

questions you have to answer.³ In any formulation, a market must exist,⁴ at an acceptable price⁵ , matching customers’ willingness⁶ and ability⁷ to buy.

Often left out of these lists is *you*. The company has to be *right for you*, personally. The simplest test is to ask:

Why are *you* the right person to start and grow this company?

And that brings us back to the original claim. You are the right person, because you had the problem, you were struck with a vision of how to solve it, and you did.

Sounds good, but is it? Here’s what you are implying by that statement:

1. I understand the problem.
2. I have an attachment and passion for the problem.
3. I know how to solve it.
4. I have the ability to execute it.
5. I understand my customers, because I am one.
6. Others have this problem, and will choose my solution.
7. I have what it takes.

The worst part is, some of those are true! Intermittent reinforcement is the strongest form of training. That’s why it’s problematic: Because some are true, you refuse to see why some are false.

This blindness consistently results in failure. It is possible that most startups begin this way; it is definite that most of those startups fail anyway.

Let’s pick apart these implications to see how to leverage “I had the problem myself” as a springboard, instead of following the usual glide-path to failure.

“I scratched my own itch” isn’t good enough

*Understanding · Passion · Know-how · Execution ·
I’m the customer · Consensus · Fortitude*

***“I had the problem myself,
so I built a product.”***

This statement is perhaps the most common origin story for all companies, large and small. It is the standard defense mounted by new founders to justify their new ventures. But is it justified?

For a company to succeed, many conditions must be true—or true enough that they’re not fatal. Those things can be formulated as a series of risks to be mitigated¹ or as a list of blunders to avoid² or as a list of



credit⁸ “Tell me about a time when you came up with a brilliant idea that revolutionized your industry and saved your company from almost certain ruin.”

1. I UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM.

You do. At least, you understand *your version* of the problem. The world is large, and getting 1000 customers means solving a variety of related problems, even if you’re targeting one niche.

Sometimes you really do have this understanding. Maybe you’re a consultant and you’ve seen 13 variants of this problem. Or you’ve been engineer in this field for ten years at three different companies and you’ve seen everything. Or you’ve researched this for years as a passion.

Either way, you’re off to a great start, but you need to view “the problem” through your customers’ eyes. Being an “expert” can actually blind you.⁹ They might see the same problem but use different language.* They might have the same type of problem but it appears in four distinct forms, so you need to either pick some to solve, or use features and language

to show how you address all four. They might need to integrate with systems you haven’t head of. Their budget might be $\frac{1}{10}$ th or 10x larger than yours was.

Treat this initial understanding as a starting point rather than the endpoint, and interview customers¹⁰ to get the full answer.

2. I HAVE AN ATTACHMENT AND PASSION FOR THE PROBLEM.

This one is very likely to be true. You cared enough to investigate the problem and derived satisfaction from solving it. You were drawn to both problem and solution. It ticks several personal boxes, which explains why it’s such a common startup origin story. I believe you.

Passion is required, because it gets you through the hard times. The pain of constant rejection—potential customers not buying, potential hires not accepting, potential investors not investing, friends and family and Twitter and Hackernews dismissing you, bad product reviews, and cancellations. The setbacks, the engineering problems that took long than you thought, the customer acquisition that isn’t happening as fast as you dreamed. The pain of seeing others succeed while you struggle, especially if they’re a direct competitor.**

You need the motivation to push through. You must have some personal connection, whether you love the work or the problem—ideally both. This company will be an extension of who you are.¹¹ “I solved my

* For example, Discord used to say “get a free community space,” but it turned out that kids were accustomed to “setting up servers,” therefore it made more sense for them to say “get a free chat server.” Their community spaces are called “servers” to this day.

** Although, remember the day before a competitor goes out of business, all their social media and press is positive, talking about hiring, growing, new features, and happy customers. Do not believe what you read.

own problem" is a good motivator, but you will have to be strong enough to face what is coming.

Which means doing the other things in this article, rather than being complacent.

3. I KNOW HOW TO SOLVE IT.

You know how to solve it one facet of it, where exactly one person understands it, with the exact configuration and constraints that you had.

I believe you can solve the other cases too. Most things with computers can be solved.

So, again this one is likely true. Good! There are many cases where it is not, especially in AI¹² where demos look great but they immediately fail (to be good enough, often enough) in the real world.

4. I HAVE THE ABILITY TO EXECUTE IT.

But "it" isn't the code. "It" is everything else a company must do to succeed. Most of that isn't writing code.

Do you have the ability to write a headline on the home page that attracts the right person in three seconds, or does it just say "_____ doesn't have to suck" because you're a lazy writer¹³ who has never written a high-performing hook?

Do you have the ability to get dozens of qualified leads onto the pricing page, or have you never created a single successful marketing campaign?¹⁴ Do you have the ability to interview twenty potential customers before they buy, or do you not know how to find them?¹⁵

There are many other things.* That's what "it" is that you have to execute.

Does this mean you're going to fail? No... unless you ignore this and go back to writing code,¹⁶ assuming that just because you have something working, the rest of the company will come naturally.

5. I UNDERSTAND MY CUSTOMERS, BECAUSE I AM ONE.

You are absolutely not like your customers.

You were so frustrated with the current solutions, decided to build your own rather than buy and implement something that existed.

So, you're like exactly 0 of your customers.

Your customers have day jobs, and you're lucky if this is one the top three problems they're experiencing right now. And yet, that's the list of problems they have the budget and time to solve.

So, you have to find¹⁵ and interview¹⁰ potential customers, to learn what *they* are actually like, using your experience as the justification of your initial theory (as described in that article), iterating until¹⁷ you actually do understand your customers, rather than yourself.

* A list appears in the middle of this article.³

6. OTHERS HAVE THIS PROBLEM, AND WILL CHOOSE MY SOLUTION.

This fallacy is the #1 reason why companies fail when they start with "I solved the problem for myself."

I believe you identified a real problem and that you have a solution, but so many other things have to go right before there's a market that can sustain even a solo entrepreneur.

There have to be enough people who have the problem, *and* know they have the problem so that they're out searching for a solution, *and* have a budget for solving it, *and* would rather buy from you than a competitor, *and* will stick around for longer than a couple of months. The list continues; this article on finding good markets⁴ helps you make sure all the other pieces are in place.

While *you* might find existing solutions inadequate, potential customers might consider them "good enough," and therefore unwilling to risk switching to a new product made by a new company, that certainly lacks features, doesn't lack bugs, and might not be around in two years.

There are a hundred times more legitimate problems in the world than there are markets to solve those problems. So when you erroneously think that "where there's a problem, there's a company," you will almost always be disappointed.

7. I HAVE WHAT IT TAKES.

I have no reason to doubt you.

In fact I would encourage you: That you yourself don't know what you're capable of, until you try. Indeed, *today* you probably *don't* have what it takes, but that was true of every other successful first-time founder.

So don't give in to impostor syndrome,¹⁸ but get ready to experience the gauntlet¹⁹ of Klingon pain sticks that await you.

Rather than thinking it's all in the bag, think the opposite: Almost everything you'll need to succeed, you don't have yet: Knowledge of customer, market, marketing, sales, finance, skills, everything.

Yet.

Even second-time founders typically fail. I've had four successful startups, two unicorns, bootstrapped and funded, and *still* most of my initial ideas about most things are wrong. So, everyone needs a Beginner's Mind.²⁰ Everyone needs to leverage their Pivot Points²¹ to win in their own way.

Your current idea is the spark; the right idea is still out there. You have to go get it.

I know you can do it.

Current version of this article:

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