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TRAINER'S MANUAL

BUSINESS IDEA TESTING FOR MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS

23/06/2025

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01   **Introduction**

This manual is designed for business coaches and trainers working with people with migration, refugee, and asylum-seeking backgrounds who are interested in starting their own business in the EU. Its goal is to help trainers design and deliver hands-on, engaging training that enables aspiring entrepreneurs to test and validate their business ideas — even with limited language skills or little prior knowledge.

Migrant entrepreneurs are some of the most active business creators in Europe. However, they often face unique challenges, especially in understanding the needs, preferences, and behaviour of customers in a new country. They may also be unfamiliar with how to recognise relevant business opportunities or how to get early feedback from potential clients.

Cultural differences and unfamiliar consumer behaviour and expectations can all affect whether an idea works — or not.

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That's why testing is critical. It allows entrepreneurs to check their assumptions before investing time, energy, and money into an idea that might not fly. It also builds confidence, opens doors to useful feedback, and creates valuable learning – fast and safely. Results of the training may validate that the entrepreneur is on the right track and function as proof when raising funds or applying for a bank loan for starting a business.

Why Test Business Ideas?

- It saves time and money. Testing avoids building something no one wants.
- It reduces risk. Especially important for people with limited resources or networks.
- It builds skills and confidence. Hands-on practice helps entrepreneurs move from idea to action.
- It's about learning, not perfection. Failure in testing is a success if you learn from it.
- No advanced language skills, business background, or significant funding are required–anyone can start testing, even in small steps.

This manual includes methods, examples, tips, and tools to help you design and deliver business idea testing workshops or organise testing events. You can use it as a guide when planning a short session, a full-day training, or a multi-day programme – in person or online. Let's help entrepreneurs learn by doing and take smart first steps toward building a business that works!

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02 Testing Business Ideas

Business idea testing brings many benefits to new entrepreneurs. It's especially useful for those who may not be familiar with the local market, customer expectations, or regulations yet.

How Testing Helps Participants

- Validate whether there is real demand for their product or service.
- Gather honest feedback from potential customers–not just friends and family
- Refine their ideas based on real-world experience and observations.
- Build confidence and develop entrepreneurial skills.
- Discover whether entrepreneurship aligns with their personal goals and lifestyle.

Most importantly, testing supports learning through action. It's not about success or failure—it's about discovering what works.

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Coaching Approach: Supporting Learning, Not Giving Answers

When working with migrants and refugees, a coaching mindset is essential. Many participants may expect trainers to give them direct advice, but the real value comes from helping them discover answers on their own.

The trainer's role is to create a safe, encouraging space where participants can explore, test, and reflect on their ideas. This means asking open-ended questions, offering structure and encouragement, and accepting that each participant learns at their own pace.

Main Goals of the Coaching Approach

- Encourage independent thinking and ownership.
- Help participants learn how to learn.
- Support decision-making with real-life information.
- Build confidence and soft skills through action.
- Treat failed tests as valuable learning opportunities.

Enabling participants to think independently and critically evaluate solutions is essential for long-term success, especially when they revisit the process in the future. Rather than relying on external support each time, this approach builds self-reliance and adaptability–even if their first business idea changes or doesn't work out.

Coaching Methods: Practical and People-centered

When coaching migrants and refugees in entrepreneurship, it's important to use methods that are hands-on, flexible, and responsive to diverse adult learning styles. Many participants may come from learning cultures where oral communication, visual tools, and learning-by-doing are more effective than written instructions. For example, people from the Global South often prefer verbal guidance over long written documents. That's why experiential, visual, and peer-based methods often work best when supporting business idea testing. These methods make the learning process more inclusive, practical, and enjoyable.

Below are key coaching methods you can use to support participants on their journey.

Guided Discovery and Open Questions

Instead of giving ready-made answers, encourage participants to explore ideas through guided questions. This builds ownership, reflection skills, and critical thinking.

For example: instead of saying "*Your price is too high*," ask "*What might make a customer feel that this price is worth paying?*"

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Example Questions to Use During Sessions:

- *Who is most likely to need or benefit from your product right now—and how can you reach them?*
- *Why would someone choose your solution over what they are already using today?*
- *Where could you quickly and easily test this idea to get honest feedback?*
- *What assumptions are you making about your customer's needs, habits, or budget? How can you test them?*

Peer Learning and Sharing Experiences

Participants often benefit greatly from learning with and from each other. Encourage group discussions, feedback circles, and peer support. You can:

- Organize regular group check-ins or brainstorming sessions.
- Use collaborative digital platforms where participants share their challenges, test results, and small wins.
- Invite former participants or more experienced entrepreneurs to share their experiences and insights.

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Role-play: Practicing Real-life Scenarios

Role play is a powerful coaching method that helps participants simulate real-life business interactions, such as pitching to customers, negotiating with suppliers, or receiving feedback. It allows entrepreneurs to build confidence, practice communication, and refine their value proposition in a safe environment. Trainers can guide role play sessions using realistic scenarios and structured feedback. This method is especially effective for participants with limited real-world experience or language barriers. Reflection after the exercise deepens learning and strengthens future performance.

Customer Discovery Interviews

Teach participants how to approach and talk to potential customers to better understand their needs. Start with classroom role-plays to build confidence, and then encourage each participant to interview at least 3–5 people. After the interviews, reflect together: *What surprised them? What did they learn? What might they do differently?*

Testing at Real Events

Encourage participants to test their ideas in real environments such as pop-up events, markets, or through online platforms. These small-scale experiments provide valuable feedback and boost confidence. You'll find more detailed guidance on how to organise these activities in Chapter 4.

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Simple Prototyping

Support participants in creating a basic, low-cost version of their product or service to help visualize the idea and gather feedback. The goal is not perfection, but visibility–making the idea tangible enough to test, learn from, and refine. Examples of simple prototypes include:

- A sketch, mood board, or visual concept
- A handmade sample, mock-up, or model
- A social media post, flyer, or simple landing page to simulate promotion or sales

Visual Tools and Templates

Using visual aids can help participants structure their thoughts and track progress throughout the testing journey. Materials should be kept simple, accessible, and – where possible – offered in multiple languages to accommodate diverse language backgrounds. Useful tools include:

- Simplified business model canvases to map out key elements of the idea
- Testing and feedback checklists to guide practical experiments
- Pitch preparation templates to structure storytelling and presentation

These tools promote clarity, build confidence, and make learning visible by helping participants reflect on how their ideas evolve over time.
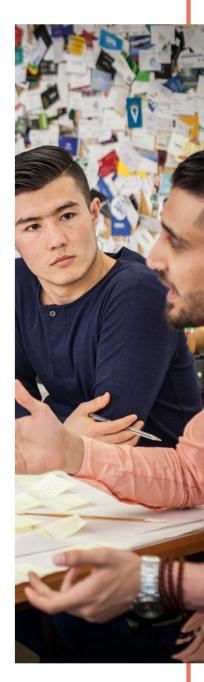
Real-life Examples and Storytelling

Sharing concrete stories from other entrepreneurs is a powerful way to inspire and build trust. Whenever possible, include examples from participants with similar backgrounds or situations. This helps others see what's possible and makes abstract ideas more relatable.

Encouraging Reflection

After each activity or test, guide participants to pause and reflect on what they've done. Use simple and accessible formats like:

- A short reflection journal (written or voice-recorded)
- Group debriefs or sharing circles
- One-on-one coaching discussions

This reflection process is key to transforming action into learning. It also helps participants gain confidence, see their progress, and plan next steps with purpose.

03 Designing a Training on Business Idea Testing

Testing business ideas is more than just a stage; it is a way of thinking that helps entrepreneurs determine viability, improve their product, and build resilience. For aspiring migrant and refugee entrepreneurs, this mindset is especially valuable, as it empowers them to take action even in unfamiliar markets or with limited resources.

For trainers, designing this kind of training requires a blend of flexibility, empathy, and structure. It means creating inclusive spaces where participants can experiment, reflect, and iterate without fear of failure. The focus should be on practical experience, hands-on learning, and tools that are adaptable to different language levels, backgrounds, and stages of idea development. Ultimately, business idea testing training is about enabling participants to move from abstract ideas to informed action – through learning by doing.

This chapter provides essential components for creating learning objectives, organising effective training, and assessing results in various settings.

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Learning Goals

Clear, measurable learning goals serve as the foundation of any effective training. They guide content development, define success, and align expectations between trainers and participants.

How to Define Learning Goals

- Start with the end in mind: Ask, *"What should participants be able to do or understand after the training?"*
- Focus on capabilities, not just knowledge: Prioritise entrepreneurial mindsets and skills such as market testing, feedback analysis, and communication.
- Use active verbs: e.g., identify, prototype, test, evaluate, adapt.
- Adapt to starting levels by accounting for participants' prior knowledge and language abilities. Learning goals may vary for someone who is just beginning to explore an idea compared to someone who is close to launching a product.

Examples of Business Idea Testing Learning Goals:

- Understand the concept and purpose of business idea testing.
- Identify a target customer and define key assumptions to test.
- Develop a simple MVP (minimum viable product) using available resources.
- Carry out at least one real-world test or validation activity.
- Evaluate feedback and determine next steps (e.g., pivot, iterate, or proceed).

Planning a Training

Designing training that is both practical and inclusive requires careful consideration of participants' diversity and the realities of the local ecosystem.

Key Design Elements

1. Length and Format

- Match training length (e.g., 3 days, 3 weeks, 2 months) to participants' availability and learning pace.
- Consider delivery format: online, offline, hybrid.
- Break learning into sprints, with room for application between sessions.

2. Content

- Customer understanding: identifying real needs.
- Solution & MVP: creating quick, low-cost prototypes.
- Testing & feedback: conducting user interviews, pop-up events, surveys.
- Product development and iteration: reflecting and making changes based on data.
- Communication: pitching the refined idea to peers or potential customers.

3. Coaching Diverse Participants

- Language: Use visuals, role-play, simple templates, and peer support. Explain and translate key terms when possible and use everyday language.
- Idea maturity: Allow parallel paths–some may ideate while others test. Use group coaching to cross-pollinate learning.
- Cultural and business backgrounds: Stay curious. Frame training around principles, not assumptions about markets or business models.
- Inclusivity: Use exercises that support diverse learning styles (visual, experiential, social) and build confidence.

4. Experiential Components

- Organise real-life testing events: markets, cafés, online showcases, networking events.
- Create conditions where failure is safe and learning is visible.
- Partner with local stakeholders (e.g. companies, banks, municipalities, NGOs, universities) for access and visibility.

5. Support Structures

- Use home assignments, templates, and 1:1 coaching.
- Share responsibilities: encourage participants to co-lead parts of sessions or promote their test events.
- Use tools like Miro, Trello, Google Drive, or Canva to manage assignments and showcase outcomes.

Measuring Outcomes and Impact

Evaluation should go beyond attendance and participant satisfaction to capture meaningful learning, behavioural change, and real-world outcomes.

What is Learning and Impact

- Learning is the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It can be measured through self-assessment, peer feedback, and performance in exercises.
- Impact is the longer-term change in behaviour, confidence, and outcomes (e.g., launching a product, forming partnerships, earning first revenue).

How to Measure Learning

- Before/after self-assessments (e.g. *"How confident do you feel taking your business idea forward?"*)
- Trainer observations during role-plays and pitches.
- Reflection journals or video logs.
- Completion of practical tasks, like MVP creation or real-world testing.
- Peer feedback sessions to assess clarity, communication, and collaboration.

How to Measure Impact

- Conduct follow-up interviews or surveys.
- Assess participant confidence and mindset change through pre/post reflections or self-evaluations.
- Collect stories of change (e.g., starting sales, registering a business, pivoting after testing).
- Track quantitative indicators such as number of ideas tested, feedback collected, prototypes built, or events attended.
- Gather partner feedback (e.g., from event hosts, mentors, or collaborators) on participant engagement and outcomes.
- Monitor continued entrepreneurial activity, such as joining new programmes, applying for funding, or launching online presence

Important note: Not every participant will launch a business – but increased entrepreneurial awareness, confidence, and the ability to test ideas are valuable outcomes.

Final Tips for Trainers

- Embrace iteration: Your training design is also a prototype. Gather feedback and improve.
- Celebrate small wins: Building confidence is often the first impact.
- Connect training to ecosystems: Bring in mentors, peers, and partners to create continuity beyond the training.

A well-designed training in business idea testing serves as a bridge — from ideas to action, from isolation to community, and from potential to real-world impact.

04 How to Organise a Business Idea Testing Event

Organising a business idea testing event is a powerful experiential learning tool for aspiring migrant and refugee entrepreneurs. These events give real-world exposure, valuable customer insights, and a platform for making informed business decisions.

This chapter guides trainers step by step in planning, facilitating, and evaluating impactful testing events.

It's All About Learning

The primary goal of any business idea testing event is learning–not selling. Remind participants that every interaction, whether it leads to a sale or not, and every piece of feedback is a valuable opportunity to refine their concept.

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Preparing the Entrepreneurs

Mental preparation is crucial. Many participants will face public exposure, receive blunt feedback, and possibly confront doubts about their idea. Trainers should:

- Normalise constructive criticism as part of growth.
- Encourage a "test, learn, and adapt" mindset.
- Reinforce that success isn't measured by revenue but by what's learnt.
- Provide examples of communication styles common in the local context, as misunderstandstandings around direct or indirect feedback can significantly affect how participants interpret customer reactions and coaching input.

Ensure Entrepreneurs Learn to:

- Set clear goals for testing *(e.g., how much potential customers are willing to pay, which features influence purchase decisions, preferred delivery methods, or whether to target B2B or B2C customers).*
- Define measurable testing metrics *(e.g., percentage of visitors who make a purchase, proportion of respondents showing interest, number of new followers on Instagram)*
- Set realistic expectations based on available resources and the testing context.

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How to Organise a Business Idea Testing Event

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- Collect feedback and track insights from customers.
- Analyse the results of testing.
- Make business decisions based on the results.
- Take next steps on product or business development based on the testing results.
- Adapt messaging based on audience response.
- Balance promotion with authenticity.

Coaching Before the Event Can Include:

- Product/service development (where to source materials, prototyping, pricing strategies)
- Marketing & sales skills (how to make marketing materials, promotion tactics, how to pitch to clients)
- Financial management (budgeting, tax requirements, bookkeeping)

Examples of Home Assignments:

- Create a clear and competitive price list.
- Develop a visual display plan (e.g. booth layout, signage, product arrangement).
- Marketing plan and promoting activities.
- Practice pitching to different types of audiences.
- Visit a local market or sales event to observe customer behaviour and benchmark presentation styles.
- Collect and analyse customer feedback before the actual testing event to refine the offering.

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To wrap up the learning process, hold a debriefing session with the entrepreneurs after the event to discuss results, share experiences, and gather their feedback. Whether you do this live or online, a group session encourages self-reflection, deepens learning, and creates opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange. Entrepreneurs can share observations and practical tips with each other, which is often incredibly useful and helps build connections among them.

The debriefing is also a good moment to revisit the original learning goals and highlight the key takeaways from the experience–otherwise, entrepreneurs may focus solely on how many sales they made, if sales were part of the event. Finally, the feedback you gather will help you improve your own coaching practice and continue developing as a trainer.

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Event Management in Practice

Organising a business idea testing event involves many moving parts, and careful planning is key to its success. When designing and executing the event, consider the following elements:

- **Format**: Choose a setup that aligns with the goals and audience–this could be a pop-up stand, café concept, market booth, interactive workshop, shop-in-a-shop, or an online testing format. Events can also be embedded within larger public gatherings for greater visibility.

- **Scale**: Define the size of the event based on your resources, venue, and participant needs. Keep it manageable while allowing for meaningful customer interaction and learning opportunities.

- **Budget:** Plan expenses realistically, taking into account what can be sourced through partnerships, sponsorships, or in-kind contributions. A clear budget helps balance ambition with feasibility.

- **Personnel:** Assemble a team that may include trainers, coordinators, and volunteers. Assign roles for planning, setup, support during the event, and follow-up.

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- **Project plan:** reate a clear project plan that outlines goals, tasks, timelines, roles, finances, and key partners. Project management tools, e.g. Trello, and shared timelines can help keep everyone aligned.

- **Communication and marketing**: Communicate consistently and clearly with all stakeholders– entrepreneurs, volunteers, partners, and attendees. Tailor messaging to each audience and ensure marketing efforts are shared among all involved.

- **Defined Roles**:

  - **Trainers** lead on event concept, coaching, coordination, partnerships, and logistics.

  - **Entrepreneurs** are responsible for preparing their products or services, setting up their space, engaging with customers, and promoting their participation.

  - **Volunteers** can support with setup and decoration, social media coverage, content capture (photos, video), and helping manage customer flow during the event.

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Management tools that support smooth execution:

- Trello / Monday – Task tracking and workflow management
- Miro – Visual collaboration (e.g., floor plans, idea mapping)
- Google Drive – Centralised storage for training materials, templates, and shared documents
- Canva – Designing marketing materials, posters, and social media assets
- Slack / WhatsApp / Telegram – Real-time communication with teams, volunteers, or participants.
- Google Forms / Typeform – Collecting feedback, RSVPs, or test results from customers

Before the event

- Set a high standard of quality – this demonstrates professionalism to entrepreneurs and builds trust with current and future partners.
- Clearly communicate expectations and responsibilities to entrepreneurs. Consider using a simple agreement to formalize their commitment.
- Make event promotion a shared responsibility — ensure each entrepreneur contributes to marketing through their own channels.
- Encourage commitment and reduce no-shows by setting clear expectations early and, if appropriate, introducing a no-show policy or fee.

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During the event

- Observe entrepreneurs in action and provide constructive feedback on areas such as customer engagement, product display, or pitching technique.
- Remind entrepreneurs to collect feedback and track data related to their testing goals, as it's easy to lose focus during a busy event.
- Encourage entrepreneurs and keep up the spirit, especially if the event has fewer customers than expected.
- Stay flexible and ready to adapt. Be prepared to solve unexpected issues or adjust plans in real time–such as changing the location, providing signage to guide customers, or troubleshooting technical challenges (e.g., internet access for mobile payments).

After the event

- Set aside time for cleanup, returning all equipment and props to their owners, wrapping up finances, and handling the many other small tasks that need attention.
- Hold a debriefing session not only with the entrepreneurs but also with your team to review the event, its goals and outcomes, and to reflect together on how to improve in the future.
- Thank all partners, customers, and volunteers, and share the key results or highlights of the event with them.

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Online Testing Events

When in-person events aren't feasible, digital platforms offer powerful, low-cost ways to validate demand.

Where to Test

- Social media
- Instagram/TikTok: Stories, polls, and live streams for instant feedback.
- Facebook/LinkedIn: Marketplace listings, live Q&As, or targeted group discussions.
- Community platforms
- Reddit, niche forums
- WhatsApp/Telegram groups
- Digital marketplaces (Etsy, Shopify trials)
- Online festivals, webinars, and workshops: Partner with virtual events for live demos.

What to Test

- Product appeal: Post different versions and track engagement, take pre-orders.
- Price points: Polls and offers of alternative prices / pricing concepts.
- Value proposition: Use short videos to test what messages resonate
- Delivery & service: Simulate transactions and fulfillment and collect feedback

How to Test

- Use polls and surveys to gather quick insights.
- Set up a simple webpage or online store to track clicks, follow the customer journey, take preorders, or collect feedback on the site's usability.
- Share videos showing how to use the product, explaining the delivery process, highlighting unique features, or showcasing how the product is made – then use the feedback, likes, and shares to gauge interest.
- Host an online workshop to test your service – for example, run a cooking or mindfulness class, or offer a short life coaching session – and measure success through sign-ups, participant feedback, and engagement.

Key Benefits of Online Testing

- Speed: Gather feedback within hours rather than weeks
- Cost: Accessible, often free or low-cost to implement
- Scale: Reach broader or global audiences beyond local pop-up events

Challenges of Online Testing

- Attendance: Attracting and retaining potential customers in a crowded digital space can be difficult
- Suitability: Not all business ideas translate well to online formats or digital validation methods

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Building Strategic Partnerships for Impact

When resources are limited, partnerships can significantly enhance the quality and reach of your testing event. The right partners help reduce costs, provide access to audiences you might not otherwise reach, and boost your event's credibility. They can contribute venues, promotional support, materials, and visibility–often with mutual benefit.

- **Venues** – Banks, shopping malls, schools, local festivals, or public events
- **Marketing Support** – Local newsletters, influencers, associations
- **Materials & Logistics** – Display tables (event rental companies), decorations (flower shops, theatres), and ingredients (local stores).
- **Audience Access** – Partner with businesses that can promote you to their customers (e.g., gyms, coworking spaces).

Tips for Securing Partnerships:

- **Align values and goals –** Choose partners whose mission, audience, or brand identity complements your initiative.
- **Be clear in your ask** – "Can you provide a venue for 3 hours to support aspiring entrepreneurs?"
- **Communicate the benefit –** Emphasize what they gain, e.g. brand exposure, direct engagement with their community, or contribution to a social impact cause
- **Follow Up** – Send a concise proposal, then share post-event results to nurture the relationship.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid in Partnerships

- **Unclear value exchange –** Always lead with the question, *"What's in it for the partner?"* Make sure the benefit to them is concrete and relevant.
- **Mismatched audiences** – Ensure your testing activity aligns with the event context. For example, avoid showcasing a children's toy brand at an adult-focused music festival.

Example of a Win-Win Partnership

A food startup partnered with a local café to host a tasting event–splitting costs while gaining access to the café's loyal customers. The café benefitted by offering an exciting pop-up experience (drawing in new visitors) and discovering potential new menu products from the startup. Look for partners who fill your gaps while creating equal value.

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Promoting the Event: Engaging Audiences and Maximising Reach

No audience, no learning. For business idea testing events to be meaningful, they must attract the right people–those who will provide useful feedback, ask relevant questions, and reflect real customer behaviour. Effective communication and promotion are essential to create this dynamic.

One of the most efficient strategies is to collaborate with existing events or community spaces. Piggybacking on their built-in audience saves effort, boosts visibility, and lends credibility to your participants' ideas.

Promotion Checklist

- Design and share a visually appealing event poster and social media assets (ensure entrepreneurs have access to these).
- Posts on your organisation's and partners' social media platforms.
- Encourage entrepreneurs to personally invite their networks (friends, family, diaspora, former colleagues)
- Include the event in your organisation's or partners' newsletters
- Submit event details to relevant local event calendars or community bulletins

Engaging Entrepreneurs in the Promotion Process

- **Clarify expectations early** – be clear about their role in promoting the event.
- **Provide communication materials** – share ready-to-use visuals and example messages.
- **Assign tasks and follow up** – ensure accountability for promotion-related actions.
- **Encourage a brand-building mindset** – help entrepreneurs see the value of storytelling and visibility as part of their business development.

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Results and Impact

Set clear learning objectives before the event begins, and remind participants that this is not a sales competition—it's a safe, supportive space to test ideas, adapt, and learn through real-world interaction.

Encouraging participants to actively track what they observe and experience helps them reflect and improve. It also provides trainers with valuable insight into learning and development.

What Participants Should Track:

- Sales numbers (if applicable)
- Which products or services sold—and which did nothat sold and what didn't
- What customers said, asked, or did during the interaction
- The characteristics of their customers (e.g., age, preferences)
- Their own confidence and and effectiveness in presenting their idea.

What Trainers and Programme Organisers Should Track:

- Number of iterations or improvements made after testing
- Participant satisfaction and self-reported learning
- Change in confidence levels (measured before and after via simple forms)
- New or continued partnerships formed during the process
- Entrepreneurial progress (e.g., launching a product, registering a business, building a brand)
- Use tools like pre- and post-event surveys, reflection exercises, interviews, and photos to document both learning and impact.

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05 How to Test Business Ideas in Practice - Case Examples

Case 1: Forward Incubator

Since 2017, Forward·Inc has empowered newcomers globally to explore entrepreneurship through a structured, hands-on approach. The cornerstone of this journey is the **Forward Incubator**, a five-month program that transforms abstract ideas into validated business ideas.

Participants, many of whom have fled conflict or economic instability, are given the tools, coaching, and community to test their ideas in real markets and get support from expert networks. Rather than relying on abstract theory, Forward Incubator emphasises learning by doing, helping entrepreneurs gain real-world insight through experimentation, feedback, and pitching.

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Preparing Entrepreneurs for Testing

Forward Incubator prepares entrepreneurs to test their business ideas through a clear, step-by-step process. This structured preparation ensures participants build the skills, confidence, and strategy needed to validate their ideas in the real world. Key steps in the process include:

- **Customer Discovery:** Understanding the problem-solution fit through interviews, surveys, and market research.
- **Experimentation Plan:** A structured Canva template that guides entrepreneurs in selecting experiments (e.g. pop-up sales, social media testing, prototypes) and expected outcomes.
- **Expert Consultations:** 1-on-1 meetings with experienced professionals to refine testing strategies and receive targeted feedback.
- **Experimentation Budget Competition:** Based on the quality of their plans, the top 8 entrepreneurs are awarded €250 each to conduct real-life experiments. These budgets help cover costs like materials, online ads, booth rentals, or digital tools.
- **Experimentation Execution:** Entrepreneurs execute their plans with the support of their team, validating their assumptions. To collect learnings, they are challenged to build an Experimentation Report including an activity log, pieces of evidence, learnings and budget execution.
- **Progress Tracking:** Student consultants and coaches help teams analyse outcomes and adjust their strategies.

This model not only equips entrepreneurs with tools but also builds the mindset and confidence needed for market interaction.

Resources and Collaboration

The Forward Incubator thrives on a collaborative infrastructure that involves multiple stakeholders and multiple platforms:

Team-Based Support

Each entrepreneur receives personalised guidance from a dedicated support team that includes:

- **Business Coach** – An experienced entrepreneur offering strategic guidance
- **Two Student Consultants** – University students supporting with hands-on support

Digital Tools and Platforms Used

- **Slack** – For daily communication and team coordination
- **Zoom** – For virtual workshops, coaching sessions, and meetings
- **Thinkific** – To host and deliver structured course content
- **Miro** – For collaborative visual planning and brainstorming
- **Canva** – To design presentations, visuals, and marketing assets
- **Google Drive** – For storing and sharing documents, templates, and reports

Structured Assignments and Templates

- Financial Forecast Model
- Lean Canvas
- Pitch Deck
- Pitch Video

Regular Monitoring: A "traffic light" system on Monday.com flags teams that may need additional support.

This system ensures participants receive consistent guidance, accountability, and peer interaction, building a strong foundation for business testing and growth.

Demo Day: Introduction to the external world

After months of learning and experimentation, entrepreneurs present their tested business and learnings during Demo Day. The top 18 entrepreneurs are selected through internal pitch review sessions and receive live feedback from panels of professionals and investors.

The top 6 entrepreneurs are chosen based on:
- 60% panel evaluation
- 40% of the audience voting

Winners receive tailored prizes such as mentorship, visibility, and resource support to help take their business to the next level.

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Results and Participant Impact

Testing through the Forward Incubator yields both concrete business results and personal transformation. In the 2024/2025 cohort:

- 124 participants took part in the program.
- 30 Entrepreneurs
- 32 Business coaches
- 62 Student consultants

- 80%+ of entrepreneurs validated a key assumption about their product, target customer, or pricing model.
- Over 60% developed a working prototype or made first sales during the program.
- 18 finalists pitched at Demo Day, with 6 winners receiving strategic prizes.

Graduates of the program leave not only with a business model but with a network, a tested strategy, and the confidence to launch.

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Real Impact in Practice: The Story of Marian Kerelos

Marian started the Incubator as an artist trying to build a community of peers in the Netherlands, connecting them on a platform where, via auction, artists could get a fair price for their work. During the programme, Marian tested her assumptions on three different levels:

- **Is there a desire in the audience to buy sustainable art?** She created one in-person event with more than 10 artists involved, auctioning their sustainable and upcycled pieces. She also created workshops to attract potential artists to use recycled materials in their pieces.

- **Should this community be built online?** She created a survey to spread about potential members of this future community to understand their pain points and needs. She created a mockup of the platform and set up social media pages.

- **Could she sell her art focused on dot painting?** For this, she prepared a booth to sell at a National Holiday Market in the Netherlands and evaluated the price customers were willing to pay for the pieces.

At the end of the programme, she pitched her idea on **Demo Day**, presenting AR@ as *"born from a simple yet profound idea:* to create a vibrant community space where sustainable artisans and crafters could not only thrive but also showcase their talents to eco-conscious consumers." She continued: *"At AR@, we have taken it a step further by introducing an auction gallery where bidders compete to acquire one-of-a-kind pieces crafted with love and care for our planet."*

"The inspiration behind our name, AR@, stems from the slang Egyptian term meaning "three or more R letters". This reflects our mission of bringing together a diverse group of artisans who are united by their commitment to sustainability. To add a touch of whimsy to our brand, our logo features a painter rat, symbolising how anyone, even a rat, can play a part in transforming trash into treasures. AR@ is more than just a marketplace; it is a celebration of craftsmanship, sustainability, and community. Join us in our journey to support talented artisans, protect the planet, and embrace the beauty of unique, handcrafted goods. Together, we can make a difference—one R at a time."

A couple of months after graduating, she used her new pitch deck and business plan to register her business with the Chamber of Commerce. Through a connection made during the experimentation phase of the programme, she developed the MVP of the platform. She found a co-founder and is now operating at full steam.

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Case 2: PLACE Network's Early-Stage Testing Model

At PLACE, business idea testing is introduced as a core entrepreneurial skill early in the participant's journey. Because PLACE participants are typically at an early ideation stage, with no product or service yet developed, the testing activities are designed to build mindset and confidence, rather than validate a finished offer.

Testing is embedded between all-day in-person workshops. During the first workshop, participants are introduced to the purpose of testing and explore different types of prototyping strategies, including:

- Wizard of Oz
- Concierge
- Physical prototypes
- Digital mock-ups
- User walkthroughs

In the workshops, participants create their own **User Testing Plan**, which includes:

- **Their learning objective** (e.g., *"Do people understand the core concept?"* or *"What problem do users expect this solution to solve?"*)
- **The test type and format**
- **The assumption they are testing and the hypothesis**
- **Tools and logistics**
- **Success indicators and how to measure them**
- **Their MVP concept**, even if still rough

Following the session, participants are asked to carry out a small-scale, self-directed test as homework. This may involve interviewing potential users, running brief simulations, creating visual or digital mock-ups, or testing key messages through social media or informal conversations.

The PLACE team provides light-touch coaching, access to resources and space, and helps connect participants with potential testers. However, the core emphasis remains on cultivating:

- Ownership
- Initiative
- Self-reflection

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Each participant answers a series of guided questions after their test, such as:

- *What were the measurable outcomes?*
- *What feedback did you receive?*
- *What surprised you the most about your assumptions?*
- *What will you change about your idea based on this experience?*

These reflections are then brought into the next workshop, which focuses on pitching. By this point, participants have not only practised describing their project idea but have also engaged with potential users and can speak more confidently about their assumptions, having tested them, what they've learnt, and what they plan to do next.

Because most PLACE participants are testing for the very first time, the learning emphasis is not on whether their idea is "ready to launch" but on developing the testing mindset: testing in small steps, testing often, and testing specific aspects of an idea at a time.

This approach demystifies the testing process, builds entrepreneurial confidence, and prepares participants to continue refining their projects beyond the programme.

Case 3: Testing Business Ideas at Flow Festival with Startup Refugees

Since 2017, Startup Refugees has partnered with the Helsinki-based Flow Festival to offer aspiring immigrant entrepreneurs a unique real-world testing ground for their business ideas. Flow Festival, one of Finland's leading music and cultural festivals, attracts 90,000 visitors over three days, creating an ideal environment for live customer interaction. By leveraging this setting, Startup Refugees enables entrepreneurs to engage directly with potential customers, observe real-time feedback, and refine their ideas. This collaboration showcases a model of experiential learning, demonstrating how hands-on opportunities can empower newcomers to explore entrepreneurship in a supportive and inspiring context.

Over the years, a wide variety of business concepts have been piloted through this initiative. These include:

- Food and beverage businesses
- Massage and yoga services
- Clothing, accessories, and jewelry brands
- Tattoo artistry (with temporary tattoos)
- Hair salons and barbershops
- Photography, art, and graphic design
- Henna art
- Perfume and fragrance brand

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Preparing Entrepreneurs

Startup Refugees ensures that each entrepreneur is well-equipped to make the most of the Flow Festival opportunity through coaching and practical workshops. These sessions cover key aspects of early-stage business development, including:

- Product development
- Branding and marketing
- Basic financial management and pricing strategies
- Sales and customer interaction

In addition to group sessions, participants receive one-on-one coaching, offering tailored guidance based on their business concept and individual needs. Entrepreneurs are also supported in sourcing materials, preparing marketing content, and refining their messaging to suit the festival audience.

In some years, participants have also taken part in co-design sessions for the event space, contributing ideas for layout, décor, and customer experience. This participatory approach builds a sense of ownership and reinforces design thinking principles in action.

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Resources and Collaboration

While Flow Festival has offered Startup Refugees a dedicated space at the event, Startup Refugees has taken on the logistics and creative planning, including tent rental and electricity, and decor and furnishing.

Given a modest budget, Startup Refugees has creatively sourced sponsorships and community support, including:

- Borrowed furniture and decorations from local theaters
- Floral sponsorships from nearby flower shops
- Upcycled materials from the Recycling Center and the Red Cross Kontti second-hand stores
- Design and floorplan support was provided by students from Aalto University's School of Arts, Design and Architecture, who also took part in the on-site setup and execution.

This collaborative ecosystem highlights how local partnerships can enrich entrepreneurial programmes without substantial financial investment.

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Results and Participant Impact

Testing at Flow Festival has yielded not only valuable business insights but also intangible benefits like confidence, credibility, and community building. Here are some reflections from past participants:

"*Flow Festival was my first real-life sales experience in Finland. I'm really happy with how it went. It helped me understand the local market and what Finnish customers are looking for much better.*"

"*It was valuable to observe which products performed best and what customers wanted to see available.*"

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06 What next?

Testing business ideas is not a one-time activity, but a mindset and practice that evolves with each step an entrepreneur takes. For trainers working with migrants and refugees, facilitating this journey is not only about teaching methods and running workshops. It's about building confidence, creating safe spaces to try, fail, learn, and try again, and supporting participants in navigating unfamiliar business ecosystems. From pop-up events and customer interviews to prototyping and role-playing, these methods help bridge the gap between ideas and sustainable business models. Trainers have a crucial role in not only introducing these tools, but also adapting them to fit the individual, cultural, and logistical realities of each participant.

In this work, remember that success doesn't always mean launching a business immediately. Sometimes, it's learning to pitch confidently, receiving critical feedback, or discovering that entrepreneurship might not be the right path—for now. These too are wins.

Good luck for your journey as a business idea testing trainer!

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Further Reading & Resources

- https://www.strategyzer.com/ – Creators of the Business Model Canvas and Value Proposition Design, offering books, tools, and online training.

- https://leanstack.com/ – Tools and coaching for Lean Canvas and problem/solution validation.

- https://foundr.com/ – Practical startup advice and free resources on idea validation and customer discovery.

- https://www.ideou.com/ – Courses and insights on human-centered business innovation from IDEO.

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In collaboration with: