

Lessons from Building Praxis – Part 7

“Everything I do, I do it for you.” – Bryan Adams

You’ve got a dynamite idea and a great product. There are so many angles to market it, and so many verticals to sell. You see a future where your customer base is massive, and you don’t want to exclude anyone in your early efforts. You struggle to define your target market because you want it so big. You struggle to define your pitch because it can alleviate so many pain points for different people.

I feel you. But if your market includes everyone, it includes no one. I knew I’d do better with a tighter market. Ideally, as Peter Thiel describes in *Zero to One*, a tiny niche I could monopolize.

But even this was broad enough for me to lose focus. The real break-through for choosing actions to get traction came when I got down to the smallest unit possible.

Focus on a single customer

No company serves “society”, or, “consumers”, or, “Millennials”. These aggregate abstractions are useful in a pitch deck to describe the macro landscape, but when the rubber meets the road, a company can only serve real individual human beings.

When I was bootstrapping Praxis and trying to exploit every low-cost marketing and PR opportunity possible, I realized the message was only potent when highly targeted. “Hey, ambitious young people, check this out!” is pretty weak compared to, “Hey Jane Doe, let me show you how this can help you achieve your specific goals.”

Whether targeting Jane Doe is scalable doesn’t matter. Common (and very good) advice about startups is to do things that don’t scale at first. Worry about scale after you have traction. But I think a target market of one is more scalable than it seems.

In marketing, it’s sometimes called a customer Persona or Avatar. You create a fictional person with a background and bio, and you tailor your message and medium to them. It’s often more effective than tailoring it to a big lump like, “18-25-year-olds interested in business and entrepreneurship.” When you market to a collective, it feels that way to your market. No one likes to feel like an interchangeable member of a homogeneous blob.

I didn’t know the marketing mumbo-jumbo or research it. I just realized that a thousand fans or ten potential customers were worth nothing compared to one actual, paying customer. Especially when doing something totally new, where social proof is key.

I created a hypothetical customer in my head. I asked myself, “What kind of person would love Praxis, and what kind of person would Praxis love?” I defined this person in detail.

I pictured a guy who had a few semesters of college he paid for himself and hated it. He’d attend a specific conference where I was speaking, and have specific intellectual interests and life experiences. I wanted a raging individualist from the Midwest who mixes practical, not-so-good for anything work ethic with wild Silicon Valley dreaming and lots of swagger. When I wrote and spoke about Praxis, I spoke to that person directly. It was a certain type of individual within a small niche of young people I already knew well.

Then I met him.

I was speaking at a conference in Michigan when a guy came up to me brimming with confidence and restlessness and asked several direct questions about Praxis. I decided then and there this would be my first customer. I didn’t care about anything as much as getting him into the program. He was the customer I needed to prove the model. If it couldn’t work for him, it was doomed anyway. If it could, it opened up the possibility of so many more customers in so many more niches.

He started his application on the spot. But it took several weeks and lots of emails and calls before he decided to make the leap, quit his job, drop his schooling for good, move away from loved ones, and go all-in. His name was Mitchell Broderick, and he turned out to be a smashing success story that has helped pave the way for many more customers. He proved what’s possible for a Praxis participant.

I would never have sold Mitch had I tried to sell his entire demographic. I would never have sold him had I tried to do it in a scalable way. My choice to channel all my efforts to one specific, imagined customer led me to one specific, real customer for whom I targeted everything.

Lots of people will tell you they like your company or would buy your product. This means absolutely nothing until you get one to pay for it. Forget about tweaking and optimizing your approach to fit some conglomerate of opinion from people with no skin in the game. Instead, define down to the last detail your ideal first customer. Target one single person, real or imagined, until you make a sale. Get someone to pay you. Only then is your idea real, and market-proven.

Then do it again. Then again.