A playbook by Saurav Kumar Nanda

The Customer Discovery Playbook

30 conversations that change how you build

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Preface

Every founder says they "talked to customers." Almost none of them did it well. Customer discovery is a skill, not an attitude. It has technique. It has reps. And it has a surprisingly narrow body of advice that consistently works across SaaS, marketplaces, physical products, and services.

This playbook is the detailed expansion of Chapter 1 of my 0→1 Product Playbook. It gives you every script, every question, every objection handle, and every synthesis move I have used across 200+ discovery calls in the last three years. Follow it literally the first time. Modify the second.

CHAPTER 01

Who to Talk To

The wrong people will teach you the wrong product.

Selection is half the battle. Talking to 30 of the wrong people will confidently point you in a wrong direction. Talking to 30 of the right people is the best investment you can make in month one.

The segment math

Define three candidate segments. Interview 10 in each. The segment with highest pain frequency and lowest acquisition cost is where you start. This is not forever — it is just the wedge.

Recruiting channels, ranked

Channel	Speed	Fit	Cost
Warm intros	Slow	High	Free
LinkedIn cold outreach	Medium	Medium-high	Free
Paid calls (Intro, Pickle)	Fast	High	$50-150/call
Communities (Slack, Discord)	Medium	Medium	Free
In-person events	Slow	High	Travel cost
Ex-customers of adjacents	Medium	High	Free if you have access

Incentives — when and how

For B2C discovery, a $25 gift card lifts reply rates from 4% to ~15%. For B2B SMB, a $50-100 credit or gift card works but avoid it if your segment will worry about ethics. For enterprise, money is a signal of low seriousness — offer a written benchmark report instead.

CHAPTER 02

The Script

A great discovery call sounds like a curious friend, not a salesperson.

The opening (0-2 min)

> *“Thanks again for the time. Quick reset — I'm not selling anything today. I'm building in the space of [problem] and I'm trying to learn how people like you actually deal with it. I'll ask a bunch of questions, share a little of what I've found, and promise to stop at 25. Okay to record?”*

The body (2-22 min)

Seven questions, in order. Do not skip. Do not rephrase to a yes/no. Let silence do the work.

1. "Walk me through the last time you [did X]. What happened?"
2. "What was the hardest part? Why?"
3. "What have you tried to fix this? Why did you stop?"
4. "How much time or money does this cost you per month?"
5. "What's the best tool or process you've found for this?"
6. "If you had a magic wand, what would change?"
7. "If I built [your rough wedge], what would stop you from using it?"

The close (22-25 min)

Three things to do before hanging up:

1. Ask for two intros to others in the same seat.
2. Ask if you can follow up when you have a prototype.

3 Thank them by name and mention something specific they said.

Objection handles

Objection	Handle
"I already use X."	"Perfect — what does X get wrong?"
"This isn't really a problem for us."	"Appreciate you saying so. Who do you know for whom it is?"
"Are you selling this?"	"Not today. I might in 6 months. Right now I'm learning."
"I don't have time."	"Ten minutes, one question: what's the single thing about [problem] that wastes your time every week?"

CHAPTER 03

How to Listen

The signal is in the specifics.

What counts as signal

- Named numbers (hours, dollars, users)
- Active voice and recent tense
- Unprompted mention of competitors or workarounds
- Emotional words ("hate," "dread," "angry," "panicked")
- Offers to introduce others
- Asking about pricing unprompted

What is noise

- "We might, maybe, in the future"
- Politeness-driven agreement ("yeah, that sounds cool")
- Feature requests untethered from a workflow
- Praise without a specific use case
- Market-size arguments ("you could sell this to every...")

Note-taking

Do not transcribe. It destroys eye contact and slows the pace. Instead: write one keyword per answer, plus the exact quote if it stings. After the call, spend five minutes filling in from memory. A one-page per call summary is enough.

CHAPTER 04

Synthesis

Patterns live at 10, themes at 20, conviction at 30.

The affinity-mapping pass

At interview 10, 20, and 30, do this ritual:

1. Open the 10-20-30 call summaries side by side.
2. Write every pain point you heard on a sticky note (digital or paper). One pain per sticky.
3. Cluster stickies into themes. Name each theme.
4. Count the number of stickies per theme.
5. Rank themes by frequency AND by urgency-of-workaround.

Themes with >40% frequency AND active workarounds are real. Themes with <20% frequency are noise. Themes in between need 10 more interviews focused on that angle.

The wedge decision

Your wedge candidate is the theme with the highest product of frequency × urgency × willingness-to-pay. You are not picking the biggest market. You are picking the sharpest cut.

CHAPTER 05

From Discovery to PRD

What you heard decides what you build.

The PRD should be a direct translation of what customers said. If a sentence in the PRD is not traceable to an interview or a workaround observed, cut it.

1. "Why now" in the PRD maps to the change you heard in the interviews (new regulation, new tool emerging, new pain threshold).
2. "Who for" maps to the segment with the highest synthesis score.
3. "What it does" maps to eliminating the worst part of the current workaround.
4. "Success metric" maps to the quantified pain you collected (hours or dollars saved).

> A PRD that is not traceable to 30 interviews is a guess. A PRD that is traceable is a hypothesis you can defend in any room.

CHAPTER 06

Running Continuous Discovery

Thirty interviews is the start. The job is to never stop learning.

The canonical "30 interviews" frame makes discovery sound like a project with a start and end. It is not. The most product-led teams I know run continuous discovery — at least 3 conversations per week, forever, indexed against the current bet. The 30 is the ramp-up; after that, it becomes a metabolism.

The 3-per-week rhythm

Three conversations a week is the smallest dose that keeps your intuition calibrated. I pick three themes each quarter — a current customer segment, a churned-customer segment, and a non-customer adjacent segment — and rotate through them. Twelve weeks × 3 calls = 36 interviews, evenly distributed, always fresh.

The recruiting pipeline

If you interview weekly you must recruit continuously. Build a lightweight pipeline: a pinned LinkedIn post asking for conversations, a dedicated Calendly with 3 slots per week, and a simple screener. 10 minutes a week keeping it running saves you the frantic recruitment pushes most teams do.

Building the discovery muscle across the team

- Every engineer attends at least one discovery call per quarter
- Every designer attends two per quarter
- Every product hire runs their own discovery from day one
- Founder attends at least one per month after the first year
- Rotate — do not let one person become "the research person"

> The company that knows its customers best has an unfair advantage. Discovery cannot be outsourced without losing the advantage.

Chapter 6 checklist

- Recurring 3-per-week discovery cadence in place
- Always-on recruitment pipeline set up
- Every team member attends at least one discovery per quarter
- Quarterly synthesis pass scheduled

CHAPTER 07

Interview Anti-Patterns

The mistakes that feel productive but destroy the signal.

Most first-time discovery interviewers make the same six mistakes. They feel productive, they feel friendly, they feel thorough. They destroy the signal. I have made every one of these myself, often multiple times. The goal here is self-awareness.

Anti-pattern 1 — Leading the witness

"So when you do X, that must be really frustrating, right?" You have just told them what to say. Fix: replace with "What was the hardest part?" and let them name it.

Anti-pattern 2 — Asking about the future

"Would you pay for this? Would you use this?" Future answers are 80% aspiration and 20% politeness. Fix: ask about recent behavior. "Walk me through the last time..."

Anti-pattern 3 — Pitching mid-call

The founder cannot resist. Fifteen minutes in, they start explaining the solution. The customer, now in pitch-mode, tells the founder what they want to hear. Fix: no pitching in the first 20 minutes. If you must, save it for the last 5 as a prototype review, not a sale.

Anti-pattern 4 — Interviewing the wrong seat

You think you are building for the manager, but you only get meetings with the individual contributor. The IC is kind, the signal is soft. The manager would have told you the real blockers. Fix: split your recruiting effort — 70% target seat, 30% adjacent seats.

Anti-pattern 5 — Filling silence

Founders are talkers. When a customer pauses, the founder rushes to fill it. That 4-second silence is where customers think. Fix: count to five in your head after every answer. Let them add. The best quotes come in the seventh second.

Anti-pattern 6 — Not recording

You think you will remember. You will not. You will remember the 3 things that matched your existing theory and forget the 7 that did not. Fix: record with permission. Transcribe via automation. Keep the raw file.

Chapter 7 checklist

- Zero "would you" questions in scripts
- Interview recorded and stored securely
- Five-second silence rule self-imposed
- Pitching kept to last 5 minutes, clearly framed
- Seat-mix tracked across 30 interviews

CHAPTER 08

Turning Discovery Into Design

From transcript, to theme, to prototype — in one week.

Discovery that does not change what you ship is wasted. The handoff from research to design is where most small teams break. Either the research sits in a document nobody opens, or the design is done from opinion while the research is ignored. Here is the handoff I use.

Step 1 — The one-page theme memo

After every synthesis pass, write a one-page memo with four sections: Pattern, Evidence, Workaround, Opportunity. "Pattern": what 40%+ of interviews said. "Evidence": 3 exact quotes. "Workaround": what they do today. "Opportunity": what a 10x improvement would feel like. This memo is the handoff artifact.

Step 2 — The constraint sheet

Before any design happens, list every constraint the interviews revealed. Device type. Time budget. Existing tool context. Cost tolerance. Skill level. Regulatory. When design starts from constraints rather than inspiration, it converges 3x faster.

Step 3 — The prototype review with the same 3 customers

Go back to three customers from your original 30 and show them the prototype. Do not demo — let them use it cold. Watch where they hesitate. The people who gave you the pattern in the first place are the people who can tell you whether the proposed solution hits it.

> Bringing customers back into the loop at the prototype stage is the single highest-leverage habit a small team can build. It turns discovery into a closed loop.

Chapter 8 checklist

- Theme memo written after every synthesis pass
- Constraint sheet drafted before design begins
- At least 3 interview subjects re-engaged at prototype stage
- Quote from customer interview cited in PRD

CHAPTER 09

Discovery Across Product Types

The 30-interview frame holds. The specifics change.

The core discovery method works for almost every product, but the recruiting, script, and signals differ meaningfully across categories. This chapter adapts the playbook for four common cases I have worked on or advised: B2B SaaS, B2C apps, marketplaces, and physical/operational products.

B2B SaaS

- Recruit on LinkedIn with a role-specific message — title precision matters more than company size
- Split interviews 60/30/10 across users, buyers, and champions
- Ask about the "workflow day" — the specific moment the pain shows up
- Listen for named tools and named vendors — the tool ecosystem is diagnostic
- Always ask "who else at your company feels this pain?" — expands your account-level map

B2C apps

- Recruit via targeted ads, relevant subreddits, or referral pools — not cold LinkedIn
- Pay a $20-30 incentive — the marginal response lift is large
- Keep interviews shorter — 15 minutes is often enough
- Show wireframes or prototypes earlier — B2C users have shorter attention spans for abstract discussion
- Watch for "I would use this if…" followed by a friction — that friction is the wedge

Marketplaces

Marketplaces are the hardest discovery. You are effectively doing two products in parallel — supply and demand — and the signal from each side is biased in opposite directions. Rules:

- Interview 30 on each side of the market. 30 suppliers and 30 buyers.

- Never show a supplier-optimized solution to a buyer; they will be disappointed
- Ask about current flow: where do they go today, and what breaks
- Ask about the 'transaction friction' — price, trust, discovery, or reliability
- Price anchoring differs — buyers and suppliers will give opposite answers; reconcile in synthesis

Physical and operational products

This is where Nandighosh Mobility lived. The interview is about real-world choreography, not software. Rules I learned running a bus company in Odisha:

- Interview in the physical environment where the product lives — at the station, at the factory, on the bus
- Watch before you ask — observe 10 minutes of real behavior before opening your mouth
- Ask about the "boring day" not the "perfect day" — operational products are built around normal, not edge
- Look for the informal workaround — whiteboards, sticky notes, shared notebooks. These are your competition
- The paying customer is often not the user — drivers used our app, passengers paid; interview both

> The discovery method is a chisel, not a saw. Use it carefully in the category you are in. The shape of the signal changes even if the technique does not.

Chapter 9 checklist

- Category-adjusted recruiting channel chosen
- Interview length and incentive calibrated to the segment
- For marketplaces: 30 interviews each side
- For operational: at least 10 observational interviews in the environment
- Synthesis pass accounts for segment-specific bias

CHAPTER 10

Discovery Before and After Launch

Pre-launch discovery and post-launch discovery have different goals and different techniques.

Most teams do discovery before launch, stop at launch, and never restart it. Wrong. Discovery pre-launch is about pattern finding. Discovery post-launch is about pattern verification and expansion. Both are needed. They do not replace each other.

Pre-launch discovery

- Goal: find the wedge. Find the customer.
- Method: 30 interviews with no product to show
- Signal: recurring pain, recurring workaround, recurring urgency
- Bias: aspirational over behavioral
- Counter: always ask about the "last time" — recent, specific

Post-launch discovery

- Goal: understand why people use, why they do not, why they stay, why they leave
- Method: activated-user interviews, churned-user interviews, power-user interviews
- Signal: specific behaviors the product enables, workflows that changed
- Bias: survivorship — you only talk to people who stayed
- Counter: exit interviews, explicit churn outreach, paid follow-ups with non-activated users

The four post-launch interview types

1. Power users — interview quarterly to understand what scale reveals
2. New activated users — interview weekly, cohort of 2-3, to understand onboarding
3. Churned users — interview anyone who cancels within 30 days; $50 incentive if needed
4. Non-activated signups — the people who signed up but never used — the most valuable and hardest to reach

> Churned-user interviews are the most painful and the most valuable. The people who left will tell you what the ones who stayed were too polite to say.

Chapter 10 checklist

- Post-launch discovery cadence in place by month 3
- Four interview types scheduled quarterly
- Churn outreach automated with a 48-hour response
- Synthesis pass done after every 15 post-launch interviews

CHAPTER 11

Tools and Templates

The minimum toolkit I use for every discovery project.

You do not need a $500/month research stack to do great discovery. Here is the minimum viable toolkit I have used to run 200+ interviews across Nandighosh, Boomerangme, and a Chicago SaaS. Total cost per month: under $30.

The minimum toolkit

Function	Tool	Cost	Why
Scheduling	Calendly	Free	Removes the email thrash
Calls	Zoom / Google Meet	Free tier	Universal, reliable
Recording	Zoom recording or Otter	Free-$17	Transcripts save 2x synthesis time
Notes	Notion / Google Docs	Free	One doc per interview, keyword-tagged
Tracking	Airtable / Google Sheets	Free	Log of every interview, segment, date
Recruiting	LinkedIn Sales Nav	$99	Worth it for B2B

The interview log schema

One row per interview. Columns I track:

- Date, name, title, company, segment
- Top 3 pain points (keywords)
- Urgency 1-5
- Willingness to pay (rough dollar range)
- Interesting quote (exact)
- Follow-up action
- Tagged to: segment / theme / wedge candidate

> A great interview log is the single most valuable asset from a discovery project. Six months later when you are pitching investors, it is your proof. Keep it pristine.

The synthesis board

I use a FigJam or Miro board with four columns: Pain / Workaround / Quote / Theme. Each interview adds one row. At 10, 20, and 30 interviews I revisit, cluster, and name themes. Total time per synthesis pass: 60-90 minutes. Total signal: immense.

CHAPTER 12

Closing

You do not need a research team. You need 30 conversations.

Customer discovery is simple, but simple is not easy. Thirty interviews will change how you think about your product, your customer, and yourself as a builder. Do them.

— Saurav Kumar Nanda · Chicago & Balasore · 2026