

UNLOCKING MARKET TRACTION

**A CORPORATE INNOVATOR'S
PLAYBOOK FOR FINDING
TRACTION FIRST**



JOSH BARKER

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Finding Traction First

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INTRODUCTION

If you're anything like me, you're a creator. You were born to create, so that's what you do: you build things, whenever the inspiration strikes you.

But many times, we create something, and we lose sight of the fact that we're building something for *someone else*.

This is the great dilemma of creators, and for Research and Development (R&D) projects all over the world: we build, but we never stop to consider whether someone *actually wants* what we're creating.

It's frustrating, isn't it? We come up with an idea, spend days designing it, and perhaps even push it through production, waiting on the edge of our seats for the day our creation is complete—only to find no takers when it's launched. How can something we put so much time and energy into fail in the market?

Your family probably thought the idea was good, and so did some of your coworkers. Since the idea made sense to them, you assumed others would like the idea, too, and you went ahead and made it.

So...why doesn't anyone want it?

The thing is, no matter what we build, if we want it to sell, we have to stick to the golden rule of innovation: **solve the problem.**

Think about it—what problem does your creation solve?

Chances are, you didn't stop to ask the question before you built your creation. I sure didn't. When I invested in my first startup, I went ahead and built my creation, and was left puzzling over the results when it failed in the market.

This is *exactly* where creators like us go wrong.

It's not that you built the thing wrong, but that you didn't build the *right thing*. You rushed directly from idea to development without first testing the market you planned to sell to. That's like deciding an old rope bridge can hold your weight and rushing across it before you test its strength—it doesn't make any sense! Although it *looks* like it can hold your weight, you'd be a little more cautious about testing it before risking your life to cross the bridge, right?

The rush to build is the start of many ventures' early deaths. With a strong passion for creativity, we innovators have a tendency to build without thinking about the consequences. It's easy to see why so many R&D projects fail every year: we don't plan, and we don't create a structure for development. We just jump the gun and build—because it makes sense to us, so it should make sense to the consumer, right?

The reality is, with that kind of mentality, most everything we build is going to fail in the market. We don't want to spend our whole lives building things that people don't want. Time is limited, and so is funding.

So, what do we do?

We create a system. A system that determines the viability of a venture, keeps the cost down, and best of all, **generates paying customers before the product ever hits the market.**

Death to the Minimum Viable Product (MVP) sounds harsh, but it doesn't mean we never get to the MVP. We're simply going to focus on the system for building the product, not the product itself. Fundamentally, as innovators, we're selling solutions to problems—so if we sell the right solution to a specific problem, a winning product is simply the outcome.

I've spent my life learning how to navigate the innovation process from start to finish, and I came up with a system that guarantees success for new products. I call it the Market Validation Funnel—and anyone can use it, anywhere, on any number of projects. Using the Funnel, we can accurately predict the success of a product before it hits the market, and we can make small, incremental adjustments along the way to ensure the product adheres to the demand of the market. Rather than investing everything in a product that *may* work, we invest a little bit at a time, test the market response, tweak the idea, and invest a little more in testing it again. By the end of the Funnel, we end up with a product that has proven success in the market before it's even engineered.

It may sound like magic, but it's not. I've proven that it works, and so have more than fifty happy clients. I've saved clients years of their lives and millions of dollars through this system. They make it through the Funnel and come to the engineering firms not only with a paying customer base, but with clear ideas into what works, what doesn't, and what additions their product will or won't need. They can even make adjustments during the development process because of the nature of the funnel, saving them even more time and money by avoiding costly updates.

The best part is, the Funnel isn't overly complicated. Anyone can follow it. There's no technical experience required to use it. I'd even dare to call it fundamentally simple—and we can use it over and over, as many times as we need, on as many products as we want to test. There's no limit to its usage.

Of course, you don't have to take my word for it. It's entirely up to you whether you read on and discover all the Market Validation Funnel can do for your company. But you have to ask yourself honestly: is it really worth the years of hardship and financial investment to go through the traditional trial-and-error of R&D? What will hurt more—the loss of a few hours of reading time, or millions of dollars and months wasted on a failed product?

Failure is a valid teacher—but sometimes, it's wiser to save yourself the trouble and read a handful of chapters in a book. After losing my fair share of dollars and time, I can tell you I would have picked up a book like this in a heartbeat. Opportunities come and go, but this book isn't going

anywhere. I'd rather take a chance on a learning new process than risk losing my startup or sponsorship—but the decision is in your hands.

If you're ready to learn, the Market Validation Funnel awaits you. Let me guide you through the process, starting with Chapter One.

PART 1

The Innovation Mindset - Why Traction Matters

CHAPTER 1

Driven to Create & Traction- First Mindset

If you're reading this, then most likely you're like me—you strongly feel that you were born to create. To see problems and feel compelled to build solutions. Ideas flow, and the thrill of turning them into reality is undeniable.

But here's the hard truth: most innovation fails. Not because the ideas are bad, but because they lack any sort of market traction. And that is a painful realization. We invest energy, passion, and often years into our creations, only to watch our creations fail to get off the ground.

The Creator's Dilemma

We build because we can. We tinker, iterate, and push forward, often assuming that if something makes sense to us, it will make sense to others. It's easy to fall in love with our ideas, believing that once we launch, the world will recognize their brilliance.

But the world operates differently. It's noisy, crowded, and filled with distractions. If we don't take the time to understand what people truly want or need, our creations end up not landing with the market. We assume that a well-designed product will speak for itself, that it will naturally find an audience, but this is rarely the case.

Reality is different.

Even the best ideas need an advocate, a strategy, and above all, market validation. Too often, creators build without market testing. We invest time, money, and energy into something that others don't even look at twice. The world doesn't reject our creations because they are poorly executed—it rejects them because they don't solve a pressing enough pain point.

Creating for Ourselves vs. Creating for Others

There's a fundamental distinction between creating for ourselves and creating for others. When we build for ourselves, we chase passion projects, following our instincts. That's fine if personal satisfaction is the end goal. But when we build for the market—when we truly want traction—we must shift our mindset.

The key question is: **Who needs this?**

Successful innovation isn't just about having a great idea—it's about ensuring the idea has demand before we invest in building it. This is where most ventures go wrong. We spend so much time on the execution that we fail to evaluate whether

there is a desperate need for what we are offering. It's a mistake I've made, and one that countless entrepreneurs and corporate innovators continue to make today.

The Rush to Build

I learned this lesson the hard way. In my early startups, I followed the conventional playbook: build the product, then try to sell it. I assumed that if I made something great, customers would come.

They didn't.

I was left wondering: **Why doesn't anyone want what I built?** The answer was painful but simple—I had skipped the most critical step: market validation.

We want to believe that if we put something into the world, people will see and value it the way we do. But ideas don't succeed on merit alone. Timing, positioning, and messaging all play a role. Most importantly, the product must solve an urgent pain point. If it doesn't, it won't matter how innovative or well-designed it is.

Traction Over Perfection

The traditional approach to innovation is backwards. It prioritizes building first and testing later. But the most successful innovators don't start by building. They start by proving or building demand. **Traction matters more than perfection.**

What if, instead of investing everything in an idea and hoping for the best, we validated and created demand before committing resources? What if we flipped the process—focusing on traction first and building second?

Consider the alternative: years of hard work poured into something that eventually ends up in the “venture graveyard.” And it isn’t just about wasted effort; it’s about missed opportunities. If we take the time to test and validate before diving in, we can pivot before we commit too much, ensuring we are always moving in the right direction.

This is the foundation of the **Market Traction Funnel (MTF)**—a structured approach to de-risking innovation by proving demand before building.

The System for Success

After years of building the wrong things, I’ve developed a process that ensures we’re solving the right problems for the right people before we invest in building anything. It focuses on generating real traction—paying customers, validated demand, and clear product-market fit—before any substantial execution effort is invested.

This process isn’t theoretical. I’ve seen it work repeatedly across industries, saving companies millions and dramatically increasing their chances of success. It transforms innovation from a gamble into a predictable, repeatable process.

At the core of this system is a driving question: What if more intrapreneurs (entrepreneurs inside larger organizations) and entrepreneurs thought this way?

What if we flipped the script, where instead of 9 out of 10 ventures failing, 9 out of 10 succeeded?

What would our world look like if great ideas weren't wasted on poor execution, but instead had a clear path to traction and impact?

I want to live in that world. And if you're reading this, I hope you do too.

Imagine knowing in advance that your product will succeed. Imagine having the confidence that, when you launch, customers are already lined up. That is what a traction-first approach offers.

The Cost of Ignoring Traction

Some might argue that validation slows down innovation. That if we spend too much time testing, we lose momentum. But this couldn't be further from the truth.

The biggest killer of innovation isn't a slow process—it's building the wrong thing.

When a venture fails because no one wants the product, all the time, money, and resources spent on it are wasted. There is nothing more demoralizing than launching a product into a

customer-less vacuum. Or, even worse, you launch a product that has “just enough” promise that you drag it along long enough to continue to bleed time and money.

By prioritizing traction, we ensure that every step we take moves us closer to success. We don’t waste time guessing; we use real-world data to guide our decisions. And when the time comes to build, we do it with clarity and confidence.

What Comes Next

In the next chapter, we’ll dive deeper into the grim reality of (most) innovation and why focusing on traction first changes everything. By the end of this book, you’ll have a clear roadmap for turning ideas into validated, successful ventures.

Because it’s not about building more—it’s about building smarter.

Welcome to the traction-first mindset.

Download the free field guide at tractionfirstbook.com to turn insight into action.

