

## How Bad Entrepreneurs Reveal Themselves in the First 5 Seconds of a Pitch

A few simple words is all it takes to figure out a founder's odds of startup success.

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The other night, I had dinner with a group of 40-ish young entrepreneurs on my university's campus. As you'd expect, I spoke with lots of enthusiastic founders and heard lots of pitches about the projects they're working on. But one student, in particular, stood out. He was clearly passionate about entrepreneurship and the startup he was building. He shared how he had spent the summer in a corporate internship he didn't enjoy, but, as soon as his workday ended, he would meet with his co-founders and they'd work on their startup until late into the evening.

Eventually, I asked him to give me a quick pitch for his startup. He lit up with excitement, and then he began with, "We're building a..."

I didn't hear the rest of his sentence because, honestly, I stopped listening. I could tell where this was going, and it wasn't going anywhere good.

I cut him off mid-sentence. I'm sure it seemed a little rude, but I needed to seize the moment for a valuable lesson. "I'm not trying to be a jerk," I told him, "but the moment you started talking about what you're building, you lost me."

He looked confused, and I could tell he wasn't sure what he'd done wrong. After all, he'd spent months building whatever it was, pouring his heart and soul into it, and here I was telling him he was doing it wrong. I get it. But he was making one of the most common mistakes young entrepreneurs make, and the sooner they learn to avoid it, the better.

### Entrepreneurship Isn't About Building Things

Here's the harsh truth: **Entrepreneurship isn't about building products.** It's about solving problems.

In other words, the moment you start talking about what you're building instead of the problem you're solving, you're missing the point of entrepreneurship and losing sight of the people you're supposed to be helping.

I've seen this mistake more times than I can count. Founders get fixated on the products they're building. They dive into the features, the tech stack, the design — every little detail. They'll talk your ear off about the intricacies of their solutions, and, in the process, they forget that customers don't want to hear about products. Customers want to know how you're going to help them solve their problems.

The importance of solving the customer's problems means anytime entrepreneurs start their pitches with "We're building a..." or "Our product does..." is usually a huge warning sign the entrepreneur is focused on the wrong things. Luckily, it's also an easy enough problem to begin solving simply by changing how you frame the conversations you have about your startup. Instead of discussing what you're building, start by discussing the people you're helping and the impact you're going to have on their lives.

For example, instead of saying, "We're building a platform that connects X with Y," say, "Right now, people who do X struggle with Y because of Z. It's a huge pain point, and it's costing them time and money."

Now, you're leading with the problem. You're speaking to the pain that your potential customers are feeling. You're making them the center of the story, not your product.

### **The Dangerous Trap of “We’re Building a...”**

I suspect the reason so many entrepreneurs fall into the trap of talking about what they're creating instead of what consumers need is because entrepreneurs are naturally builders. We get excited about creating things, and we spend so much time immersed in our products that they become our focal point. We start to think that if we just build something great, people will come.

But that's not how entrepreneurship works. The most successful startups don't start with a product. They start with a deep understanding of a problem. Then they immerse themselves in their customers' lives, figure out what those customers need, and build a solution that fits.

And to be clear, this emphasis on problem-solving isn't just advice for pitching. It's fundamental to how every founder should approach entrepreneurship. The real job of an entrepreneur isn't to build things; it's to identify and solve problems. Success isn't measured by how cool your product is or how many features it has. It's measured by how well you can solve a problem for a group of people who are willing to pay for that solution. When you start by understanding the problem, you're able to create a solution that genuinely meets the needs of your customers. As a result, you're not just building for the sake of building; you're building something that has value. And that ability to create value is what creates the key difference between a startup that thrives and one that flounders. So, the next time you find yourself starting a pitch with, “We're building a...,” stop and ask yourself: Am I focused on the problem? Am I speaking to the needs of the people I'm trying to help? If not, it's time to reframe the conversation. Because the best entrepreneurs aren't the ones who build the most products; they're the ones who solve the most problems.