to understand your market, to become an expert. Stay a project as long as possible because as soon as you become a company, collateral problems will arise. Be a project that becomes a company and not a company that is looking for a project.

ARE YOU WILLING TO TAKE THE RISK?

If not, try something else, because entrepreneurship is about great risk and even greater boldness.