



Mel Lim

ACCELERATE WITH DISRUPTIVE QUESTIONS

by Mel Lim

No questions are too small in the process of scaling a business—regardless of size and phase. Both startups and mature businesses must consider these disruptive factors. But for startups to compete and scale rapidly under limited resources, it is imperative for teams to push themselves to answer these pertinent questions, resolve them quickly, and be resolute. That way they can deliver and build, swiftly and effectively, without losing focus, and pivot when necessary.

SCALING SERIES

ACCELERATE WITH DISRUPTIVE QUESTIONS

“Curiosity killed the cat?”

No. I would argue...

Curiosity brings forth play.

Curiosity brings forth new knowledge that can be put into real action.

Curiosity brings forth innovation.

Being curious is what I encourage all my clients to do. It’s actually harder than we think; especially a lot of seasoned leaders and entrepreneurs have been hardened by failures and are set in their ways. My role as a growth and brand strategist is to engage leaders, and guide them to challenge themselves by using a framework which I call “Disruptive Questions.” These questions are derived from my two decades of experience in building and scaling companies; helping them develop a product from a mere concept or a technology; helping them bring that product to market and capture the market; helping them with their fundraising, and helping them set up a foundation ready for rapid acceleration. I have about 250+ questions; segmented into key categories:

- product | ideas
- talent | people
- finance | moola
- experience design | branding & marketing

They are all interconnected; one can’t work without the other, and all are equally important in growing and scaling companies. These questions will help streamline processes, and remove redundancies, as complexities typically inhibit growth. The goal is to produce a strong foundation for acceleration, while staying fluid enough to adapt to changing times. Each industry, has it own set of challenges and opportunities. Within each industry, there is an ecosystem; a set of key disruptors and trends from macro to micro: globalization, emerging technologies, supply chain, regulations, consumer shifts, geopolitical uncertainties, etc.

Ways to Engage:

I have compiled here some key disruptive questions that I hope will get you to strategize and think about your business holistically. But before we take this mini framework for a spin, I'd like to suggest the following brainstorming process:

- Withhold from saying NO, or BUTs. Capture every idea, every thought from every participant/stakeholder¹. Allow for addition, instead of subtraction.
- Allow for the process to be fluid - asking one question MAY lead to another question.
- Capture every possible potential solution.
- Allow room for fresh perspectives from people OUTSIDE of your team. (ie. Customers, partners)
- Accommodate different styles of brainstorming that are suitable to your company culture.
- Have an end goal in mind; measurable outcomes, actionable next steps, and start giving yourself and your team proper timeframes and key players to execute².

TOP INTERNAL QUESTIONS

What is your purpose?

Purpose defines us. It gives us reasons to exist, to plough through, to rise when all else fails. Our purpose is what fuels us when we tap out our resources, when we face challenges. Asking this question will force you as a company to define your core values, your key messaging, your metrics for success, your North Star³. To some it is impact: be it environmental, social, and/or economic. But whatever it may be; OWN your purpose. Be unapologetic about it. The more certain and defined you are with your purpose; the stronger your execution. It will help you set your key differentiators, uphold your brand promise, and help you develop your brand vision. It will say everything about what kind of thought leader you are. It will inspire, lead, guide and move others in the "right" direction.

Asking this question impacts: brand strategy – vision, voice and tone, value, stance and promise, product development; ux,ui,cx strategies; culture; talent strategies; strategic partnership.

Why are we doing this...now?

Timing is key⁴. The right product, right people, right strategies at the right time CAN accelerate growth, especially if executed with high standards and quality. Some leaders use their "gut"/ intuition to determine whether the market is ready for their product. Some will rely heavily on business intelligence/ data. Either route you take, knowing your market, your competitors and trends, and understanding the geopolitical landscape will help you prepare for the uncertainties to come. This will further define your key differentiators and the value you bring to your customers.

Asking this question impacts product innovation, development, operations, resources—cash/budget, talent strategies, sales and marketing strategies.

What kind of culture do we build for our company?

It's always about people. People, people, people. No matter how great of an idea you have, you need extraordinary talent to execute your vision. Your company culture will play a huge part in attracting these talents. Your company DNA will determine how ideas are exchanged, how talents are nurtured, how work/life integration is cultivated, and how your brand will be talked about and advocated. It starts from the inside out⁵.

Asking this question impacts talent strategies and management, product innovation and development, leadership, strategic partnership, and brand strategy.

What are your resources? What are your performance metrics?

Idea + people + moola = MAGIC. Admit it. We need all three to build a great product and amazing brand, that can last through time—well at least until you raise the next round of funding, generate some revenue, gain some customers, whatever your success metrics are. And balancing people, finance, time, and speed to market is crucial in any business, startup or not. Look at it as a symbiotic ecosystem— you build a product, you have something of great value to offer your customer, you have a solid sales strategy that you've developed. In order for you to hit your metrics⁶, you need to have the right people to run those initiatives and the right budget to execute within the given amount of time. Essentially, knowing what your resources are will help you define your key performance metrics, track them and hit them⁷.

Asking this question impacts finance, sales and marketing strategies, talent management, and operations.

TOP EXTERNAL QUESTIONS

What are our competitors doing?

Is this question important? To some it's not. To some it is imperative. Why? Because knowing who your competitors are will help you understand what has worked and what hasn't and why⁸. For startups, reinventing the wheel may not necessarily be wise when resources are limited. So why not study, understand your competitors, their price points, their customers, their strategies and initiatives, their brand voice and tone. It will surely help you hone in on yours and your differentiators⁹. While this effort helps you gather insights on your competitors, and helps you prepare, asking this question actually forces you to focus inward. It will lead you to asking, "What about OUR company? What makes US unique?" Having competitors will actually help drive innovation.

Asking this question impacts product innovation and development, product marketing, brand strategy, sales and marketing strategies.

What if we are swimming in a blue ocean and there aren't any competitors around?

Well, then you are one of the first few movers in your space. You would think that would make it easier, but the blue ocean¹⁰ doesn't stay blue for long. It can become red very very quickly. Your main goal is speed to market...BUT with HIGH standards! Just because you are the first in the market, it doesn't give you the green light to spew out substandard products/services. On the contrary, in order for you to OWN the market as the leader, you should ALWAYS be setting higher standards. Ask how you define great products/services? How do you define great customer experience? How do you define great design?

Asking this question impacts product innovation and development, customer experience strategies, product marketing, and brand strategy.

What is happening elsewhere in the world? Does it even matter?

YES. Absolutely! With regulations and geopolitical turmoil, companies are always having to adapt their products to adhere to ever-changing regulations and compliance¹¹. For some product-focused companies, tariffs and import and export laws have immediate and massive impact on their supply chain, top and bottom line. So tune in to your international economic systems¹², finance and political news, talk to experts on the ground and be prepared.

Asking this question impacts product planning and development, financial planning, sales strategies, and talent strategies.

Who is your audience? And how can you connect with them authentically?

One of the key ingredients in building brand longevity is knowing that customers always come first. No, I'm not saying that brands should compromise their core values; but brands should respond swiftly, adapt to changing trends and market demands, and connect with their audience authentically. Your audience today may not be your audience tomorrow, as global markets shift and expand. You must address, if not at least be aware of, issues¹³ surrounding inclusivity, diversity, privacy, cultural sensitivity¹⁴, sexism and ageism. And as your audience becomes more digitally intelligent, and culturally diverse, they can sniff out disingenuous narrative and experience. Their demands from your brand will be exacting, in terms of how your products and services are delivered to them.

Asking this question impacts product development, talent strategies, and marketing strategies.

What is our offline versus online, omnichannel strategy?

Brilliant brands read minds. They engage consumers at critical touch point, anticipate needs, enrich the user experience, and feel personalized and relevant. With technology, consumers are now expecting a complete 360 brand experience both offline and online, to be fully integrated and seamless¹⁵. How brands connect to consumers through their digital intelligence—their messaging, product/services, when, how and via which platform and what digital features—are crucial in building traction, brand loyalty and advocacy.

Asking this question impacts marketing and brand strategies and operations.

Framework

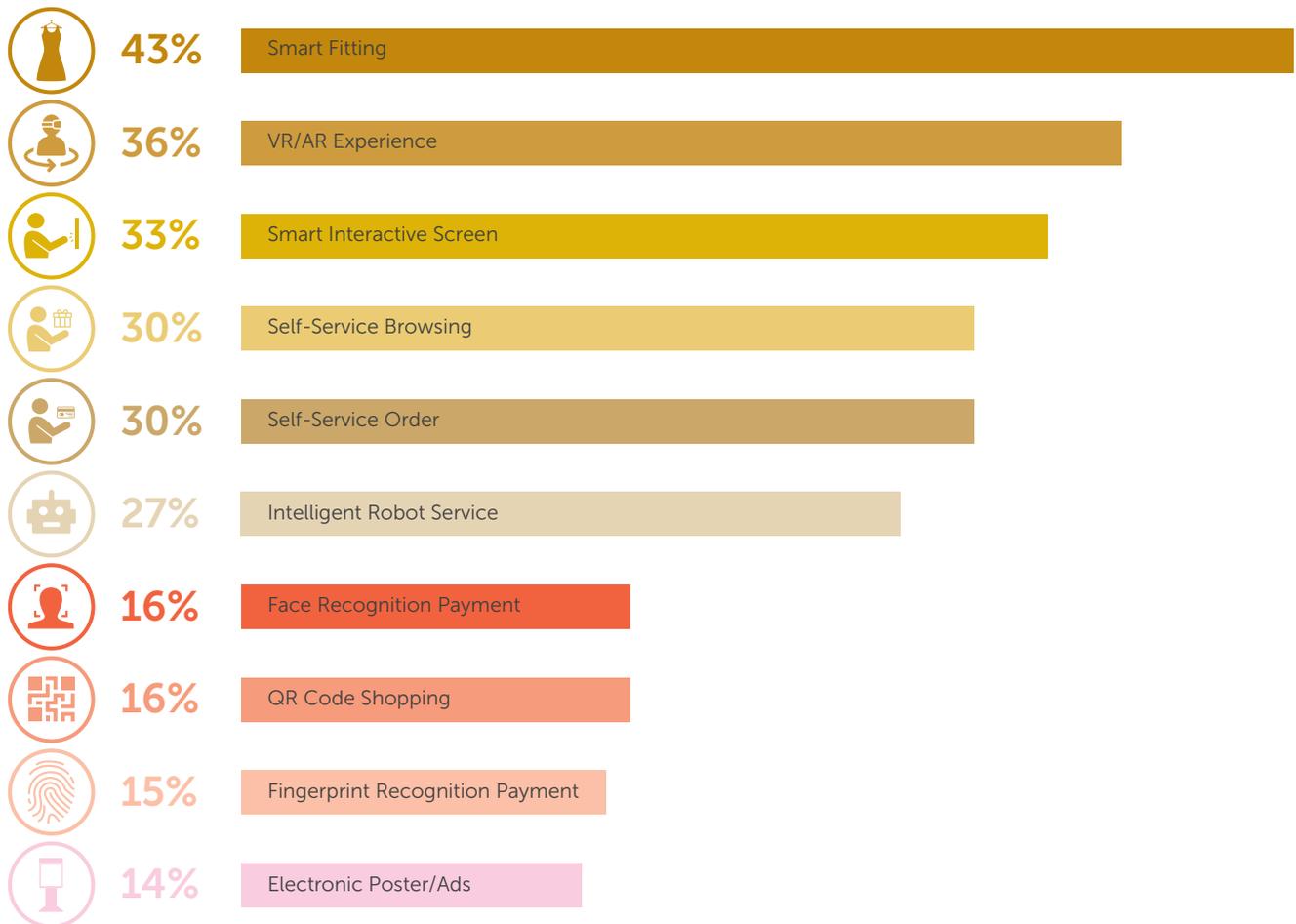
In my book, *Turtle Design in a Rabbit Age*, I've offered a framework of questions that I typically ask my clients when designing technology experience. (See Pg 10)

I want you to add your own questions to this. Take this framework as your foundation; challenge yourself, add your own questions, be curious, explore, and think beyond the obvious. Ask those "stupid" questions if you'd like - but these questions will lead you to producing some real strategic initiatives that will disrupt your business in ways you can't even imagine.

Have fun!

DID YOU KNOW?...

*Question:
What digital features would you be interested in for future offline stores?*



*Nearly Half of Luxury Consumers Expect Improvement
in Digital Shopping Experience at Offline Stores*

Source: BCG X Tencent Luxury Study, 2019



QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN DESIGNING TECHNOLOGY EXPERIENCES¹⁶

The Whos

- To whom are we telling this story?
- Investors?
- Partners?
- Media?
- Public?
- Customers?
- Industry Experts?
- Competitors?
- Who will maintain and update the company's story?

The Whys

- Why would your customers care?
- Why are we telling this story? And why tell this story now?
- Is it to prove that the tech company is the leader in its space?
- Is it to demo that the product is freaking awesome and might even achieve world peace?
- Is it to raise money?
- Is it to squash the noise of industry competitors?

The Whats

- *What* covers a lot of ground, from concept to launch, and all the planning in between:
- What is the content?
- What are the metrics for success?
- What are we measuring against?
- What is the company's goal?
- What is the competitive market like?
- What is the budget?

Add your own questions here:



The Whens

- When is this story being told:
- When the product is ready to launch?
- When SEs (sales engineers) do their pitches/demos?
- When CFOs or CIOs do their pitches to some large organization?

The Hows

- How are you telling it?
- Is it being delivered in person?
- Will a PPT be used?
- Do you intend to communicate it through a video animation?
- Are you distributing it via social media channels?
- Do you envision Cirque du Soleil troops flying around while you belt out your company's 30-second elevator pitch?

The Wheres

- Where is the company heading?
- Where is the technology taking us?
- Where will this technology be two, five, or ten years from now?
- Where will our competitors be two, five, or ten years from now?
- Where will this content live, and for how long?

Add your own questions here:

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NOTES

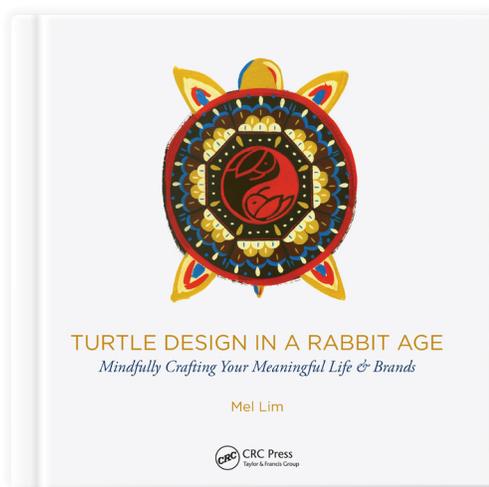
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MEL LIM

Strategist, Keynote Speaker, Author & Award-Winning Designer

Mel Lim is a global technology storyteller and strategy consultant. Her success record for growing and scaling companies has positioned her as one of the most sought-after consultants in the tech and software startup scene. Traditionally trained in architecture, this Malaysian-born Chinese immigrant, and serial entrepreneur from humble beginnings began her career designing retail centers, casinos, stadiums, and hotels in Asia, Europe, and the US. Mel went on to found an innovation strategy and design agency that has garnered hundreds of industry accolades. Recognizing her knack for building businesses and products, Mel took her hybrid international background in design and strategy, and accelerated technology startups to multi-million dollar, revenue-generating enterprises, positioning them as global brands and most innovative tech companies in the world. Her current and past clients include well-known brands like Varonis, Axure, LeEco, Tata, Intel, Comcast, London Jewelers, and Zeeto.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Mel is currently the President of Maspira Groupe, an innovation consultancy focusing on product development and growth strategies. Mel recently completed a book entitled *Turtle Design in a Rabbit Age*. Published by CRC Press, her book offers a platform to help people achieve equanimity and find meaning in their work and lives through mindfulness, and companies to craft value by reframing their approach to impact creation and experience design. She lectures on innovation, consumer behaviors, and women leadership at leading institutions like Stanford University and KPMG, has served on advisory boards at the New School in NYC and the World Brand Congress, and is currently a board member at Upflex NYC and Maison Marcel. Mel has recently been awarded the Top 50 Tech Visionaries Award by Intercon and was named among the 250 Most Inspiring Female Entrepreneurs by DataBird.

A large, abstract watercolor splash in shades of orange, red, and yellow, with some darker, more saturated red and purple tones at the bottom. The splash is centered on a white background and has a soft, feathered edge.

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