

THE ACDS

The Active Category Design Survey

Before you design a category, find out what everyone actually believes. The ACDS turns founding lore, sales instinct, and customer experience into data you can argue with.

OVERVIEW The empirical foundation

The Active Category Design Survey (ACDS) is the empirical foundation of Active Category Design. It is a 13-question open-ended survey designed to surface insider and outsider assumptions about the problem the company exists to solve: what it is, what it costs, who has it, what people do about it today, why that is insufficient, and what a novel solution looks like, what it is named, and what it delivers.

From this data you will build theme counts, cluster maps, and 2x2s. But the survey's real job is not consensus. It is to expose the **gaps**: between what leadership believes and what the field says, between how insiders frame the problem and how customers actually live it. Those gaps spark the awkward conversations that lead to new markets.

AUDIENCE Who takes it

Field to at least 10 and up to 200 respondents, internal and external. Every respondent should be familiar with the company's purpose, founding insight, sales motion, value proposition, and use cases.

- INT** Internal: spread across functions and seniority — founders, product, sales, support, engineering. Include the skeptics on purpose; consensus tells you nothing.
- EXT** External: current customers, former customers, prospects, and partners. Former customers are gold — they have distance, and nothing to be polite about.
- ID** Collect name and role. Attribution is what lets you see divergence by seat later. Promise the answers stay inside the project team, and keep that promise.

Don't compete. Create the conditions to win.



ADMINISTRATION

Recruit like it matters. Because it does.

Response quality tracks the seriousness of the ask. Internally, the mandate comes from the CEO, individually addressed — never a mass BCC. Externally, the outreach is customized to the relationship.

INTERNAL The CEO mandate

Sent by the CEO personally. The survey itself follows under separate cover from the project lead.

Dear [NAME],

You have been selected to participate in a critical research process that will help us unlock the highest possible value for our company and our customers.

Your part is straightforward: [SENDER] will send you the ACDS, a survey of **13** open-ended questions, under separate cover. It takes 15–20 minutes, but the questions require deep consideration and thought — please complete it at a time when you can give it your undivided attention.

Your response is due back by [DATE]. Thank you for taking part in this important work.

– [CEO NAME]

EXTERNAL The customized ask

Adapt per relationship: current customer, former customer, prospect, partner.

Dear [NAME],

We are undertaking a broad project to make our company as valuable as possible to our customers and partners. As a [RELATIONSHIP], you have a unique perspective that will directly shape the result.

If you are willing, we will share a short survey of **9** open-ended questions. It takes 15–20 minutes of focused attention, and your answers will be read closely — this is research, not a feedback form.

Many thanks,

– [SENDER, TITLE]

THE QUESTIONS • INTERNAL

Thirteen questions for the inside.

Ask them exactly as written, one per screen, all open-ended. The “explain it like we’re five” repeat is deliberate: jargon hides disagreement, and plain language exposes it.

- Q1 What was the company’s founding insight? What inspired its creation?
- Q2 What problem does the company exist to solve?
- Q3 Same question — but now explain it to us like we’re five years old.
- Q4 What type of organization has this problem?
- Q5 Who specifically within the organization has this problem and is responsible for its costs? (e.g. executives, managers, operators, developers, engineers)
- Q6 Is this a problem they know they have but think they can’t solve? Or a problem they don’t know they have (yet)? (choose one, then add context)
- Q7 What category of products or services do they turn to for this today, if any?
- Q8 What are the costs if the problem goes unsolved?
- Q9 What is your unique approach to solving this problem?
- Q10 What happens when a customer solves this problem? What benefits or changes do — or could — they see?
- Q11 What do customers (or investors / partners) compare you to? Is this a fair comparison? Why or why not?
- Q12 Imagine you had to come up with a new category for your company right now. What would it be, and why?
- Q13 What else should we know about your company?

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THE QUESTIONS • EXTERNAL

Nine questions for the outside.

Outsiders answer from experience, not strategy — so the questions shift from “what do we believe” to “what did you live.” Fewer questions, same spine: problem, owner, cost, alternative, outcome, name.

- Q1** In your own words, what problem does **[Company]** exist to solve?
- Q2** Same question — but now explain it to us like we’re five years old.
- Q3** Think back to before you engaged **[Company]**. What were you trying to solve, and what were you doing about it at the time?
- Q4** Who in your organization feels this problem most, and who ultimately pays for it?
- Q5** What did that problem cost you when it went unaddressed?
- Q6** What changed once you addressed it — or what would change, if it were truly solved?
- Q7** What do you compare **[Company]** to? Is that a fair comparison? Why or why not?
- Q8** If you had to describe **[Company]**’s category in a few words, what would you call it?
- Q9** What else should we understand about how you see **[Company]**?

Why fewer? External goodwill is a budget. Nine focused questions protect completion rates while still covering the dimensions you need to compare inside against outside — and the comparison is the point.

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Alternative Uses • Active Category
Design
The ACDS • Survey Guide

FIELDING & ANALYSIS

Field it simply. Read it deeply.

Any survey platform works — Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, or whatever your team already uses. One question per screen, no length requirements, two-week window with one reminder. The craft is in the analysis.

ANALYZE The theming method

- 01 Export responses to Excel: questions as column headers, respondents as rows.
- 02 Insert a new column to the right of every question column. Label it “Q1 Themes,” “Q2 Themes,” and so on.
- 03 Read every response and distill it into two-to-six-word thematic phrases — as many per answer as it honestly contains. You are parsing answers down to their essence, not summarizing politely.
- 04 Keep a running theme lexicon in an adjacent doc, and reuse exact phrasing throughout. “The Breaking-Change Cascade” and “breaking changes cascade” must be the same theme, or your counts will lie to you.
- 05 Count. Themes that recur across many seats are candidate villains. Themes that appear on only one side of the inside/outside line are your awkward conversations.
- 06 Then — optionally — give an LLM the raw responses and these same instructions. Compare its themes with yours. Did it catch something you missed? Add it in.

Do not offload this to an LLM. The machine will miss nuance, and worse, it will rob you of the dwelling. Reading every answer slowly is how you become the expert in the room on this data — and being that expert is the whole job in the sessions that follow. Use the LLM to check your work, never to do it.

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WORKED EXAMPLE

What theming looks like.

A composite example from a fictional clinical-scheduling company, one question deep. Watch what the themes column reveals that no single answer does.

READ Five answers, one question

RESPONDENT	Q: WHAT PROBLEM DOES THE COMPANY EXIST TO SOLVE?	Q THEMES
CEO	"We fix the chaos of hospital shift scheduling. Managers burn hours juggling spreadsheets and last-minute callouts."	The Last-Minute Scramble ; Spreadsheet Sprawl
Head of Product	"Filling open shifts fast when someone calls out sick."	The Last-Minute Scramble
Sales Lead	"We help hospitals cut agency spend by making better use of their own staff."	Agency-Spend Drain; Underused Internal Staff
Customer • Nurse Mgr	"Honestly? My weekends. I spend every Sunday texting people, begging someone to cover Monday."	The Sunday Begging Ritual; The Last-Minute Scramble
Former Customer	"Retention. Nurses quit over schedules they feel are unfair, and nobody connects that to the scheduling tool."	Schedule-Driven Turnover

FINDINGS What the column tells you

- A Three of five respondents converge on **The Last-Minute Scramble**. Recurrence across seats makes it the leading villain candidate.
- B Only outsiders name **The Sunday Begging Ritual** and **Schedule-Driven Turnover**. Insiders describe a workflow problem; the people living it describe a life problem and a retention problem. That divergence is where the category conversation starts.
- C Sales frames the problem as **Agency-Spend Drain** — money, not chaos. Neither wrong nor right: a second dimension to test in the Compass and the 2×2.

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VISUALIZE

From themes to the map.

Once the themes column is full, make it spatial. One question per board: the question in the center, your themes as cards around it, and every verbatim clustered under the theme it expresses. The map does what the spreadsheet cannot: it makes the gaps visible to a room.



One question, four themes, verbatims clustered. Cluster size = recurrence. The clusters only outsiders built are the finding.

BUILD YOURS Four steps in Mural, Miro, or FigJam

- 01 One board per question. Put the question in the center — dark card, exact survey wording.
- 02 Add your themes as colored cards around it. Use your lexicon phrasing exactly; the cards are the themes, promoted.
- 03 Paste every relevant verbatim under its theme, attributed by role. One answer can live under two themes; that is signal, not mess.
- 04 Read the shape with the room: the biggest cluster is your villain candidate; the clusters only outsiders built are your awkward conversations. Let people react on stickies — the argument is the point.