

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/how-to-avoid-building-a-beautiful-product-no-one-needs/>

Airtable co-founder and CEO Howie Liu discusses how he and his co-founders sequentially de-risked product-market fit in the three years before they publicly launched their product. They began by talking to people who worked on similar products in the past, before testing front-end mock-ups with potential customers, and eventually inviting users to ship real data to their product.



## Transcript

- We certainly didn't want to just be so arrogant as to believe that, we could stick our heads in, huddled down and like Steve jobs just come up with like a magical new product that for sure everybody in the world would want.. So I would say that we were pretty iterative in terms of de-risking the product market fit.. Even if it didn't entail actually launching the product.. So early on, in the earliest days we were going out and just talking to lots of other people who had worked on similar products.. Whether it's, you know, Steve Sinofsky from Microsoft who had worked, who had overseen Office and Windows and kind of getting his feedback on our idea, right.. Or other people who had worked on similar products.. You know, there were a number of low code companies that existed 10 years ago, right? And never quite made it.. And so we kind of wanted to go and talk to these founders and other operators and figure out why isn't there already a product like this that's mainstream, that's successful.. Why did your company not kind of ever quite, hit that ubiquity? And so we, we did a lot of that kind of early research, just like trying to figure out what was the prior art who else has thought about this idea in the space.. Subsequently, we kind of develop our own thesis or it kind of corroborated our thesis that none of these products were good enough..

Like I think there was a certain threshold we believed where if the product was hard to use, if it was too complex, if it just wasn't a viable replacement for Excel or Google Sheets, then people wouldn't use it.. So there was always kind of like, we believed that there was a binary of either your product is better enough and intuitive enough to kind of replace an existing player or it wasn't.. And then if it's not, then you just kind of died this very slow death where like, you have a few people who are kind of enthusiasts of your product, but it never quite catches on, in a mainstream way.. So, you know, that, that's kind of what the, the conclusion that we came to it.. We had some validating conversations with, people who did work on products like this, and actually felt pretty strongly that this could be a thing, that we were onto something.. I think Steven actually had had pretty positive feedback for us.. And, we also talked to somebody who had led Microsoft Access within Microsoft and kind of shared their perspective on this product genre.. So that was kind of the first step.. I think thereafter we just realized like, okay, it's gonna really come down to our ability to distill a lot of the complexity behind, kind of a relational database low-code app platform into something that feels effortless, intuitive, even delightful to use, right? And has to be as easy or arguably even easier to use than kind of the status quo, right? So the friction to adopt Airtable had to be minimal relative to using a spreadsheet.. So we started working a lot of, client side or front end only prototypes..

We were just prototyping the design of the product and some of the interactions and the UX.. And we would build these initially just mocks and then later functional prototypes, but think the backend, right? So it wouldn't actually persist data, but you could kind of click around.. And then we started testing those with, different types of knowledge workers in different use cases industries, saw how they use their existing tools and then asked them to kind of replicate a workflow or see if they could understand how our product worked.. And there were just kind of these subsequent milestones like that where we would go and validate the next big risk, right? Like, can we design a product that actually is intuitive enough? Okay, if we can do that.. Then can we actually get people, even if the product, even if the UX is theoretically intuitive enough, can we actually get people to shift their data over to our product, right? So then build a backend that's functional enough to actually persist data and like get people, even on small scale to see if they can actually start using our table.. And if not, then why? I would say like every three to five months, we were probably, de-risking a different question about the viability of this product market fit, leading up to actually launching it, and then just crossing our fingers and seeing if people now that anybody could

sign up for the product, it was out there, whether people would actually come in and sign up for and hear about and talk about our product...