## Don’t Just Trust…Verify The Merits of the MVP

One of the most useful concepts in “Lean Analytics” is that of Minimum Viable Product or MVP.  The idea is that entrepreneurs tend to be people who are great at having business-savvy, money-making ideas, but tend to rush ahead enthusiastically building products and features that no one actually wants.  The MVP model is about finding creative ways to move from theory to actuality in order to provide real customer experiences that result in real data and real analysis.

The Minimum Viable Feature is a new twist on the MVP idea and consists of moving from theory to actuality regarding software features.  Testing features on customers comes with all the same risks that every other aspect of new business development holds: CEOs are often guilty of believing their hunches over the data and the facts; start-ups try to push features on customers rather than ask or let the data prove their usefulness and viability; entrepreneurs prefer to sit at the computer rather than get out of the building and test the facts.

The basic premise is to get customers to a) try the feature and b) tell you about their experience – honestly.  While it’s essential to remember that people have a human tendency to tell you what you want to hear, there are workarounds to the problem of getting customers to be honest about their experience. Another mistake to avoid is fantasizing that every business is going to be as successful as a Dropbox or an Airbnb.  Consultants tell their clients: “It’ll go viral!” But based on what? Using what data? Remember that the vast majority of MVPs are not those success stories we have heard about, because most companies never get off the ground.

A Minimum Viable Feature could be a software element, but it could just as easily be a new physical product, a new project, a new offering of services or a new pricing structure.

Start by creating the theoretical New Feature into something as close to reality as possible, *using the least amount of resources possible*.  It needs to be as close to what you envision the final product to be as possible, in order for people to give you the most accurate feedback.  But the idea is still Minimum as far as viability is concerned. If you are using a prototype to test your New Feature, it may be on paper or a model.  A prototype may not be as good as the real thing, but it will help answer questions: What was the [application usage](http://www.nalpeiron.com/NalpeironSoftwareAnalytics.html) like? Did the users successfully navigate the feature? What were the [user adoption rates](http://www.nalpeiron.com/NalpeironSoftwareAnalytics.html)?  Where did they get stuck?

Next, build in layers to your testing that are designed to help break your need or desire to be proven correct (see [Stop Lying to Yourself](http://blog.nalpeiron.com/2013/12/stop-lying-to-yourself/)). Entrepreneurial hunches can be so exciting and seem so inspired and creative that a tsunami of emotion – *not based in reality*– tends to accompany them.  So if you are surveying folks: keep it simple, ask straightforward, direct questions, and give opportunities for delivering bad news.  Ask for the opportunity to follow up with your survey respondents and some of them may become your new customers.  Sometimes it’s best to ask their opinion as to what someone else would do.  This gives them an out; after all, they’re not criticizing your product, but they might feel comfortable suggesting that someone else would!

Independent filmmakers have been using the MVF concept for decades, creating a 2 to 5-minute version of their completed film to raise capital and generate customers.  They use the screenings to gain audience feedback long before sinking money wholesale into the finished film.

You can record a user’s experience of the feature with a video camera or even a phone camera to analyze their experience.  The “post-game show” discussion with the user will provide even further insights.  Famously, Dropbox launched a screencast of their MVP on Hacker News.  This 3-minute screening generated a waiting list of 5000 emails of people *who said*they were interested in buying the product, *before it had even been built.* An updated version of the video grew the email list exponentially from 5000 to 75000 in a day.

Short videos are used by hundreds of thousands of users of Kickstarter and Indiegogo to test products and features.  One feature of Kickstarter is that if the entire amount for the project is not raised, no money changes hands.  Crowdfunding platforms such as these can give very fast answers as to whether you have a feature for which customers are truly interested in handing over money.

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