

Book Review of *Me, My Customer, and AI: The New Rules of Entrepreneurship*
When AI Lowers the Cost of Building, Relationships Become the Advantage

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Abstract

Me, My Customer, and AI: The New Rules of Entrepreneurship by Henrik Werdelin and Nicholas Thorne presents the view that artificial intelligence (AI) reduces several of the traditional obstacles to beginning and expanding businesses; however, AI also makes products, content, and operational capabilities easier for competitors to replicate. Therefore, in this new environment, the authors present customer relationships, founder knowledge, and "relationship capital" as central to entrepreneurial advantage. This review posits that the authors' best work occurs when they link AI use to founders developing strong customer fit through service design, along with sustainable customer closeness. Its practical tools give entrepreneurs tangible ways to move ideas toward a customer-centered venture. While the authors are stronger on how AI may improve response rates than on whether AI-mediated interactions can maintain authentic trust as a company

grows, this open question makes the book valuable for action research because organizations can test which uses of AI support the development of meaningful customer relationships versus those that only create the illusion of closeness.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; entrepreneurship; customer relationships; relationship capital; action research

Me, My Customer, and AI develops from a paradox that provides a way to organize the work of the book. AI makes doing business easier (reducing research costs, design costs, coding costs, content generation costs, operating costs, etc.), but now virtually anyone who wants to can obtain access to those same tools. As companies have found their technical and operational abilities easier to develop and deploy, these technologies provide increasingly less stable bases for sustainable competitive differentiation. Therefore, Werdelin and Thorne suggest that one potential sustainable advantage of being an entrepreneur is developing a deep understanding of a specific group of customers and creating relational connections with those customers that others cannot replicate. Thus, the book's most valuable contribution is to move the focus away from the technological aspect of a tool or platform toward relationship capital.

The book develops its argument through several practical frameworks rather than a typical theoretical or academic model. The first few chapters invite entrepreneurs to start with themselves, their motivations, and the communities they already know. Using the 5 P's framework (passions, positions, possessions, powers, and potentials), the authors provide an initial framework for entrepreneurs to find and explore ways to generate entrepreneurial energy. The subsequent idea of founder customer fit takes that internal knowledge

outward. Rather than starting with a large target market and trying to discover a product, the authors advocate that founders should find people they can develop long-term relationships with; in turn, the problems associated with those relationships may become more apparent. Through repeated examples such as the development of BARK, the authors demonstrate that product-market fit may occur more organically when the founder has established a close relationship with the customer problem.

As the authors describe the process of defining problems in relation to customers, they introduce two additional ideas. First, the "It Sucks That" framework invites founders to identify a specific customer (or type of customer) they want to assist and the specific outcome that customer is seeking. Additionally, the authors define the obstacles (i.e., "it sucks that") that prevent that desired outcome from occurring. The strength of this simple yet effective device lies in forcing an entrepreneur to convert a vague opportunity into a tangible problem experienced by a real person. Second, the authors consistently caution against developing a technically advanced solution for a problem that does not matter to customers. From this perspective, AI is seen as an enabler, providing value only after the founder has made a thoughtful choice regarding both whom they serve and what problem requires attention.

In its last chapters, the authors expand upon previous concepts by integrating them into discussions related to AI-enabled organizational design. The authors' definition of a service system encourages entrepreneurs to envision their product or service offerings within the context of a broader network of resources designed to enable a customer to accomplish some desired outcome. By leveraging AI to reduce friction among various elements of a

service system, facilitate coordination among component elements, and scale up forms of service that were previously too costly to offer at scale, entrepreneurs can use AI as more than just a means of achieving cost savings. By encouraging entrepreneurs to view automation as enabling more time to be spent by founders and staff members in areas requiring judgment, customer insight, and relational aspects of interactions that contribute to perceived value (e.g., responsive communication), the authors resist a tendency many entrepreneurs fall prey to: viewing AI solely as a means of cost savings.

In its chapter discussing AI and intimacy, the authors assert that AI enables entrepreneurs to maintain closeness with customers even as companies grow. To achieve this goal, Werdelin and Thorne provide three suggestions for remaining connected to customers: (1) remaining engaged in customer service for longer periods of time; (2) employing segmentation and sentiment analysis to gain insights about groups of customers without needing individual identification; and (3) reducing feedback loops so that customer input reaches decision makers more rapidly. Of these ideas, "neighborization" is particularly relevant because it establishes a distinction between customers perceiving familiarity and responsiveness versus invasive personalization.

The authors argue that at least one part of this equation (the ability to scale) has been made somewhat more credible by the emergence of artificial intelligence. AI, as discussed throughout *Me, My Customer, and AI*, can assist companies in responding rapidly to customer needs. AI can also help organizations analyze large amounts of data quickly to identify trends in what their customers say about them. Whether customers perceive these rapid responses as being similar to the type of interactions that develop between humans

is another matter altogether. While a machine can remember your preferences, sort positive from negative comments regarding your product or service, and compose a personalized greeting, none of those actions results in a true "understanding" of you. The authors acknowledge the importance of privacy and discuss the dangers of poor personalization, but they do not address when automation leads to familiarity that feels manipulative or too generic. There is no need to dismiss the proposed framework entirely. Rather, there are additional boundaries that deserve further study.

There are two primary limits to the book's arguments. First, there is the nature of the evidence. The authors have attempted to write a "how-to" style book based on their experiences developing and providing advice to startup ventures, combined with case studies from companies such as BARK and Ro. As a result, much of the evidence used to support some of the larger assertions is anecdotal rather than systematic. For instance, the assertion that AI will lead to greater democratization of entrepreneurship is both believable and supported by declining production costs. However, other barriers to entry remain, including access to capital, distribution, regulatory compliance, knowledge of specific domains, and customer confidence. Second, the notion that relationship capital will become the key differentiator in markets with high levels of AI usage may be stronger in some types of services or communities than in others. Additionally, while relationship capital may become a significant source of competitive advantage in an AI-rich environment for many firms, price competition, differences in underlying infrastructure, and network effects will continue to play roles in determining success for many business models.

Additionally, these limitations provide an opportunity for action research. For example, a small firm interested in investigating whether using AI-based solutions will enhance the level of relationship capital it possesses relative to its competitors could implement several bounded experiments. Initially, the company could measure performance metrics related to customer satisfaction, such as response time, repeat purchases, complaints resolved per unit of sales, referrals generated per dollar spent, and qualitative feedback received. In the next round of the experiment, the company could add AI-assisted capabilities to support employee messaging decisions (e.g., message triage), customer segmentation decisions (i.e., customer categorizations), or drafting capabilities (i.e., generating draft messages). Employee decision-making authority would still rest with employees after receiving recommendations. Researchers would then investigate whether introducing AI-related enhancements resulted in improved operational efficiency without compromising perceived quality, accuracy, confidentiality, and trust. Subsequent rounds could assess the efficacy of increased automation.

From an educational perspective, Me, My Customer, and AI provides a substantial contribution by shifting focus away from enthusiastic discussions about AI's potential applications for entrepreneurship education toward problem identification, defining customers, experimentation, and designing products or services around identified problems. The 5 P's, founder customer fit, and identifying an "It Sucks That" problem all lend themselves well to entrepreneurship education settings, including classrooms, incubators, and early-stage venture development programs.

Overall, *Me, My Customer, and AI* is most useful for founders, entrepreneurship students, and early-stage teams that want to use AI without losing sight of the customer. Its main unresolved question is whether AI can help companies remain close to customers without making that closeness feel artificial, which gives action researchers a practical area for further testing.

References

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