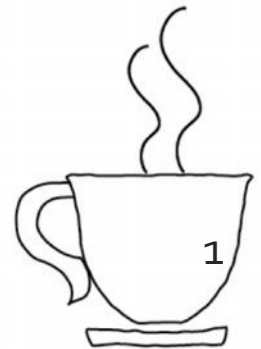
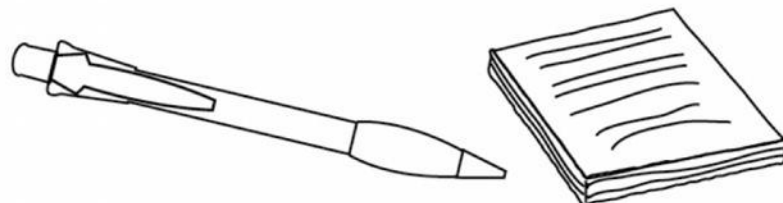
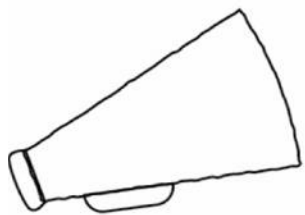


# The Reality-Check Interview

*Resources for Solopreneurs*  
**Mary Ellen Bates**



## The Reality-Check Interview: Being a truly client-driven solopreneur

Some people start their business by offering something they think people will want. I watched as a chili-and-ice-cream shop (yes, really!) opened near me with high hopes. The owner was passionate about chili and he loved ice cream, so he figured that he'd



be so successful that he could franchise his concept within a year. His shop offered five delicious types of chili and four great flavors of ice cream and, while I can attest to the quality of the food, the store didn't last six months. There were only so many times that his customers wanted to eat chili and ice cream, and he couldn't compete with nearby restaurants that offered more varied menus.

A more sustainable business is one that is built around what you love to do *and* what people will happily pay you for. For most solopreneurs, this is the most challenging aspect of starting a business—learning whether people value what you're offering and want to pay you well for it. The best way to find out is to shut up and listen. No, really.



I call these conversations "reality-check interviews"; you are interviewing people to learn about their pain points and what needs you can address, and to find out whether your assumptions are aligned with reality. You are finding out what they **need, value** and **are willing to pay for**. Although this step may not sound like fun, it is a vital part of creating a business that can sustain you.

### Are You My Customer?

First, think about the kind of people you think will be your customers. If you are an event planner, your clients might be marketing professionals and HR departments within organizations, convention and visitors bureaus, and public relations companies. If you are a virtual assistant, your customers could be small business owners, one-person businesses, and small non-profits. If your passion is videography, your clients might be production companies.



One of the most effective ways I have found to reach out to people I want to interview is to use the social networking site [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com). A basic account is free, and your

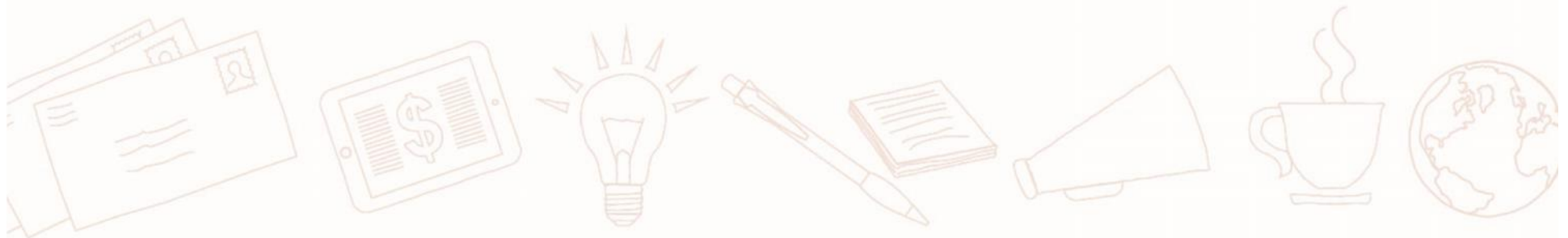


LinkedIn profile can serve as another place to promote yourself and your services. Use its Advanced Search feature to find people who meet your criteria for possible clients, then contact them through LinkedIn and ask for a brief interview. Since the people you contact can immediately look at your profile and learn something about you, they may be more likely to agree to a conversation than had they been approached through email.



You will learn the most if you talk with people who don't know you well. Your friends, family, and colleagues already have assumptions about who you are and what you do, so their answers are often filtered through those assumptions. Instead, reach out to people with whom you people with

whom you have some connection—a friend of a friend who regularly buys products or services similar to what you have in mind, someone you are connected to through LinkedIn or other social networks who you think could be a client, or someone you met at a conference or networking event who sounded interested in what you do.



Keep the initial request short and to the point. Remember—this is all about you listening and the other person talking. Here is an example of a request for a reality-check interview from someone I identified through LinkedIn.

*Hi, Robin:*

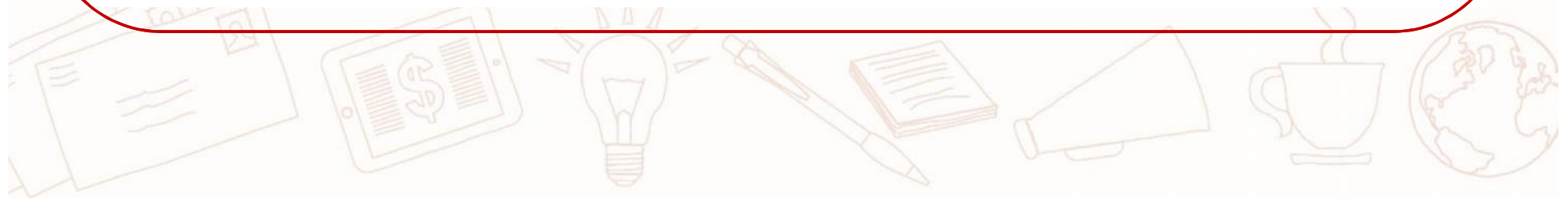
*I was intrigued by your service on the board of ASTC {something you saw in that person's LinkedIn profile}, which prompted me to reach out to you.*

*I am in the beginning phase of starting a new business, and I am learning about what jury consultants {i.e., people like this person} are most concerned about. I value your perspective, and would like to know if I could schedule a 10-minute conversation with you in the next few weeks. I look forward to chatting with you.*

*Kind regards,*

*Mary Ellen*

{my email and phone numbers, links to my LinkedIn profile and web site}



*Remember that these are not marketing conversations.* You are not promoting your business to the people you are talking with; you are asking them questions in order to learn what their biggest concerns are, what they want most in relation to what you can do, and whether they are willing to pay *what you want to be paid*. (If you don't know what your hourly rate is yet, be sure to download [MEB's Amazing Hourly Rate Calculator](#).) You will be talking with people who you think represent your potential clients, keeping in mind that you will most likely be surprised by what you learn.



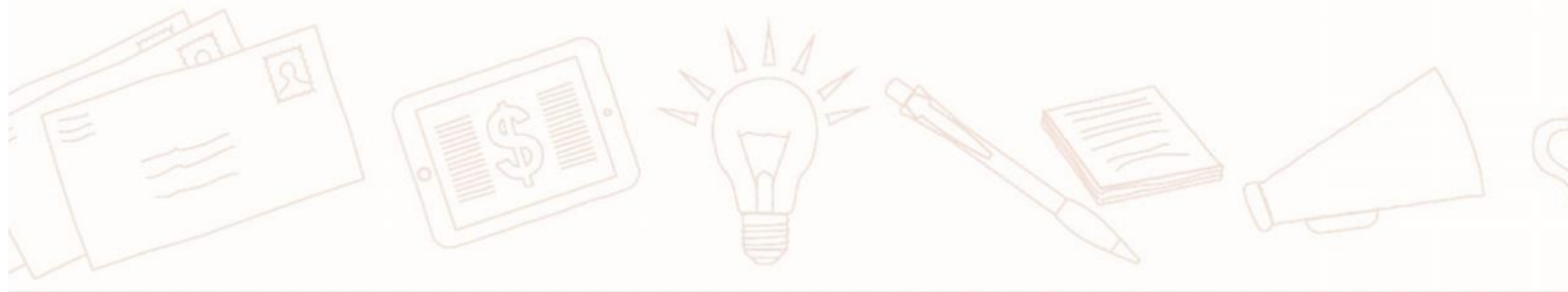
When I started my company, I thought I would provide industry profiles to business marketers who needed to understand their customers. However, after several conversations with marketing professionals, I learned that they saw little value in my industry profiles. Rather, they wanted information that answered their deeper questions—what their clients are most concerned about, what their biggest competitors were up to, and what new areas they could expand into. Thanks to my reality-check interviews, I avoided wasting months of time talking to my prospective clients about something they didn't value enough to pay for.



## What Do You Really Want?

These conversations involve more than simply chatting with someone. Your goal is to be able to look at the world from your clients' perspective. You need to prepare open-ended questions that are clear and that—as much as possible—do not assume anything about your client's situation. Your goal is to learn as much as possible about what motivates your clients to buy products or services similar to what you have in mind. Your questions will, of course, be driven by who you think your clients are. Here are some examples of the kinds of questions that enable you to glean useful information, all designed to elicit your clients' biggest concern or need, whether they are willing to pay you to resolve it, and how they describe that concern.

- An event planner might ask potential clients: What are your goals when you schedule a conference? What would ensure that it's as successful as possible? What do you wish you could do to enhance the value of the event?



- A mobile app developer might ask potential clients: Could you describe the last couple of times when you brought in a developer? How did you find him or her? What were your chief concerns? When during your planning process could a developer have been most valuable?
- A photographer might ask potential clients: What are the occasions when you would want a photographer? What would you pay to have a professional “head shot” portrait that highlights your personality and character? What about candid photos of you and your pet? What other opportunities haven’t I thought of?



Note that none of these are yes-or-no questions—they are open-ended and encourage your contacts to think about what they want and value, and they help you learn how your potential customers recognize and describe that need. Your goal, by the end of each conversation, is to see the world through your customers’ eyes, understand what they **need, value** and **are willing to pay for**, and to describe your value in terms that resonate with your market.





During these short interviews—aim for no more than 10 or 15 minutes—your job is to ask questions and listen to the answers. You are not talking about the fabulous services you could provide; you are just listening to what the other person is telling you. Ask follow-up questions to learn enough so that you can later design a product or service that your clients will find immediately beneficial.

While each situation is different, the following examples can serve as a basis for your reality-check interviews.

- What's your biggest challenge now?
- What do you wish you could do?
- What's keeping you from your goals?
- What do you wish you could find someone to do?
- What would you pay to address that problem?

At the end of interviews, remember to not only thank your contacts for their time and insight but also to ask for names of anyone they know who you could briefly talk with.



Strangers are far more likely to respond when you can say, “Tyler suggested that I talk with you,” and each referral gets you that much farther from your own assumptions and perspective.

Once you have had five or six of these conversations, you will have a much richer idea of what your market's biggest concerns are and in what situations they would be willing to pay well for what you do. Now consider how you can add even more value to what you do and make your product or service unique. If you are an architect, experience in sustainable design could help you stand out. If you are a financial planner with a special-needs child, you can offer your perspective and understanding to families in similar situations. At the end of your interviews, you want to be able to describe your ideal clients in one sentence—“My best clients are civil litigation defense lawyers and related trial consultants.”



Most solopreneurs balk at these interviews, and many of them waste precious start-up months creating a product or service for which there is no market. By doing your primary research now, you build your business on a firm foundation.



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