The Working Backwards Canvas

Five questions, then one sentence. This comes before the press release, before the FAQ, and before anybody says the word solution. The most common way Working Backwards fails is skipping this page.

1. Who is the customer?

Be specific. Identify the customer who most prominently represents the biggest problem you want to solve. The more focused you are, the more unique and delightful the solution will be.
A Swedish resident who has a family with young children and manages the family's affairs. A CIO of a large enterprise in a traditional industry who manages hundreds of business applications. A university technical degree graduate with no work experience in the field they studied.

2. What is the customer problem or opportunity?

What are they frustrated with today? What is the missed opportunity they are not able to take?

3. What is the most important customer benefit?

The one thing they care about most. Think in values rather than features: speed, quality, cost, reliability, simplicity, visibility.
Force the choice: would they prioritize speed or security? Visibility or exposure? A benefit list with four items on it is a benefit list nobody chose.

4. How do you know what customers need or want?

Which data and observations do you have that indicate the problem exists? Are there noteworthy anecdotes, and what do they teach you? What do you know about the scope and the impact? What information are you missing, and how might you find it out?

5. What does the customer experience look like?

What kind of solution or product do you imagine? How does it deliver the most important customer benefit? How will the solution make customers feel?

Where question 1 goes wrong. Ask an experienced team who their customer is and you will get several different answers around one table. The disagreement is the useful output. Do not resolve it by picking the most senior person's answer.

THE TODAY STATEMENT

Compress questions 1, 2 and 3 into one sentence, in the present tense, about today. If the sentence does not hold together, the answers do not either.

> Today [customers]
> have to [customer problem]
> when [situation when the problem occurs].
> [Customers] need [most important benefit].

TWO WORKED EXAMPLES

Both describe something that does not exist yet. An example built on a product the room already knows lets people reverse-engineer the answer.

A PRODUCT

Knowing how much life a second-hand appliance has left.

> Today people furnishing a home on a small budget have to judge a ten-year-old washing machine from three photographs and a stranger's word, whenever they try to buy second-hand instead of new. They need to know how many years the machine has left.

Everybody has stood in front of this decision, the benefit forces a real choice, and there is no standard way to answer it at the point of sale. The solution space stays open: a diagnostic, a certification, a warranty, a marketplace guarantee.

A SERVICE

Handing over what the person leaving actually knows.

> Today a person taking over a role has to rebuild it from scratch, whenever the colleague who knew which supplier to call and which report nobody reads has already left. They need the working knowledge, not the documentation.

The obvious customer is the wrong one. Teams answer question 1 with the leaver, or with HR, and the person with the problem is the successor. The answer is a method rather than a system, which is the case teams find hardest.

YOURS

TWO FAILURE MODES TO WATCH FOR

Retrofitting. The team already has a solution in mind and works the customer answers backwards to justify it. Question 4 is the check: if the evidence arrived after the idea, say so out loud.

Averaging. A customer definition wide enough to include everybody produces a benefit vague enough to design nothing against.

WHAT COMES NEXT

1
The five questions and the Today Statement. **You are here.**

2
The PRFAQ: the press release and FAQ, written as though it had launched.

3
Quick experiments that could disprove an assumption before real investment.

4
Build and iterate: release a Minimum Loveable Product and hold focus on the customer need.

Working through a real challenge?

Thirty minutes on the initiative you would run this on, and what a session would need.
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