

The Art of Hassle Map Thinking

Adrian Slywotzky with Karl Weber

Building a great new business has never been what you would call “easy.”

The list of potential challenges has always been long and daunting: Intense competition, technological problems, infrastructure requirements, financial demands, managerial complexities, legal entanglements. But there’s one thing we’ve generally been able to take for granted; If you create a good new product, people will demand it. There’s even a folk saying that reaffirms the rule. “Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door.”

That was then. Today is different. We live in a world where demand *can’t* be taken for granted, where even amazing products often fail to find a market, where lack of demand is causing well-conceived, well-run businesses around the country and the world to struggle to survive, and where the global economy as a whole has been stuck in neutral mainly because of sluggish demand.

Several years ago, we began hearing from more and more clients and other business leaders that the biggest problem facing their businesses was the very basic one of lack of demand. We began investigating the causes of the problem and possible solutions. In the years since then, the problem has only become more widespread. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008-2009, weak demand continues to dampen growth, economic development, and social progress in almost every corner of society. Millions of people are suffering as a result.

What we’ve learned in the course of our investigations into demand has been revealing. We’ve discovered that, even as most companies are searching in vain for the demand they need to grow, a handful are attracting enormous streams of demand, often achieving sales levels five and even ten times greater than rivals with seemingly equivalent products or services. These organizations are as diverse as the grocery chain Wegmans, the car-sharing startup Zipcar, the coffee maker Nespresso, and the movie studio Pixar; they include familiar phenomena like Netflix and Bloomberg, and relatively little-known organizations like California health care provider CareMore and Swedish packaging company Tetra Pak. Even a handful of nonprofits like Teach for America and the Seattle Opera have proven to be masters of demand creation.

What makes these organizations different? How have they escaped the demand doldrums in which most of the economy is mired?

We've discovered a number of key elements shared by virtually every great demand-creating organization: They all produce magnetic products, build a complete backstory in support of those products, work hard to discover triggers that convert potential buyers into customers, strive to improve their products along a steep trajectory, and develop numerous product and service variations to meet the needs of many customer types. But the single most important quality that all great demand-creating companies have in common is something we call Hassle Map thinking.

What is a Hassle Map? To answer that question, step outside the company-centric, supply-centered focus in which most leaders of businesses and other organizations are stuck, and think about life from the perspective we all share during our off-duty hours—the perspective of the ordinary customer.

Let's face it: All too often, life is a succession of hassles. There's an endless array of frustrations, inconveniences, complications, disappointments, and potential disasters lurking in most of our daily experiences. Even very good products and services (we'll call them simply "products" for simplicity's sake) have their weaknesses and drawbacks. My new smartphone sometimes drops my calls; my favorite hotel chain sometimes loses my reservation; those new lightbulbs last longer but produce less light; my new hybrid car gets better mileage but the engine feels less peppy.

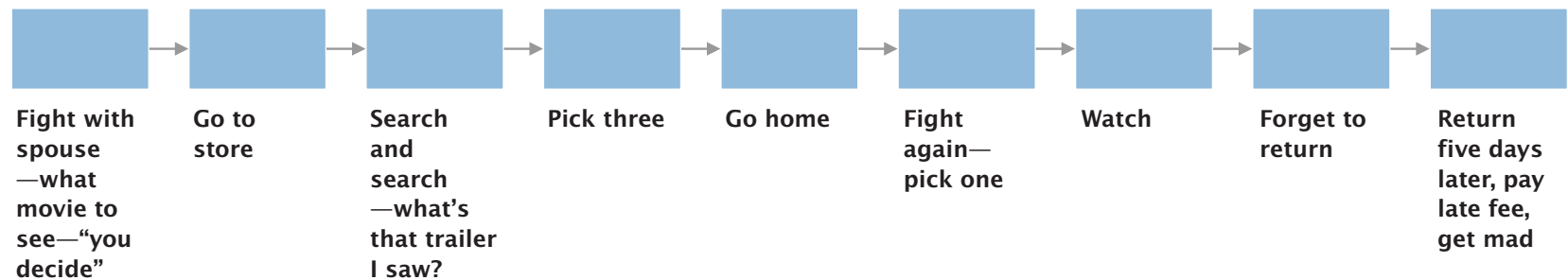
Managers, marketers, designers, service suppliers, and salespeople for the companies that provide these products don't focus on their weaknesses. That's understandable. They devote their lives to making products that are as good as they can possibly be and then to promoting them as enthusiastically as they can. Who wants to concentrate on the negatives? Yet we've found that organizations that excel at demand creation do exactly that. **They examine the lives of customers through the lens of what we call a Hassle Map—a detailed study of the problems, large and small, that people experience whenever they use their products.**

These organizations have discovered that the Hassle Map is really a treasure map—a chart of hidden opportunities to create new demand by fixing customer hassles, one at a time.

Think about the last time you traveled by plane, challenged an erroneous cable TV bill, or dealt with any large and unresponsive bureaucracy. Those are familiar examples of Hassle Maps. Each extra step, wasted moment, avoidable risk, needless complication, less-than-optimal solution, awkward compromise, and disappointing outcome is a friction point on the Hassle Map. And each represents an opportunity for a creative organization to create new demand by eliminating the friction or even reversing it, turning hassle into delight.

A Hassle Map may be a purely mental construct. But even more useful is to turn it into a literal map—a physical, visual representation of the hassles a customer experiences. If you want to master the discipline of demand creation, drawing the Hassle Map of the customer you seek to serve is an invaluable exercise. Here's a classic example:

The Movie Rental Hassle Map (c. 1997)



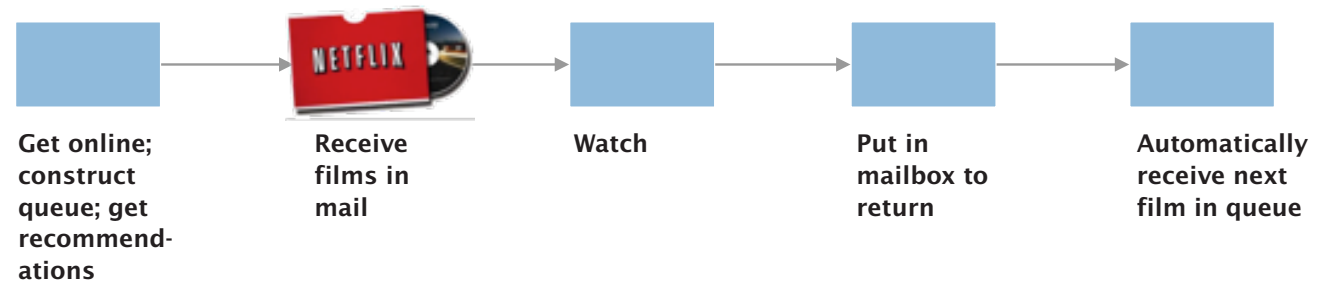
Imagine being the executive in charge of the Blockbuster movie rental chain in the late 1990s. You probably feel pretty good about your business, which is the most successful company in a large and growing industry. People by the millions buy your product, which must mean they like it. All in all, it seems as if you've solved the mystery of demand—perhaps forever.

But it's a funny thing about demand: There's often a huge gap between what people buy and what they truly want and need. That gap is revealed by the Hassle Map—and that gap is where the opportunity to create huge new demand is hiding.

Most video rental customers in 1997 would have been able to describe the drawbacks and inconveniences of the process pretty clearly: the two drives to the mall, once to rent a movie and once to return it; the often fruitless search of the crowded aisles for a movie the whole family will like; and above all those annoying late fees.

Reed Hastings was one of those customers. He was also a former executive with a high-tech company that specialized in debugging software, which had helped him develop a talent for diagnosing and fixing hassles. Hastings could see that new technologies, including the Internet and the DVD, created an opportunity to drastically redraw the video rental Hassle Map—and so he launched a company named Netflix to do just that:

The Movie Rental Hassle Map After Netflix



There's a lot more to the story of Netflix, of course. But fundamentally, Reed Hastings's understanding of the customer Hassle Map and his cleverness in using technology to dramatically simplify it is the reason Netflix has become one of America's fastest-growing companies . . . while Blockbuster has filed for bankruptcy.

Drawing the Hassle Map is a powerful way of analyzing the customer experience. It's also a vital leadership tool, particularly in today's era when, for so many organizations, the demand engine appears to be broken. (At the top of every CEO's to-do list should be this item: Get to know my customer's Hassle Map—intimately.) Above all, it's a crucial step toward seeing differently—glimpsing, for the first time, both how bad the present reality is and how much better it can become.

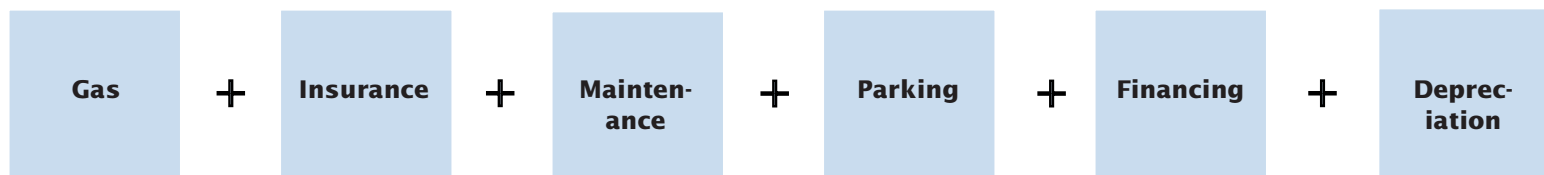
There are various kinds of Hassle Maps. Some Hassle Maps are lists of the steps involved in a process, often including too many activities that are needlessly complicated or whose value and purpose are unclear. Filling out your income tax return might be an example.

Other Hassle Maps chart the people, organizations, suppliers, and sources a customer must engage to complete a given task, often leading to confusion, waste, excess choice, and information overload—renovating a kitchen, for instance.

And still others graph the trade-offs between consumer needs that are equally desirable yet apparently mutually exclusive: In one arena after another, customers are told they can have low cost or quality, convenience or variety, personal service or speed—but never both.

Here's another example:

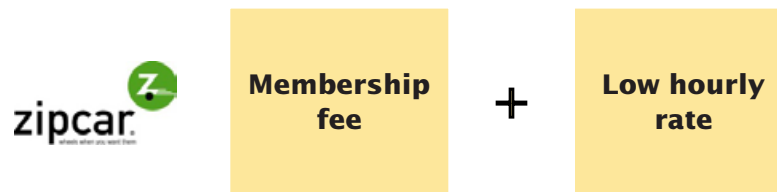
The City Driving Hassle Map



If you've ever owned a car in a big city, you're all too familiar with this Hassle Map. Each box in the chain represents a long list of frustrations and costs that make urban driving uniquely irritating, from gas-price roulette at the pump to circling city blocks endlessly in search of that elusive parking spot for the weekend.

Robin Chase founded the car-sharing company Zipcar with idealistic motives. A dedicated environmentalist, she was concerned about the high price our society was paying for its addiction to fossil fuels. Millions of people share her concern—but they weren't motivated to actually change their behavior and demand Zipcar's product until Chase and her successor as CEO, Scott Griffith, devised a business design that drastically improved the urban driving Hassle Map:

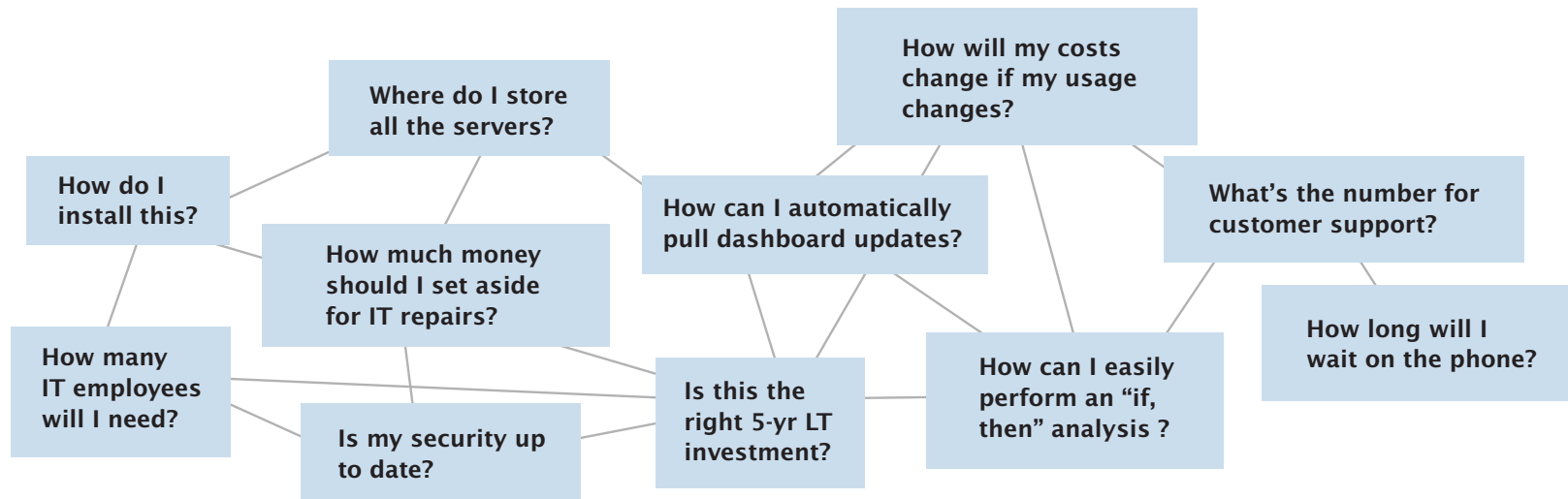
The City Driving Hassle Map After Zipcar



As members know, driving in the city is dramatically simplified by Zipcar. Pay the membership fee and an hourly rate, and all you have to do is pick up the car at a nearby location and go for a drive. Insurance, maintenance, financing, depreciation, even gas are all paid for by Zipcar. No wonder demand for Zipcar—along with company revenues—has been growing by 92 percent annually since 2002.

Here's another Hassle Map with a slightly different look. This one is drawn from the world of business-to-business (B2B) services:

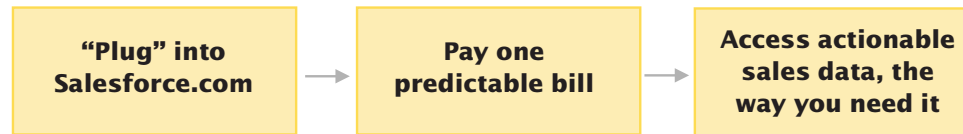
The Customer Relationship Management Software Hassle Map:



This Hassle Map doesn't reflect the sequence of steps involved in using a product. Instead, it shows the array of challenges and complications that companies face when they consider implementing a customer relationship management (CRM) software system to help them improve their sales and marketing programs. Lots of companies shy away from such systems simply because the hassles are so numerous and complex—and because of the horror stories they've heard from colleagues at other companies who've gotten bogged down in years of efforts to fix those hassles.

Salesforce.com has become the most popular and successful company in the CRM software world by sharply reducing the complications on its customers Hassle Maps:

The Customer Relationship Management Software Hassle Map After Salesforce.com



You could create a similar pair of before-and-after Hassle Maps to illustrate how Bloomberg has simplified and streamlined the challenges involved in gathering and using financial data for its thousands of Wall Street client firms. The Bloomberg monitor amasses and formats information from hundreds of sources and provides simple tools for using the information quickly and easily to make life for traders and money managers more convenient and more profitable—a powerful example of hassle reduction that has created a huge, persistent, and growing stream of demand for Bloomberg’s product.

Drawing the Hassle Map is a crucial step toward seeing differently—glimpsing, for the first time, both how bad the present reality is and how much better it can become.

Maybe you've seen enough to be convinced of the value—and the impact—of Hassle Map thinking. How can you go about applying this approach to your own demand creation challenges?

The process begins, of course, with asking the right kinds of questions. You need to step away from the usual supply-side thinking (“What’s our product? What’s great about it?”) to focus on the demand-side thinking that your customers are practicing. The smartest demand creators ask themselves probing questions like:

- **What is the psychology of our customers?** What do they want out of life? How do existing products meet those desires? And if they don’t, why not?
- **Which hassles drive customers crazy?** Are there hassles they barely notice because they’re so familiar—but which we might be able to fix?
- **What is using our current product really like?** What are its strengths?—and more important, what are its weaknesses? Where does our product waste customers’ time, even if only a few seconds? Where does it squander their money, even if only a dollar or two? Where does it create needless confusion, even if it’s only momentary? Where does it require extra steps, even only one or two? Where does it generate avoidable risks, even if they’re seemingly remote?

Answering questions like these will obviously require that you talk with customers—a difficult and painful step in itself for many organizational leaders. “Painful”?—Yes. Customers are variable, inconsistent, fickle, demanding, argumentative, disloyal, and ungrateful. They have no idea how costly and difficult it was for you to create your existing product; they don’t care how much midnight oil you burned in laboring to perfect it; they don’t even recognize or appreciate how cool your technology is, how ingenious your design, or how carefully calibrated the tradeoffs you’ve made. All they care about is how easy, fast, fun, cheap, and reliable it is to use—and they will drop you in a heartbeat if they find a competing product that is five percent better.

So talking with customers is almost guaranteed to give you a case of heartburn. But you'd better do it anyway, since the alternative is to bet your organization's future demand on guesswork.

Supplement your customer conversations with customer observations. Many times, users of products are unable to articulate or even to understand exactly how they experience those products. The best approach is to watch customers in action—in their homes or offices if possible, in an experimental setting if that is unavoidable. (Tetra Pak, the Swedish designer of aseptic food packaging, sends researchers into the aisles of grocery stores to study how real customers look at, handle, and select products in various kinds of packages when they don't realize someone is watching; Netflix sends engineers into the homes of customers to observe them as they watch movies, noting how they handle the remote control, when they pause the picture, and what makes them turn off the movie altogether.)

Then start creating your Hassle Map by drawing one or more freestyle sketches that represent your initial hypothesis. Over time, test those sketches with customers. Ask them what you've omitted or overlooked; have them sketch in their own additions or tell you stories about the hassles they particularly abhor. Little by little, you'll add details to the picture.

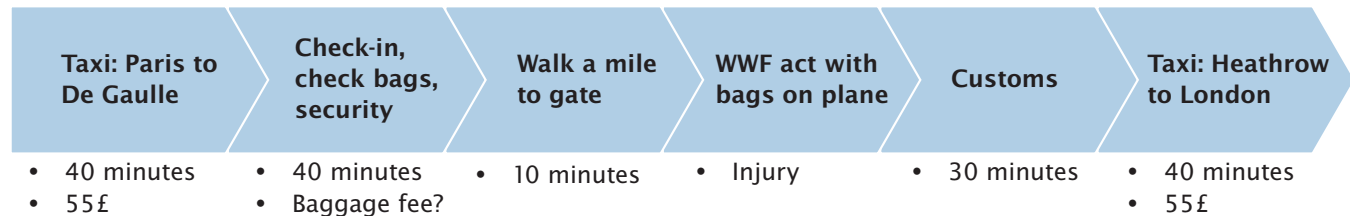
You'll also draw alternative versions of the customer Hassle Map for different users of your product and for different usage occasions. To return to the Zipcar example, the hassles of urban driving are somewhat different for a young childless couple that needs a car only once a month to go shopping at a suburban mall as compared with a family of five with kids who need to be dropped off daily at soccer and ballet practice or a small business owner who uses a car to pick up clients at the airport. Each of your variant Hassle Maps will present its own array of problems—and demand-creation opportunities.

If possible, try to quantify the key hassle components. Attaching actual numbers to the hassles you map—dollar amounts, minutes or hours wasted, process steps required, typical error rates—

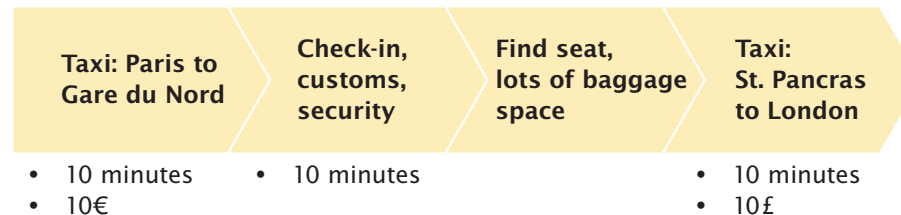
will help you prioritize the hassles you choose to focus on. It will also help you plan your investments in hassle-fixing product improvements and systems, as well as helping you determine break-even points for your financial analysis.

Here's an example of how a Hassle Map can be quantified. The two versions below illustrate the hassles facing travelers between Paris and London—first using a traditional airline, then using Eurostar's high-speed rail system made possible by the opening of the Channel tunnel in 1994:

Air Travel: *Extra 160 Minutes + Extra \$150*



Eurostar: *Extra 20 Minutes + Extra \$30*



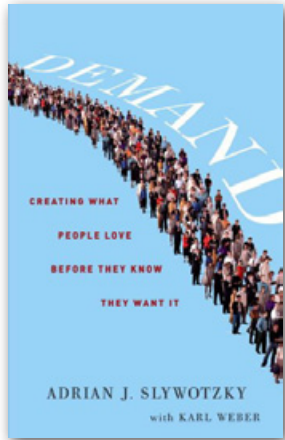
The process of quantification showed that the Eurostar enhancements could save travelers about 140 minutes and the equivalent of \$120 per trip—huge, measurable improvements that have helped Eurostar steadily capture a larger and larger share of demand from the airlines. (It certainly doesn't hurt to have quantifiable hassle reductions that you can point to in your advertising and marketing.)

As you're probably beginning to recognize, developing a Hassle Map is a journey, not a destination. Your understanding of your customers' Hassle Map must continually evolve, because as circumstances change, customer needs and wants do, too. The video rental Hassle Map designed by Reed Hastings back in 1999 was a huge improvement over the one that Blockbuster provided. But if Netflix had remained content with that business design, it would probably be struggling today. Instead, as technology and customer expectations have changed, Netflix has remained one step ahead. Today the company is a leader in video streaming technology, bringing movies into customers' homes even more quickly and easily than before.

Hassles are everywhere—always have been, always will be. But people with the clarity of vision to understand them and the tenacious creativity to fix them are few and far between. When successful, they're rewarded with huge streams of demand (and the revenues and profits that go with them). If you aspire to be among the great demand creators of tomorrow, the best way to start is with mapping the hassles of your customers or of the customers you hope to serve. In the words of Henk Kwakman of Nespresso—one of the great demand creators we've been privileged to meet—"When you discover a problem, you discover a business."

That's what the art of Hassle Mapping is all about. 📍

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Adrian J. Slywotzky is a partner of Oliver Wyman, an international management consulting firm. The *Times of London* named Slywotzky one of the top 50 business thinkers and *Industry Week* has named him one of the six most influential management thinkers, “promising to be what Peter Drucker was to much of the twentieth century: the management guru against whom all others are measured.” **Karl Weber** writes about business and current affairs.

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