# SBIR Proposal Writing Basics: Prepare to be Surprised

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You may be aware of, or have even participated in, an I-Corps program. This is a brainchild of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in which the commercialization or marketability of a new innovation or technology at a university is evaluated. Typically, a team of three individuals (a faculty member, typically the inventor; a student, typically a grad student or post doc who worked with the inventor in developing the innovation; and a mentor with significant prior technology commercialization experience) is assigned this task. While there are lots of interesting twists and turns to the I-Corps process, we want to focus on a key one, namely “customer discovery.”

The team will initially identify and describe what they think a customer would value in the innovation or technology. This initial hypothesis comes from some preconceived notions of the team members, and from the teachings of the classwork behind the I-Corps process. Teams are often quite clear and adamant that they know what the customer cares about and how the innovation/technology will meet that need.

At this point, the I-Corps teams are sent out to interview folks who have some knowledge of the market where the team thinks the innovation/technology will fit. The team’s job is to discover whether their hypothesis about what the customer wants (and therefore values) in the innovation/technology is correct or not.

We’ve been exposed to a maybe 25 I-Corps teams over the past couple of years, and one glaring commonality has emerged: each one discovered, as they conducted their interviews, that there were important differences between what they THOUGHT the market cared about and valued, and what the market actually DID care about. Sometimes these only mean that the innovation/technology needs to be repositioned or modified a bit to meet the needs and wants of the market, while in other instances it has meant that the team must perform a major pivot and take the innovation/technology in a very different direction than they anticipated.

So, what’s the relevance of the I-Corps customer discovery experience to SBIR/STTR? As an SBIR/STTR competitor, you hopefully grasp that commercialization of your innovation/technology should be the ultimate goal of your SBIR/STTR project. The I-Corps experience, then, tells you that you can’t do a good job of commercializing your SBIR/STTR innovation unless you get out and do some customer discovery. You need to hypothesize about who the customer is, what their needs/wants are, and how your innovation is going to appeal to them. But you then need to take that hypothesis to the streets, knock on the doors of potential customers, competitors, opinion leaders, and other relevant individuals to ask for their honest and blunt opinions about your innovation and its place (if any) in the market place.

We think that, when you do this, you will have your eyes opened as have these I-Corps teams, and realize that your understanding of the market is not entirely accurate (and in some cases, may not be accurate at all). You need to be prepared to be challenged and proven wrong in your hypothesis about the market. And you need to be prepared to modify, whether it be modestly or massively, your thinking and the direction of your commercialization efforts when you discover that your hypothesis is “lacking.”

“Heck,” you’re thinking, “why would I want to do that? I don’t want to hear that I’m wrong or that the customer isn’t in love with my innovation/technology like I am.” That’s not an unexpected attitude, but it is an extremely dangerous one. If you are off the mark in your understanding of the market and how your innovation/technology fits in to it, then you are going to spend a lot of time and money only to see your commercialization efforts flop (or at least fail to achieve the level of success they could have reached). And if you don’t like the pain of the customer discovery process telling you that your innovation/technology isn’t aligned with the needs/wants of the market, then you really won’t like the feeling you get after you squander all your savings and the kids’ college fund, and waste 10 years of your life, only to see your half-baked commercialization efforts fail.

So, learn an important lesson from the I-Corps program: none of us has perfect knowledge and understanding of the market and the customer. We can think and ponder and hypothesize all we want, but until we get off our keisters and out of our labs and go talk with some potential customers and competitors, we cannot improve on the market knowledge we need to be successful in Phase III commercialization of our SBIR/STTR projects.