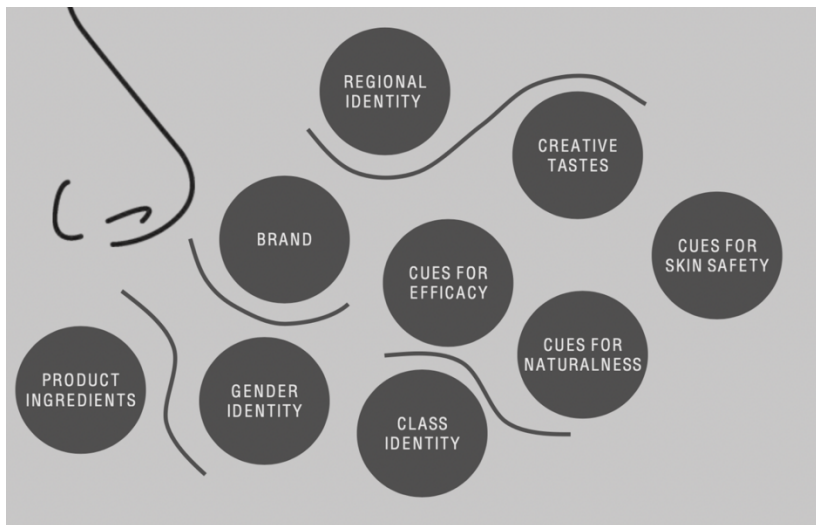


## The problem with user preferences

“I hate scented stuff,” said a person I once interviewed about laundry products. This was weird, because she’d just taken us on a tour of her home and pointed out that she loved the smell of a fresh basil plant in her kitchen. Also scent is, like, a very primal and basic human sense; I’ve never heard of anyone hating all smells ever. She explained that to her, scented products seem “chemical-y and fake, like they’re trying to cover something up.” That made a lot more sense: she doesn’t trust products with added, unnatural smells. Had we stopped the conversation at her anti-scent declaration, we wouldn’t have gotten anywhere.



*What's in a scent? A lot more than just a smell anyway (illustration by Laura Kacir)*

Of course we should care about what users want, but preferences actually make a pretty shaky foundation for product development. To be clear: this is not about pushing things on people who don’t want them; that’s immoral and dumb. But when we stop short of delving into preferences, which almost always have a great story behind them, we’re doing both our team and the user we’re speaking with a disservice.

Over the years, I’ve seen the treachery of preferences firsthand. I once heard a frontline factory worker say “I hate technology” after trying a HoloLens for the first time. My teammates were tempted to dismiss him as an old, a Luddite, or a bad candidate for industrial AR evangelism, but I remembered that this particular worker made painstakingly detailed PowerPoints for new hires—he’d shown them to us earlier that day. It would be a mistake to take this guy at his word when his statement actually contained volumes: it wasn’t that he hated technology, it was that AR as he’d experienced it through the HoloLens was disorienting and strange. There were lessons for our team in this. For one: we could design our AR software with skeuomorphs that made it feel more accessible and less Star Trek-y. At the very least, we could have taken a team member with us on this visit who was older than 28 (having an older person with us might’ve made this worker feel more at ease.)

The point is that preferences on their own can't help us design or build better products. Preferences are highly particular, unique to individuals, and usually subconsciously tied to a specific experience that is far more interesting to learn about than the preference itself (this is the difference between "I don't like that it's purple" and "I don't like purple because reminds me of bruising and that doesn't feel like a healthy color to me.") What we should care about is getting underneath preferences, to stories, fears, and underlying motivations. Unlike preferences, unmet needs are more or less universal. Take the worker who said "I don't like technology." If we go deeper, we can extrapolate that this is about disliking the feeling of incompetence: we all hate feeling like we don't know how to work something, like an Android person trying to navigate an iPhone.

### **Preferences and product testing**

Preferences pop a lot during testing. Putting a prototype in front of someone and asking a version of "do you like this?" (e.g. "would you use this?" or "does this help you?") strips your solution of its context and elicits weak answers, usually based on preferences. This approach also tends to protect your team from bad news about your product, since most people want to be polite and vague statements like "sure, I like it" give them an out.

You might believe that your solution should be so fantastic that it can speak for itself when you put it in front of people—that it shouldn't require any context. It's true that if you have to explain too much about your idea, you probably haven't designed a sufficient prototype. At the same time, a good test is about answering a specific question; if you don't know what you're asking, you're probably not ready to leave the learning phase or test in the first place. Testing can seem like a shortcut to get to what's truly relevant, avoiding the dead-ends and rabbit holes of a meandering, open-ended conversations with people about their lives. But it's during these critical discussions—and digressions—that you are actually in touch with peoples' realities, untainted by your own assumptions. It's when you're actually learning, because your implicit goal is to better understand the person in front of you, not the product on the table between you.

Instead of looking for likes, you should be devising a test to assess whether or not people will regularly pick up and use your product; this is the true test of product-market fit. To give yourself a leg up, you've ideally already designed a prototype based on your deep knowledge of users and the problem space. In most cases, this knowledge requires open-ended discovery research before you write code or build a prototype. This is why qualitative in-context interviews are a gold standard: in a person's environment we can get a sense of what people do in addition to what they say. We can even find discrepancies between these things, and draw conclusions about who this person aspires to be. Also consider that people can need something that they don't necessarily like (like a screen time management app or online therapy.)

### **Preferences and surveys**

Preferences also tend to run rampant in surveys, which are very hard to write well. Too often, we use surveys to try and quantify what is actually qualitative. Knowing that

someone is 7 out of 10 satisfied with something tells us nothing about what “7” actually means to this person. In an effort to make easy sense of something to ourselves, we rob survey participants of the ability to just tell us what matters to them, how much, and why.

### **Preferences as excuses**

At their worst, customer preferences become strawmen for bad products and unethical strategies. Kids like Juul, but that doesn’t mean they should have one. Product companies under scrutiny often point to customer preferences as a justification (oh we don’t make movies with diverse casts because our viewers don’t watch them!) This kind of stalemate between companies and customers isn’t sustainable, even if temporarily masks a product company’s inertia.

### **Preferences are increasingly inorganic and therefore unreliable**

Many of our preferences are no longer innate; they’re being actively reshaped by the addictive technology we use every day. What’s “fast?” Amazon has set our expectations for the overnight delivery of AA batteries and measuring spoons. What’s “cool?” Direct-to-consumer “blands” like Quip, Away, and Casper have habituated us to a minimal millennial design aesthetic. Two of the most commonly cited user preferences, simplicity and convenience, now come at the expense of an assumed tradeoff: personal data and privacy for the sake of convenience, and lack of meaningful user choice for simplicity. When product teams base their solutions on of these types of inorganic preferences, they are overrotating on a snapshot in time of their competitors’ strategies, not innovating.

Above all, we should think of preferences as an invitation to ask why—to elicit a story, or to learn more about the life experiences that shape this person’s worldview. Not going deeper on preferences is the number one mistake I see people making when they’re leading qualitative interviews. Always ask: “what makes you say that?” The answer isn’t always relevant, but it can contain the insight that will make all the difference.