

Failing the mom test

Son: “Mom, mom, I have an idea for a business — can I run it by you?” I am about to expose my ego — please don’t hurt my feelings.

Mom: “Of course, dear.” You are my only son and I am ready to lie to protect you.

Son: “You like your iPad, right? You use it a lot?”

Mom: “Yes.” You led me to this answer, so here you go.

Son: “Okay, so would you ever buy an app which was like a cookbook for your iPad?” I am optimistically asking a hypothetical question and you know what I want you to say.

Mom: “Hmmm.” As if I need another cookbook at my age.

Son: “And it only costs \$40 — that’s cheaper than those hardcovers on your shelf.” I’m going to skip that lukewarm signal and tell you more about my great idea.

Mom: “Well...” Aren’t apps supposed to cost a dollar?

Son: “And you can share recipes with your friends, and there’s an iPhone app which is your shopping list. And videos of that celebrity chef you love.” Please just say “yes.” I will not leave you alone until you do.

Mom: “Oh, well yes honey, that sounds amazing. And you’re right, \$40 is a good deal. Will it have pictures of the recipes?” I have rationalised the price outside of a real purchase decision, made a non-committal compliment, and offered a feature request to appear engaged.

Son: “Yes, definitely. Thanks mom — love you!” I have completely mis-interpreted this conversation and taken it as validation.

Mom: “Won’t you have some lasagna?” I am concerned that you won’t be able to afford food soon. Please eat something.

Our misguided entrepreneur has a few more conversations like this, becomes increasingly convinced he’s right, quits his job, and sinks his savings into the app. Then he wonders why nobody (even his mom) buys the app, especially since he had been so rigorous.

Doing it wrong is worse than doing nothing at all. When you know you’re clueless, you tend to be careful. But collecting a fistful of false positives is like convincing a drunk he’s sober: not an improvement.

Let’s fix the conversation and show that if we do it right, even mom can help us figure out whether our business is a good idea.

Passing the mom test

Son: “Hey mom, how’s that new iPad treating you?”

Mom: “Oh - I love it! I use it every day.”

Son: “What do you usually do on it?” Whoops — we asked a generic question, so answer to this probably won’t be terribly valuable.

Mom: “Oh, you know. Read the news, play sudoku, catch up with my friends. The usual.”

Son: “What’s the last thing you did on it?” Get specific about examples in the past to get real, concrete data.

Mom: “You know your father and I are planning that trip? I was figuring out where we could stay. “ She uses it for both entertainment and utility, which didn’t come up during the “usually” answer.

Son: “Did you use an app for that?” A slightly leading question, but sometimes we need to nudge to get to the topic we’re