




Product  
Communication  
Basics



PRODUCT  
COMMS  
CLUB

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# Introduction

Welcome! You're about to start kicking ass at talking about your product.

It astounded me when I realized that lots of entrepreneurs aren't very good at this. The average marketing department isn't very good at it either. (Next time you're driving around, pay close attention to the billboards. Can you tell what half of the stuff they're advertising even *is*?) Communication is super difficult, especially when you only have a few words and a split second to do it. Most people don't devote the time or energy to figuring out how to distill an idea. Plenty of brilliant software engineers create awesome tools but aren't able to convince anyone to use them, which is a tragedy. On the bright side, this means that if you master product communication, you'll be ahead of the competition!

So wait, what is product communication — isn't that just marketing? Nah. I'm using the term "product communication" precisely so I can avoid calling it marketing. Why? Because "marketing" makes people think about advertisements and social media, and it attracts the type of person who uses hashtags at the end of every tweet. Product communication is essential for ads and social media, but it's a step ahead of all that.

Before we launch into the exercises, let's take a brief sanity check. Clever communication won't help if you don't have reasonable product-market fit and decent design. Your product doesn't have to be perfect, but it does have to provide genuine and compelling value to your customers. Be brutal with yourself about this. It hurts much less to go back to the drawing board *before* launch (although sometimes you need the experience of failing to teach you where change is needed).

For product-market fit, talk to your target customers and give them the opportunity to use a prototype. Eavesdrop on their conversations among themselves (forums, blogs, secret hidden bunkers, etc). For design, read *The Design of Everyday Things* as many times as you can stand. There are a lot of other resources out there, just a Google search away. This workbook will still be here when you're ready. Of course, if you're ready now, forge ahead!

## Real Quick: How to Use this Book

If it fits your workflow, I recommend printing this document. Fetch a pen and paper, or set yourself up to toggle between your PDF viewer and a note-taking application. You're going to get your hands dirty (only in the most figurative sense).

A few sections of *Product Communication Basics* are read-only, but most are like... well, like homework. I know, I know — a throwback to high school really fires up your entrepreneurial spirit! Sorry about that. The fact is, business is a tedious slog with rare upswings of excitement. Working out your product message — that is, how to quickly communicate *what your product does* and *what it means* — is mostly slog with a few fun flashes of insight thrown in.

Write out answers to all the questions, or record yourself speaking the answers and write them down later. If you have a cofounder / partner / team, go through the exercises together. (Or you can all do them separately and see how your responses differ!) If you already have taglines and such, try to avoid reusing them — write fresh ones in order to surface new ideas.

Don't throw away this material when you're done. Keep it all to use later in blog posts, social media posts, advertising, outreach emails, and so on. The more you can do the work once and use it over and over again, the better. Sprints of hard work are a smart type of laziness ;)

# Brass Tacks; Nuts & Bolts

Answering all these questions should feel like getting grilled by an investor, crossed with explaining your job to enthusiastic but clueless family members.

## Customers

Enough about you – let's talk about the folks with money in their pockets. I'm sure you've heard the phrase "the customer is always right" (and if you've worked retail, you know how horrible the corresponding reality is). A more neutral way to express that principle might be "satisfying the customer is necessary" – and to satisfy the customer, you need to know who they are and figure out what they need enough to pay for it. Without any further ado...

1) Who are your customers? Demographics, industry, personality. Keep it as narrow as possible. Trying to serve everyone, especially in the beginning, is a losing game. You'll flounder. Even if your product is a broad-based consumer offering, focus on a couple of specific segments right now.

2) What are some of their problems? What are they frustrated by, and why?

3) What goal do those problems hinder or block? What are your customers trying to accomplish?

4) Which of their pain points are you addressing? What's the corresponding goal?

5) How does the situation feel to your customer currently? Describe the agony / inconvenience and their gut reactions to it.

6) What language do your customers use to describe their problems? Which phrases would they Google? For example, “unique” and “not the same” have similar meanings but different cultural connotations. You want to get very comfortable not only with your potential customers’ perspectives but also with their vernacular. (I could have said “slang” or “linguistic habits” instead of “vernacular” – see how that works?)

7) This might feel silly, but I want you to write a little vignette either about a hypothetical customer, describing their current setup in the domain relevant to your business. Let’s say you’re going to sell to architects. “Jennifer sits down at her desk, powers up her computer, and double-clicks the AutoCAD icon. She opens the file she was working on last night, and while she waits for it to load, she pulls up her email application...” Etc, etc. It doesn’t need to be long – 150 words or so will do. We’ll come back to this later.

## Competitors

8) Who are your competitors? Don’t think of competitors just as similar products, but as any solution that solves the same pain point – including free ones. For example, open-source WordPress is a competitor to Squarespace.

9) Come at it from another angle, just in case: who would your competitors identify as *their* competitors?

Quick note on competition: The key to competition as an underdog is not to be better – don’t pile on features – but to come at things from a different angle. Take the example of Squarespace versus open-source WordPress. Squarespace doesn’t compete with WordPress by doing more – Squarespace is *way* less customizable and has far fewer capabilities, especially when it comes to ecommerce. Squarespace competes by offering something out-of-the-box beautiful to people who don’t want to fiddle with a bunch of settings or install various different plugins.

Your advantages as a new market entrant are focus and nimbleness. Another note on that in a second...

10) Why should customers choose you instead of the competitors? How are you different?

11) How does that difference serve your customers? Do you target a particular niche?

Quick quote on niches from bootstrapping guru Amy Hoy, when she was [interviewed on the Kalzumeus podcast](#):

“If you have a pool that is very popular, has a lot of customers, there’s got to be a significant portion of those customers who are being ill-served by that product. [...] It cannot be all things to all people. So someone like us who just needs a few thousand customers to live like a king, can swoop in and serve a segment of those customers, which were created for you by [...] this competitor which is allegedly saturating the market.”

In other words, having competitors is not a bad thing. Their existence proves that there’s a market for whatever you’re making.

12) How much do your competitors charge? Do they have several different price points?

13) Why do you think they charge that specific amount?

A quick note about pricing segmentation: I recommend learning about the [demand curve](#). Business analyst Ben Thompson wrote an article in 2013 that [explains this concept from the perspective of iPhone pricing](#):

“[The demand curve] is why companies typically sell multiple variations of a product; the idea is to also sell a higher-priced product that appeals to those willing to spend more, and a lower-priced product that attracts those lower down the demand curve. Ideally, the lower-priced product doesn’t cannibalize the higher-priced ones.”

In the beginning you may not have the resources to offer several different pricing verticals, but even just two can make a difference.

## Your Company

14) Who is the founder? What is their / your story?

15) Name some entrepreneurs that you admire, and briefly list why.

16) Compare your company to a company or two from another industry.

17) Why are you the person (or company) that your customers should buy from? What relevant experience do you have? Whether you’re early-stage or not, you want to be able to establish credibility to customers who don’t know much about you. Name-dropping is encouraged.

18) Why did you decide to address this particular niche or market? Are you solving a problem that you’ve personally experienced? (It’s totally fine if you’re not.)

19) Describe a mistake that you’ve made and learned from. Bonus points if it’s directly related to your product.

20) What’s your business model?

21) Assuming you charge money either up-front or monthly, why should users be willing to pay the amount that you're asking?

22) How did you settle on that specific amount?

23) What's your refund process? What reaction can customers expect if they try out your product and hate it?

24) What kind of support do you offer? What's your attitude toward customer support?

25) How is your business going to change the market you're in? What will your larger impact be?

## The Product Itself

Now we get to the really good stuff! Your answers in this next section will be the basis of your landing page, your main promotional copy... all that jazz. No pressure, right?

Remember to keep it loose. If you're a drinker, have a couple of beers and kick back. Or try the opposite approach and work on this right after your morning coffee. Creativity is wild and sloppy, so don't be afraid of that. You can always refine your answers later.

26) What is the purpose of your product? (I know, it feels like a mundane question after all that buildup.)

27) Now pause for a minute and evaluate your answer. Did you name what your product *does*, concretely, or the benefit it provides? For example, the core of what Twitter *does* is allow you to publish public 140-character messages. The core of Twitter's value to its users is that it encourages you to bounce ideas around with people who share your interests, regardless of their physical location.



You need to communicate both the concrete details of your product *and* the abstract benefit. Why? Because people hesitate to buy a product when they don't understand what it does. They also hesitate when they don't understand *why* it does what it does.

If you're having trouble expressing the concrete details, break it down into the literal actions the customer has to take – the text fields they need to fill out and the buttons they need to press.

28) If you wrote down what your product does, now it's time to write down the benefit. And vice versa – if you wrote down the benefit, you should now write down the concrete mechanism.

29) How long were your explanations of the benefit and the concrete details? Try boiling each of them down to one sentence. It doesn't have to be perfect. Feel free to break grammar rules – this is brainstorming and your customers won't see this version. Use the fewest words possible.

30) Remember the vignette you wrote at the end of the Customers section? Write a sequel to that – roughly the same length – that explains what your hypothetical customer's life will be like after they start using your tool. This might feel silly and melodramatic, but do your best to paint a picture. If it helps, amp up the silliness and melodrama.

31) If your product had a personality, what would it be? Bright, bubbly, down-to-earth, straightforward, clever, no-nonsense, silly, stern? Use words that tie into the feeling someone gets when using your product.

32) What are the reasons *not* to use your product? If you were a potential customer, what would you be worried about?

33) How are you addressing those worries? What are you doing to mitigate risk for your users?

## What Next?

Like I said earlier, you can use almost all of what you wrote in blog posts and other marketing materials. I think your home on the web is the most important place to start...

## Landing Page

The purpose of a landing page is to get the visitor to take a certain action. [As I've written previously](#):

“Tell the visitor why they should give you their money – in exchange for something valuable – and then make it really easy for them to do that. I mean “really easy” in the most practical sense. A highly visible ‘BUY NOW’ button is ideal, although it’s worth toning down the tackiness if you can. Require as little information from the customer as is practical.”

Originally I thought about restricting this guide to just landing page advice, since so many of them are so bad. But then I realized that I was just looking at the tip of the iceberg. Luckily, we’ve now examined the rest of that hulking iceberg, and we can move on! In terms of textual content, this is how your landing page should work:

## Headline + Subheadline

“The Swift Mop: Effortless Sparkling Floors!”

Based on #29 from the Product section.

## Evocation of Customer's Problem

“Don't you hate having a dirty floor? Food stains on the kitchen tile, dried mud in the hall – tracked in by the kids, the pets, and your own shoes. But who has time to push a mop around all day? This isn't the 1950s!”

Based on #5 and #6 from the Customers section.

## Offer of Solution

“The Swift Mop does all the work for you – our one-of-a-kind scrub module and cleaning solution will get your floors spotless and gleaming. Spend three minutes using this device, and you'll be ready to eat off the ground! Put away the bucket of soapy water, and don't spend another Sunday on your knees with a sponge. You're not the maid anymore – the Swift Mop's in town.”

Based on #26, #27, and #28 from the Product section.

## Immediate Payment or Signup

Imagine a big yellow button that says “Get clean floors now!” with a price indicated below it.

## How Your Product is a Solution

This is a longer version of “Offer of Solution”. You get the idea, so I'm not going to write this out. Swiffer – uh, I mean Swift Mop – can handle that themselves.

Use the vignettes from #7 in the Customer section and #30 in the Customer section.

## FAQ Addressing Possible Concerns

“Q: Is the Swift Mop's cleaning fluid pet-friendly? A: Yes, dogs and cats are perfectly safe in a Swift Mop home!”

Based on #32 and #33 from the Product section.

## Immediate Payment or Signup

Another big yellow button that says “Get clean floors now!”

## Something Else In Case They’re Not Ready to Buy

“Join our mailing list for regular coupons and home-cleaning tips!”

That’s the basic formula. But [when you have time](#) – and enough traffic to yield meaningful results – A/B test the hell out of this! Different combinations of text segments plus different images and screenshots may yield very different conversion rates. Maybe your customers prefer a short landing page to a long landing page. [To quote 37signals / Basecamp](#), “Please note: What works for us may not work for you. Please do your own testing. Your conversion rates may suffer if you copy us.”

Another crucial point: Ask for feedback! From your friends, your family, and most importantly, as many members of your target customer group as you can reach. There are a lot of niche subreddits, and hopefully there’s one for the people you want to reach – ask what they think. If you don’t mind being a little dishonest, this is an ideal way to frame it: “Trying to decide whether to buy [your product here]. What do you guys think?” People will be more honest if they don’t realize the product creator is watching.

## Blog Posts

Blog posts aren’t exactly slept on, since everyone is in love with ~content marketing~ lately. This isn’t new or revolutionary or *complicated*. After going through all those questions I asked you, you are very well-armed to write valuable blog posts that will get you leads. Actually, you’ll barely need to write the blog posts – it’ll be more like cutting and pasting what you wrote earlier and then editing the transitions.

Here are three of the various useful things a good blog can do for you:

- 1) Give potential customers confidence that they're placing their trust in expert hands.
- 2) Cajole people into signing up for your email list. (Seriously, don't underestimate the value of an email newsletter. It converts better than social media, and you own it.) Every blog post should have a signup form at the bottom.
- 3) Provide a way and a reason to stay top-of-mind with past and future customers. (This may not be relevant if you're selling a once-in-a-lifetime product, but lots of businesses thrive on repeat purchasers.)

## Recipes

You can mix and match the questions you answered and turn the results into blog posts.

Five examples for ya:

- #25 (changing the market you're in) + #16 (pick a company comp from another industry) + #10 (why customers should choose you over competitors)
- #17 (what are your qualifications?) + #19 (a mistake that you've learned from) + #18 (why did you pick this niche?)
- #21 (why should customers pay the amount you're asking?) + #27 (the benefit your product provides) + #23 (what's your refund process?) + #30 (how your customer's life will be better after buying your product)
- #8 (who are your competitors?) + #2 (what frustrates your target customers?) + #31 (your product's personality) + #33 (how are you mitigating risk for your users?)
- #14 (founder's story) + #18 (why did you choose this niche?) + #5 (your target customers' current pain) + #3 (your target customers' blocked goals)

To compose more of these, do the same thing I did: cut out all the questions and shuffle them around on a table, looking for compelling combinations.

## Conclusion

If you take away anything from this workbook, let it be that nailing down the concrete details of your product message is the foundation you need to build out the rest of your marketing outreach. The most important of all the questions were these two:

26) What is the purpose of your product? (I know, it feels like a mundane question after all that buildup.)

27) Now pause for a minute and evaluate your answer. Did you name what your product *does*, concretely, or the benefit it provides? For example, the core of what Twitter *does* is allow you to publish public 140-character messages. The core of Twitter's value to its users is that it encourages you to bounce ideas around with people who share your interests, regardless of their physical location.

You need to communicate both the concrete details of your product *and* the abstract benefit. Why? Because people hesitate to buy a product when they don't understand what it does. They also hesitate when they don't understand *why* it does what it does.

If you're having trouble expressing the concrete details, break it down into the literal actions the customer has to take – the text fields they need to fill out and the buttons they need to press.

Good luck! Feel free to get in touch with feedback about *Product Communication Basics* – [sonya@productcomms.club](mailto:sonya@productcomms.club) :)