

How to Make an App When You Can't Code (a Step-by-Step Guide)

Got a great idea? Here's how to make an app that pops in a crowded marketplace.

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Outline: How to Make an App

1. Refine your idea.
2. Narrow your audience and test for demand.
3. Create a minimum viable product (MVP).
4. Make the first version of your app.

You've dreamed up the perfect app idea, but your amount of technical knowledge is slim to none. Now what?

Coding experience isn't necessarily vital upfront when it comes to making an app, so never fear. "People ... essentially use the lack of this technical talent as an excuse to not get started when, in reality, it's sort of this chicken-and-egg situation," says Jonathan Greechan, co-founder of and head of marketing for The Founder Institute. "A lot of people think, 'I can't start the business until I have the technical founder – I can't launch it,' but in reality, you won't find the technical founder unless you start building out the business."

Many first-time tech founders think they need to find a team immediately, but in the early stages, the most vital part of your business is the product concept. Consider waiting to bring on a technical co-founder until you have a deep understanding of your market – because that understanding

should inform who you want to partner with and the skills you're looking for.

Your mission when making an app: Prove to the world – and to potential investors and customers – that you've got a sound business idea. Though it's important to show people may eventually be willing to pay money for your app idea, focus more on creating an absolutely essential product for your market rather than generating revenue right out of the gate, says Rob Biederman, co-founder and co-CEO of Catalant Technologies.

Here's your go-to guide for building out your business idea – from identifying your audience to creating your app.

Narrow your idea, and focus on the problem you're solving.

Before Nadia Masri, founder and CEO of Perksy, incorporated her company, she dove into researching the consumer insights industry and her target market: the millennial and Gen Z generations. Before you move forward with creating your app, you need to gather key intel, including gauging the strengths and weaknesses of competitive products. Just because you've dreamed up something great doesn't mean someone else hasn't had the same idea – and had it sooner.

"People ... are intimidated to talk about their competition," says Masri. "Competition is great – it validates a concept. I think there's a healthy level: Too much competition means the market's oversaturated; not enough competition might mean that the idea is not that viable." Of course, take any sweeping generalization with a grain of salt, she says. If you size up the competition and know you can do something differently to provide greater value to your end user, you've got a fighting chance. Make sure your potential product or service is something that you yourself need and want, and do an extensive

amount of research to validate your app idea.

While you're narrowing that idea, make your goal to "solve one problem for one customer with one killer feature," says Greechan. Apps that try to solve a slew of problems often take on too much – either they're not solving any of the problems especially well, or none of the problems are especially important. Think about what would make you yourself download the app and – this is key – keep it on your phone.

Another way to think about the problem you're solving: Consider the "customer pain point," says Biederman. Ask yourself what the app needs to be able to do to satisfy customer pain, then consider the key requirements of that solution – the ones without which it would have zero value. Focus on solving that one problem incredibly well, and once you do that, "customers will end up basically helping you define your product road map," says Greechan. You'll receive requests for adding certain features, and you can use them to help chart your way forward in product development.

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Pinpoint your audience, and test for demand.

Let's say you've got 10 business ideas, and you know that the odds are only one of them will be successful. Would you choose one at random and fund it to fruition without doing your research? Or would you try your best to predict which of them is most viable, then put your time, energy and money behind that one? In a hypothetical scenario, it's easy to say the latter. But once you have a tech business idea, there's a psychological temptation to put everything behind it and hire developers from the get-go.

"It's like going to the casino," says Alexander Cowan,

professor of technology management at The University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. "It's exciting – you feel like you're getting a shot at rolling the dice and seeing what happens. But the reality is you're giving yourself one roll of the dice when you could be giving yourself five, and that's a big mistake."

To gauge whether or not you're making a safe bet, you'll need to test for demand. The first step: Identify your audience. "'If you build it, they will come' ... is not reality," says Greechan. Ask yourself: Who is this app for? You'll likely need a niche market to start off, even if you want usage to expand to everyone, and a great way to start is a "factual screener," says Cowan. Let's say you're making an app for HVAC technicians who fix air conditioning systems – if you ask a group of them how many they've repaired in the past week and they say less than 10, you may have misjudged the need for your service, says Cowan. If you're hearing different levels of demand from different sources, you likely haven't narrowed your ideal audience enough.

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Once you've pinpointed a niche audience, you can start investing in it long before your app launches. If you're creating an app for writers, for example, you could start a Meetup group, host events or even launch a podcast or blog. The aim is to build an interested community. If no one clicks on your posts or displays any interest in the events, that could be an indicator that you're not on the right track, says Cowan. But if you do see some interest, try to quantify it. One of the easiest and most effective ways to start is by creating a landing page for your app, explaining your goal and collecting email addresses from people who are interested.

Before Biederman launched his marketplace for MBA students, he tested for user demand with a \$9 landing page on GoDaddy and asked people to enter their email addresses if interested. He

says anyone can do the same on a variety of platforms with \$10 to \$20, and no coding experience is required. Options include Launchrock (a standard for building “really easy landing pages,” says Greechan) and Carrd. After you’ve built your landing page, get the word out – and pay attention to how many email addresses you collect to gauge interest levels. If you go on to develop your app idea, ping your audience semi-regularly with updates.

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Make it work on the cheap.

“Figure out the absolute cheapest way to have something that works that you can start offering to the target customer,” says Greechan. “In the beginning, you’re really just trying to release the [simplest] product that ... solves one customer problem. You don’t need tons of technology to do that.”

Return to the original problem you’re trying to solve for your core audience, and make sure you’re focused in on it. “You want to prove as many things as you can about your end market and their pain and how you can solve it at minimum possible cost,” says Biederman.

Now it’s time to build your minimum viable product (MVP). Although it can be tempting to go all-out on design and features from your long-term vision for the app, this step is about caution and making sure people still want what you’re offering before diving in headfirst. Your MVP is different than your Version 1.0 in that the “whole point of the MVP [is] actually to avoid building actual product if you can,” says Cowan, adding that the latter is expensive and more permanent.

Exhibit A: ZeroCater, an office meal catering company that serves as a liaison between local restaurants and companies, started out as just an email inbox and a manual meal-scheduling spreadsheet. When the company launched in 2009, “it

consisted of zero lines of code,” says CEO Ali Sabeti. As the customer base grew, ZeroCater built out its service beyond a spreadsheet and invested in a more advanced website – one that allowed it to match office lunch preferences with hundreds of restaurants and local catering companies, plus keep up with feedback from tens of thousands of employees.

60	"Lior	04-Oct Mon	12:00 PM	X	Roast Turkey - SSB Catering	15		
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60	"Lior	01-Oct Fri	12:00 PM	X	Burger Bar - Brickhouse	15		
	"Lior	30-Sep Thu	12:00 PM	X	Sandwich Lunch To-Go	18	38 K	03-Sep F
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	"Lior	27-Sep Mon	12:00 PM	X	Pasta - Pasta Paradiso	15		Billed
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60	"Lior	22-Sep Wed	12:00 PM	X	Assorted Sandwiches - Deliboard	15	38 K	08-Jul Tr
	"Lior	21-Sep Tue	12:00 PM	X	Sausages - Rosamunde	15		
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56	"Lior	17-Sep Fri	12:00 PM	X	Vietnamese - Jasmine Garden	15	38 K	24-Jun T
60	"Lior	16-Sep Thu	12:00 PM	X	Burger Bar - Brickhouse	17		
	"Lior	15-Sep Wed	12:00 PM	X	Korean - Stone Korean Kitchen	15	38 K	17-Jun T
60	"Lior	14-Sep Tue	12:00 PM	X	Chinese - Jasmine Tea House	15		
	"Lior	13-Sep Mon	12:00 PM	X	Smoked Beef Brisket Brando - Stuffed	15	38 K	10-Jun T

ZeroCater’s MVP was a simple spreadsheet.

Image credit: ZeroCater

If you’re not sold on the idea of DIY-ing your service via an email inbox and a spreadsheet, there are other ways to make an app with no coding required. For a mobile app, consider tools like Thunkable, Appy Pie and AppMachine. If you’ve got your sights set on a web application, try Bubble or Shoutem, and for a marketplace app, consider Sharetribe or Kreezalid. Finally, if you’re building an e-commerce platform, you could launch your MVP on a platform like Shopify.

If you’re able to validate business and potentially even start generating revenue without the app itself, says Greechan, you’ll be approaching people with the tech skills you’re looking for from a position of strength.

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Make the first version of your app.

Before Masri launched her company, she used a permanent marker to draw what she thought her app should look like – even though she had no design experience. Put pen to paper to sketch out the ideal. It's an easy way to get out of your own head and start wrapping your mind around the concrete product or service you're offering. After your initial set of sketches, try pairing your design ideas with free online tools to create high-quality mockups, such as Proto.io or InVision (no coding required). Adobe InDesign is another option for creating mockups, though a subscription will set you back about \$20.99 per month (after the free trial). Your mockups will also be useful for gauging how your potential audience feels about using your app – whether you're hosting potential audience focus groups or soliciting feedback from friends and mentors.

Next step: If you're unfamiliar with HTML and CSS, it's a good idea to rectify that sooner rather than later. Even if you're not planning to make the app yourself, being familiar with the most basic coding languages could help you communicate better with software engineers, developers, technical co-founders or anyone else who helps you later on your journey. "In 2016, not being able to use HTML and CSS was the professional equivalent of being illiterate," says Cowan. "It's so easy to learn as long as you have the right focus and ... a relevant project to work on." Free online platforms include Codecademy or Khan Academy, and for skills-learning websites like Coursera and Udemy, prices depend on the course.

Once you've got the basics of coding down – and if you're set on making an app from scratch rather than sticking with a web app or other online tool – it's time to build your basic concept. You can pitch your design – whether you created it on InDesign or using a web tool – to engineers. "It's a lot easier for engineers, or anyone else for that matter, to

understand what you're trying to bring to life once they can see a visual representation of it, even if it's not that great," says Masri. "It helps them envision what they could help turn it into."

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To find software developers or engineers to help you bring your idea to life, you can reach out to your network, attend networking events and Meetups, search by skills on LinkedIn or check freelancer websites like Gigster.

A note about pricing: "Don't go for the person with the lowest day rate," says Cowan. "What you really care about is: How much does it cost you for them to get you to a certain outcome with your app?" Finding the lowest possible hourly rate, he says, is seldom the most economical way to do that. Something else to keep in mind? Ensure you're clear about your vision for the user experience, including who the users will be and the problem they're hoping the app will solve, says Cowan, before you offer a developer the gig, make sure they're engaged and have relevant questions about the project. You can offer payment via cash or with company equity, but be careful about offering too much of the latter. "I'm in the camp of, 'Pay ... someone a little bit, even in good faith payment,'" says Masri. "Find engineers who have full-time jobs who are willing to take this on as a side project."

Combined with your vision, a clear audience and the quantifiable demand you measured earlier, the baseline version of your app should be enough to take to potential investors and customers.

Related: A Step-by-Step Guide To Building Your First Mobile App

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