Minimum Viable Products (MVPs)

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What an MVP is for

The seminar opens with a quiz: what is the *primary* purpose of a minimum viable product?

- **(a) To test the ability of the product to meet minimal customer needs.**
- (b) Get as much revenue as we can as early as we can.
- (c) Identify bugs in a product with a fixed feature set that meets a set of requirements.
- (d) All of the above.

The answer is (a). An MVP is an **experiment**, not a revenue play and not a QA exercise.

It is not a full product — but it *is* a product

The distinction the course insists on: an MVP is not a full product, but it is a **product, not a prototype**. It has to actually work.

> "By far the dominant reason for not releasing sooner was a reluctance to trade the dream of success for the reality of feedback."
>
> — Kent Beck, *Approaching a Minimum Viable Product* (August 2009)

That quote is the same failure mode Paul Graham describes in lean-startup[1], from the other direction: shipping is avoided because shipping produces information, and information can be disappointing.

Prototype vs MVP

Prototype	MVP
Use for visualising and testing product ideas	Functional product with core features
Often not actually functional	Must be functional (even if minimal)
Super fast to build and test	Requires working code, deployment, etc.
Aims to test and refine ideas	Aims to test **market fit**
Ideas tested in a "controlled" environment	**Released to the market**

The dividing line is the last row: a prototype is shown to people, an MVP is released to them.

Six principles for an MVP

1. **KISS** — keep it simple, stupid.
2. **Fast to build.**
3. **Positive user experience.**
4. **Early adopters** — build for them, not the majority (see customer-discovery[2]).
5. **Iterate and refine.**
6. **Set success metrics.**

Principle 6 is the one that connects back to test-cards-and-learning-cards[3]: without a success metric agreed in advance, the MVP produces impressions rather than evidence.

Types of MVP

Not all MVPs are software:

Type	What it is
Pre-order	Take orders before the thing exists — tests willingness to pay directly
Show and tell	Demonstrate the concept and measure the reaction

[1] courses/comp1100/lean-startup.pdf
[2] courses/comp1100/customer-discovery.pdf
[3] courses/comp1100/test-cards-and-learning-cards.pdf

Type	What it is
Audience building	Build the audience first, product second
"Wizard of Oz" product	The customer-facing experience is real; the machinery behind it is a human
Digital product	An actual, minimal, working piece of software

Different MVP types let you run **different experiments** — choose the one that tests the hypothesis you actually have. If the open question is "will anyone pay?", a pre-order tests it far faster than building the product would.

Competitors

The MVP has to be minimum *relative to what already exists*. The value proposition diagram from value-proposition-canvas[4] returns here — what your customer wants, what you do well, and **what your competitors do well**. Features your competitors already deliver well may be table stakes rather than optional.

Key takeaways

- MVP = the **most important features**.
- MVP purpose: **experiment!**
- Simple and easy to build.
- Different MVPs allow us to run different experiments.

See prototyping[5] for the cheaper things to build first.

[4] courses/comp1100/value-proposition-canvas.pdf
[5] courses/comp1100/prototyping.pdf