Reflective Essay

Communication & Stakeholder Management

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents **2**
Introduction **3**
Knowledge Areas **4**
Stakeholder Management 4
Storytelling 6
Pitching 7
Visual Presentations 9
Public Speaking 10
Negotiating 12
Use of generative AI **14**
Sources **15**
Appendix A **16**
Appendix B **18**
Appendix C **19**

Introduction

Last semester I followed the course Communication & Stakeholder Management at CODE University of Applied Sciences. In this essay, for the knowledge areas Stakeholder Management, Storytelling, Pitching, Visual Presentations, Public Speaking and Negotiating, I will shortly recap the course theory after which I will dive deeper into the application of the theory and accordingly reflect on what exactly I learned and how this helped me develop myself both personally and professionally.

On another note, one should be aware that I am using a mix of two different projects throughout this essay to illustrate my learnings. I do this because I decided to end one of the projects near the end of the semester while starting another one at the same time. Let me explain the two projects here to avoid confusion for the rest of the essay. Jimmy's is the first project I worked on. The concept encompasses a fast food fast health restaurant providing quick, nutritious and affordable meals on location. The target customers are gym-goers who also watch their diet. The reason my partner, Roos Moorees, and I decided not to continue this project is due to lack of personal experience within the field, very high competition in the market and an unrealistic value proposition. The project I started at the same time I decided to discontinue Jimmy's is called Answer Engine Studio. This is an agency providing so-called Generative Engine Optimization which helps increase a brand's visibility within LLM's like ChatGPT, Copilot or Perplexity. I started researching this topic with a friend of mine, and now business partner, called Gabriel Rose (Apollo 11 CODE student). At this point in the project we are starting to understand how to utilize third party software to improve AI visibility for CODE University of Applied Sciences itself, as we reached an agreement to help their marketing team with this matter.

Knowledge Areas

Stakeholder Management

Theory

First of all, I now understand that stakeholders include everybody who has an interest (direct or indirect, financially or not financially motivated). Furthermore, stakeholders can be identified by making use of the stakeholder wheel, where one identifies stakeholders based on their relation to the company (core, direct or indirect). One can also make use of the stakeholder matrix which segments stakeholders based on the level of power and interest they have in a project. This is mapped out in a 2 by 2 matrix which allows you to see how much priority every stakeholder needs and also helps identify the communication needs of every stakeholder. Above all I also learned that finger-pointing towards other stakeholders is a vicious circle and should be avoided at all cost. The application and reflection of some will be presented below, including some other learnings not mentioned earlier.

Application

In Jimmy's case I used the stakeholder wheel map, where the core stakeholders include the team (group product manager, design lead, sales lead, hr, etc.), primary stakeholders include gym-goers, gym partners, suppliers, employees and investors while secondary stakeholders include the government, social media, competitors like Leon, Green & Protein, Prep my Meal McDonalds etc., and also people who advised me like lecturers Roland Fassauer, Pras Gunasekera and student Adonis Almagro. In addition, I made a stakeholder interest map which helped me define interests, estimated impact, estimated priority and decide how often and in what way each stakeholder should be communicated with. For example, the team has the highest impact and priority which is addressed by weekly meetings. Investors and suppliers on the other hand also have a high impact but lower priority, which are addressed accordingly by holding quarterly meetings. Furthermore, customers will be addressed through a weekly newsletter and website because they have both medium impact and priority. For more examples about how other stakeholders are addressed, look into Appendix A.

In Answer Engine Studio's case I once again used the stakeholder wheel map to clarify which stakeholders I have to deal with in this stage of the project. The core stakeholders here include me, Gabriel Rose, Pablo Rippol and Alberto Bueno. The primary stakeholders include our potential clients (B2B SaaS companies), CODE University of Applied Sciences (we are improving their GEO for them), software providers such as Scrunch AI, Profound, Superlines or another while secondary stakeholders include LLM providers like ChatGPT, Copilot and more, and competing agencies providing the same services as we do. The power-interest matrix (Appendix A) put our team in high/high, after which we decided to set weekly 60-min sprints.

In the Deep Dive Workshop, I applied the theory of using facts and data instead of opinions (SIMON, 2015). The game was framed as within a beverage company. I remember I had the role of a customer, where during the game I got a challenge to create a fictional social media message. I then had to present this message to the other players and would earn points if the majority voted for it. The choice was simple: I either write a message promoting the transparency and health of the beverage, or one bashing these same values. This was because promoting the transparency and health would win me the votes of Aleksey (Director of beverage company), Roos (chairwoman of meeting) and Amelie (Public relations of beverage company or something similar if I recall correctly), because they had interest in the company's success, whereas Sohalia (press criticising the beverage company) had interest in the company's ''downfall''. Maybe the roles were a little different, but what matters is that I made the decision to eventually write a message promoting the beverage company on its transparency and health so I could gain the most amount of votes, which would help me win the game. A purely data-driven approach.

Reflection

The most important thing I learned is definitely how to identify stakeholders and prioritise/communicate with them accordingly. Even though I haven't had the chance to fully implement these learnings yet, I am confident they will help me in my future projects where stakeholder management will undoubtedly play a role. For example where, at this moment of writing, Answer Engine Studio just agreed with CODE to help them with their generative engine optimization. In this case it will become important to make sure that both CODE and us, the team, stay aligned on the same vision and satisfied. For this I will make use of the before mentioned frameworks/maps, where for example Thomas Bachem and fellow students will also have to be taken into account as stakeholders.

Another learning I found very valuable is to base certain decisions on merely data and facts instead of opinions. In the workshop, this approach really helped me to get a clear image of what every stakeholder needs and wants, and allowed me to make a decision that is grounded in truth instead of just feelings.

Storytelling

Theory

A common way to appeal to your customers is by inviting them into a story, where they are the hero and you, the brand, the guide. This character has a problem, who meets a guide, who gives them a plan that calls them to action which results in success for this character.

Application

In pitching Jimmy's for Better Products and the final pitch for this course, I used the storytelling-technique of introducing a problem with an example and solution: ''Imagine you are a 21 year old who works out four times a week and just finished your workout at 5pm. You try to combine your workouts with eating healthy food supporting muscle growth, long lectures and a side job twice a week, all while trying to maintain your social life. Sounds difficult right? Well that's exactly what we thought. Jimmy's helps you by providing fast, nutritious and affordable food that fits perfectly into your schedule.'' This allowed the audience to empathize with the problem and feel engaged.

I also used a similar approach for a presentation in the third lecture of this course. This is the character with a problem who meets a guide, who gives them a call to action which results in success. In my case I created the character Maya, who is a student on a budget but wants to eat healthy to grow muscles and doesn't want to spend precious time cooking. She encounters the problem that there is no option close or next to her gym that's fast, cheap, and genuinely healthy at the same time. She's tired of compromising protein without veggies, speed without quality, price without nutrition, and finds that eating well shouldn't be a luxury for people trying to do the right thing. But then she meets Jimmy's, who gives her a plan: Swing by Jimmy's after your workout, pick your healthy meal, be out in minutes and grow sustainably. Jimmy's calls her to action: Come to Jimmy's today! She finally finds success: Maya eats a balanced, macro-friendly meal in under 5 minutes without overspending. She tracks steady strength gains and better recovery.

Besides, I used the same story in the pitch for a practice sales pitch with Erika Root. Root is ex-Google, currently head of sales of a startup named GAIA. In this practice sales call I asked her if she could roleplay as a potential client to which I would try to sell. I accompanied this pitch with a pitch deck. I also tried to adjust the pitch a little bit so that it matched the audience. And I say tried because it turned out that it still didn't completely match the audience which I address in the reflection.

Reflection

After I pitched, Root gave the feedback that in a discovery sales call, you don't use slides (unless the client asks for very specific examples). You also don't start reciting your entire pre-written story/pitch, but rather just asking questions. Then you show that you care about the customer's interest, otherwise it becomes too obvious that you are just trying to sell to them. So next time I will not use a story-based pitch deck in a discovery call but instead a question-led discovery framework like SPICED (Situation, Pain, Impact, Critical Event and Decision).

What I think did work well however is the hero/guide framework in combination with the elevator pitch to introduce your project to the average joe (eg. friends, colleagues, professors etc.). This makes the problem easier to understand and provides a clear and concise understanding of the solution you are presenting. And, with small but the right adjustments, you can also use the framework for other target audiences making it very versatile.

Pitching

Theory

Besides a good microphone and camera, in remote situations you must always ensure that both your hands and head are visible to allow the audience to see your hand gestures as opposed to only seeing your face. Also because it is even harder to keep attention in remote situations, it is advised to include interactions every 3 to 5 minutes as opposed to every 10 minutes in person. On top of that, making a connection remotely is also harder, which is why you should try to look into the camera 80% of the time.

Application

I pitched my first startup idea, Jimmy's, to Pras Gunasekera, Roland Fassauer and Adonis Almagro each separately for feedback and ideas. Both Pras and Roland were in the first few weeks of the semester to ask guiding questions on how to actually start such an ambitious project, while I reached out to Almagro much later after we did the validations. I elevator pitched the idea orally, without any slides to back it up. In this pitch I used the example problem and solution framework I also used before: ''Imagine you are a 21 year old who works out four times a week and just finished your workout at 5pm. You try to combine your workouts with eating healthy food supporting muscle growth, long lectures and a side job twice a week, all while trying to maintain your social life. Sounds difficult right? Well that's exactly what we thought. Jimmy's helps you by providing, nutritious and affordable food that fits perfectly into your schedule.''

For lecture 5 about Presenting we had to prepare a 3 minute presentation and present this online accordingly. For this presentation, we were each assigned a topic pre-selected by the lecturer to make sure we focussed on the presentation and not too much on the content. In my case, I had to make a presentation about the future of artificial intelligence in daily life. First of all, I made use of storytelling by introducing an example problem and then presenting value (the solution). In my case this included an example of someone's job application being rejected by AI without explanation, after which I presented the solution of always keeping humans in the loop and doing double fact checks. Furthermore, in this presentation I also applied the principle of looking into the camera 80% of the time.

Another example where I applied the 80% rule and kept attention every 3 to 5 minutes (I asked questions like ''have you ever experienced that?'' during the storytelling aspect of the pitch) was in the practice sales call with Erika Root. I arranged this meeting with Erika, who I got to know through the course How to Start a Startup as a guest lecturer. I asked Erika if I could practice selling my service, an agency providing Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) for companies, so she could give me valuable feedback and insights before I actually start selling my service to real companies. This meeting was also remote, where I applied the tips and tricks I learned before once again, now also ensuring my hands were visible. I pitched my service here with the use of a pitch deck, where I included the example problem and solution approach.

Reflection

I think the most valuable thing I learned that I didn't know before is how to properly present yourself in a remote situation. Even though remote meetings were quite common for me already, I never took a moment to think about how to optimize presenting in them. Moving forward, because of the tips and tricks mentioned above, I now can maximize my presence by having enough gesture space, 80% eye contact and making use of the 3-5 minute rule, maintaining as much clarity and professionalism as possible.

Furthermore, some advantages of online presenting I became aware of which I am able to leverage now, (besides geographically) are screensharing, time efficiency and ease of recording for review. However, I still prefer in-person meetings because I find them to be more engaging as you can better connect with your attendees physically than virtually.

Visual Presentations

Theory

While presenting with visual materials one should use the following guidelines: no more than 6 ‘objects’ on a slide, black background (this puts the spotlight on the presenter instead of slides), important things require big sizes for attention, use contrast to your advantage and don’t use page numbers on slides.

Application

I applied these guidelines in pitch decks for both Jimmy’s and Answer Engine Studio. In every slide, I made sure I didn’t use more than 6 ‘objects’. On top of that, I kept the background relatively dark while using contrast to highlight the keywords (see Appendix B for a few example slides). Furthermore, I only used 2 colors with one neutral color as “This creates cohesion and prevents your slides from looking chaotic.”, according to Bestel (2025).

Reflection

Although it’s not a lot, I still learned these very useful guidelines that will change the way I present with visual material, allowing me to present my concepts more convincingly. Before I was aware of these guidelines, I always made use of white backgrounds where I made the important aspects considerably smaller than the less important title of a slide. I also used to put too many objects on my slide. I now know to avoid this and instead use these guidelines to my advantage.

Public Speaking

Theory

Warming up your voice is a good way to prepare for a presentation. This can be done using the articulation exercises: *Pe-te-ke*, *Be-de-ge*, *Ge-de-ke*, lip rolls, tongue circles and more. A body warm up in combination can help you feel relaxed on stage. This is achieved by doing some basic stretches, shaking out your arms and legs, turning your head from side to side and more.

A good way to capture attention is to include proper storytelling, where you start with an example problem after which you show how you provide value by solving this problem. Ways to deal with stage fright include but are not limited to taking deep breaths, holding something in your hands, collecting your thoughts, speaking 1 to 1 instead of 500 at once and picturing yourself confident.

Application

I applied these theories in practice during and before my presentation at better products, where I presented Jimmy's with the help of a pitch deck. Because I was late, everybody was already sitting in the classroom which allowed me to do some articulation exercises before entering the room so my voice would be warm. Right before presenting, I just kept my attention fully focussed towards the people around me and listened with complete attention to the current presenters, instead of stressing about what to say and looking up notes last minute.

I also applied some of these concepts when I presented in front of the class for the course How to Start a Startup. There we had the assignment to design a MVP (minimum viable product) test for a very specific example case within 20 minutes with 2 other people. After the timer rang, all three groups had to present their MVP after which a winner was chosen. I presented the MVP my team and I designed, and just before presenting I made sure I took a deep breath and stayed extra down to earth, once again focussing my attention outwards and on other people. We won the small competition.

The last case in which I applied these concepts is for the pitch in the final lecture of this course, where I presented together with Roos our Jimmy’s concept once again. We did a full body and voice warm-up before with the entire class. During this presentation I forgot some parts of the text I wanted to say, but instead of freezing I just continued like nothing happened. Here I applied fake it until you make it which I learned from the first lecture where we had to do powerpoint karaoke. More about this right below.

Reflection

I remember I was really really nervous to do the powerpoint karaoke because I knew (or had the limiting belief about myself) that I was not the best at both presenting and improvising. During the presentation these beliefs became true, as I froze at a certain point and afterwards just kept stumbling over words. However, this proved to be a very good learning opportunity where I got the advice to just not show the audience I didn't know how to continue by essentially faking it until making it. Now I can just act like nothing happened and continue without anybody noticing.

I've never seen myself as the best presenter, but do have the ambition to become really good at it. This is because I think being able to convince others of your idea is at least as important as the idea itself. To realise this, I set a goal at the beginning of the semester, which was to discover my personal presentation style. In hindsight, I can say I definitely achieved this goal. I figured that rehearsing a presentation 3 times with only a list of bullet points, not a whole written text (which I used to do before) works way better for me. This way I keep freedom and flexibility without having to cite a pre-written text word for word (which caused me to stumble over words) while making sure I do not forget to mention the most important information.

I also used to feel quite nervous before a presentation, but I learned that just focusing on other people instead of yourself helps you relieve some pressure. On top of this, I tried other techniques to relax such as imagine speaking one on one instead of a group, taking deep breaths before and collecting your thoughts, but I found none of them work best for me besides just directing your attention outwards before and during the presentation. Something I will also not do in the future is a complete 10 minute body warmup as I feel it didn't really help me presenting the times we tried it in class, even though it was fun.

Other ways I've learned how to engage and build trust with my audience is by asking questions and sharing personal anecdotes at the beginning of my presentation. However, I realise I'm still not as good as I want to be. For the future, I want to improve my stage presence even more by using hand gestures and using more dynamics in my voice. I aim to achieve these goals by practicing in the mirror once every week using the karaoke powerpoint to improve my improvisational skills at the same time.

Negotiating

Theory

One can make use of the four Harvard principles of negotiation: 1 - separate the issue from the person and regard the other party as a partner instead of opponent, 2 - negotiate interest oriented instead of position focused, 3 - develop criteria that a solution must fulfill and 4 - you should have different options to choose from. Another helpful tactic is to make use of anchoring and framing requests or proposals. You can achieve this by tying requests to quantifiable business case reasons and finishing it off with the question “How could you work this out?”. You must also resist the temptation to negotiate against yourself. On top of that it is wise to make the first offer yourself to anchor a number in your opponent's mind (The Futur, 2025). If you get lowballed, you drop another anchor on top of that. Use the flinch. Last but not least, negotiating must be trained like a muscle to become better at it.

Application

In the negotiation workshop during the fourth lecture of this course, I first had to negotiate about my own situation. This included my housemates not cleaning the apartment as much as I did. In this scenario, Roos Moorees played my so-called ‘partner’. To prepare for this negotiation, I filled in the negotiation canvas (Appendix B). Here I clarified our goals, ‘bargaining chips’, key interests, possible solutions and walkaway alternatives. During the negotiation, it quickly became clear that my partner didn’t have a schedule as clear as mine and greatly valued flexibility. After I also explained my desires, which was mainly to carry equal responsibilities for cleaning the house, we decided that she could do the small chores like taking out the trash, putting the dishes away and restocking toilet and kitchen paper, while me and my four other housemates would rotate on the big cleaning tasks every week. We also decided on a punishment for when we would not adhere to this schedule. In this situation, we achieved a win-win.

In the second negotiation exercise I had to fulfill the role of a team lead at a design company, arguing with my partner Tanya Rybalko. She roleplayed as an employee who wanted a raise which I couldn’t offer her due to a budget freeze. The maximum I was allowed to give was a one time bonus and future promotion. During the negotiation I made use of the third Harvard principle of negotiating by giving her more options. For example, I offered that she could work on a more prestigious project which would benefit her professionally, and also a promotion in terms of responsibility within the team so she could learn new things. She disagreed with both of them as she just wanted a raise. I then offered a one time small bonus and a raise for six months later to make sure she didn’t leave the company. As I will cover later in the reflection, this was not the ideal outcome.

I also had to negotiate with Paulina Steffen, in charge of marketing at CODE. She agreed that we, the team of Answer Engine Studio, could help with the generative engine optimization for CODE (increasing visibility within AI). We did a lot of research on which software existed to realise this. We then made a proposal on which one CODE should use, where we eventually decided on a subscription from Scrunch AI, which would cost €500 per month. Our main goal with this collaboration is to learn how to actually optimize websites using a third party software, where CODE can be a pilot/case study to use in future sales calls. In the call we discussed the €500 plan, after which it became clear that this was a bit too much for CODE as they currently were not really aware of the benefits such tool provides. However, we did agree on them using the 7 day free trial option, where we would also be allowed to use the software. And, this also allows us to have them experience how much value the tool actually provides. We made use here of the third Harvard principle of negotiation. Another thing that really helped us during this negotiation was that we stayed kind and respectful at all times, as ‘’The more pleasant you are to work with, the more deals you'll get done’’, according to Rothbart (2025). This ensured we still got access to the actual tool, without them cutting us off.

Another example where I negotiated was at the flea market in Mauerpark a week ago. I saw this very cool Philips sign made of metal, which I wanted to have because Philips was founded in the town I come from in the Netherlands. It had sentimental value to me. Applying the knowledge I had gained, I made the first offer of 5 euros. I knew this was way too low, but I expected the seller to know how to negotiate as well, which is why it was important to anchor as low as possible. He then, as expected, dropped another anchor on me, asking for €20. I flinched like this course taught me. Too much. He offered €15. I said no and walked away. A few seconds later he whistled and said €10 was okay. I agreed. See Appendix B for the Philips sign.

Reflection

A very valuable key takeaway I learned from the negotiation workshop, which will change the way I approach negotiations in the future, is to make sure to fully understand your opponent/partner’s situation first. In the situation with Tanya I should have asked more questions to gain a better understanding of her situation, so that we could define criteria that a solution must fulfill. For example I should have asked her ‘’Which parts of your role energize you most, and where do you feel undervalued?’’ or ‘’If we can’t meet your request today, what options are you considering?’’. This aligns with the 3rd Harvard principle of negotiation, but seeing it in practice makes a difference. I believe this would have helped get a better outcome for both of us. We eventually agreed on a one-time bonus and a promotion in six months which was not ideal, because I wanted to spend as little as possible while she wanted a raise.

Use of generative AI

I only made use of generative AI in the creation of the negotiation canvas (Appendix C) and for critiquing my essay (giving suggestions on what to improve, no re-writing).

Sources

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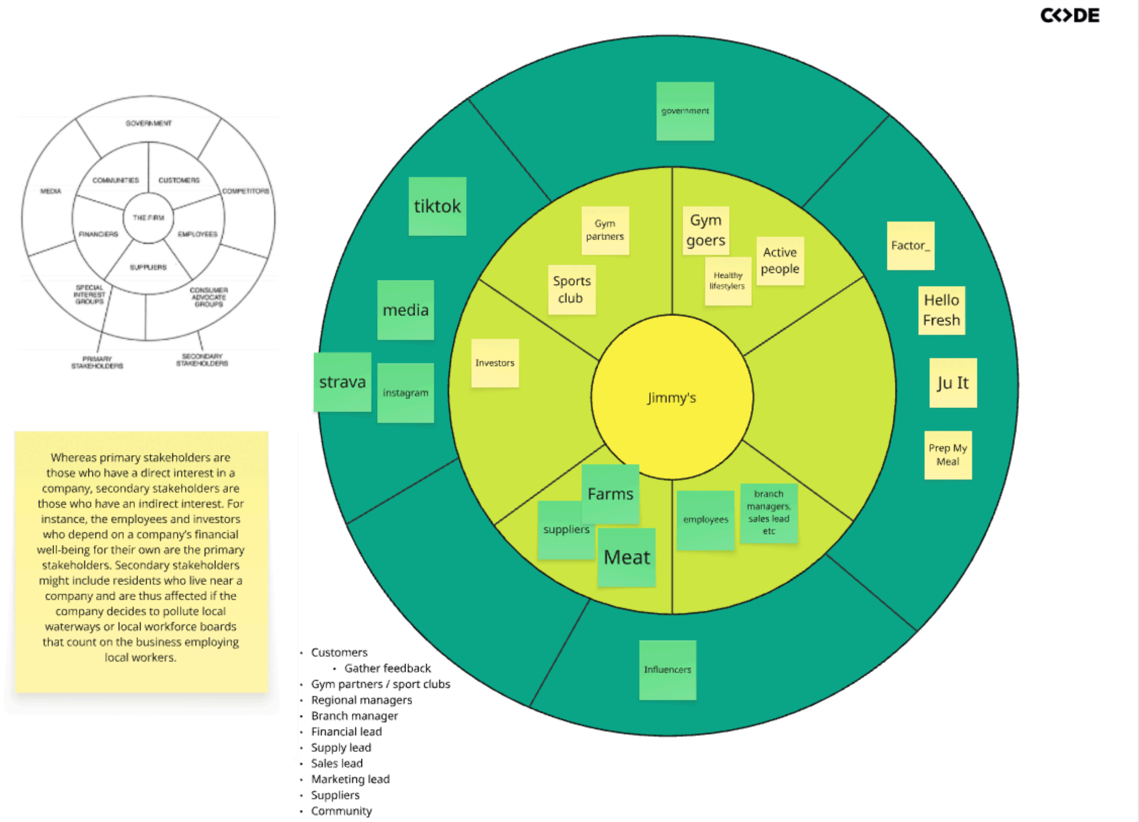
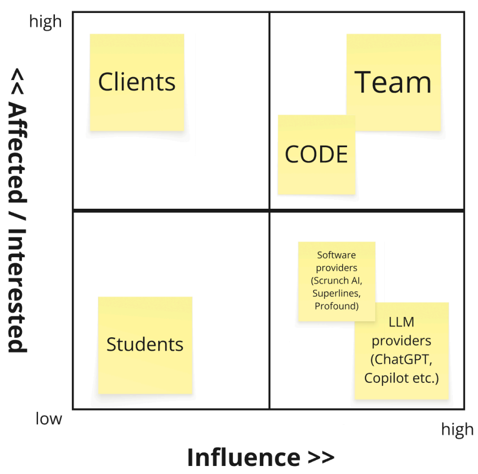
Appendix A

Stakeholder wheel for Jimmy’s



Stakeholder 2 by 2 matrix

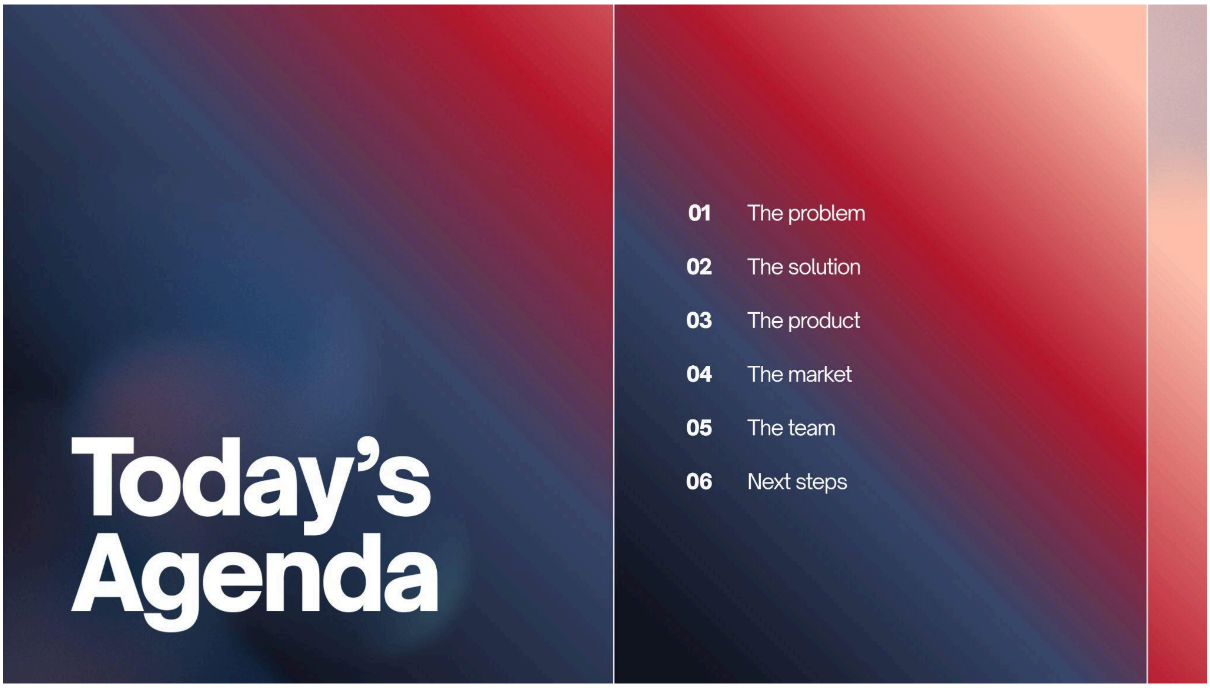


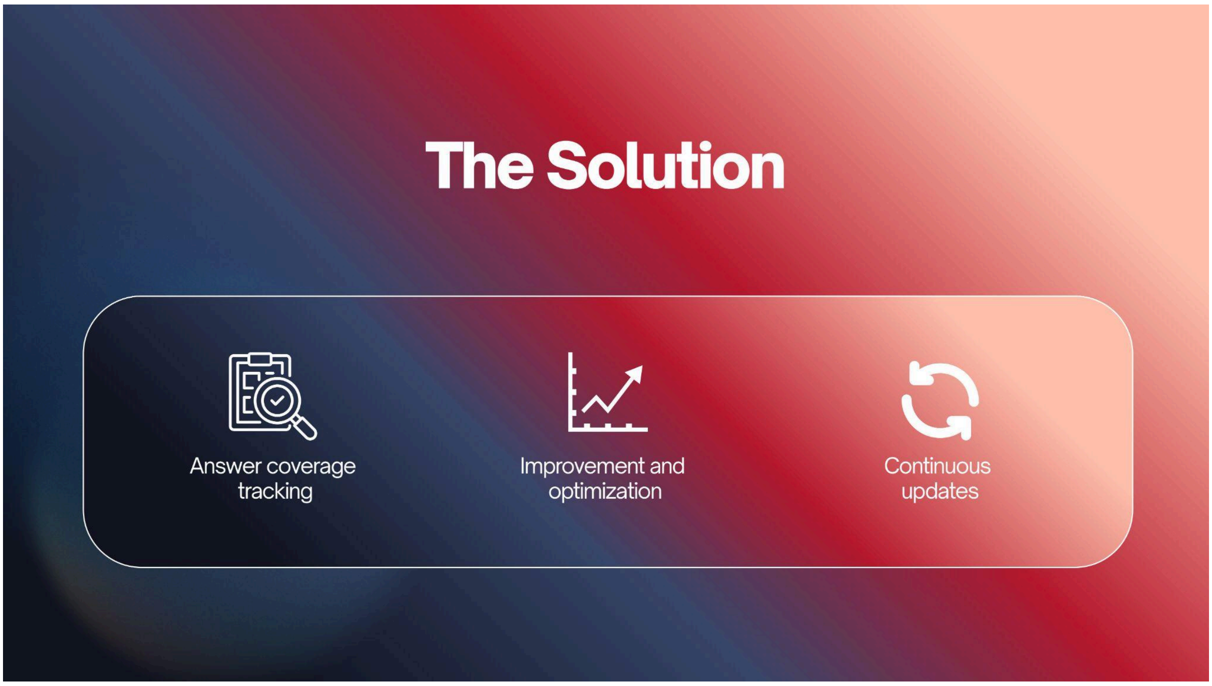
Stakeholder interest map for Jimmy's

Stakeholder	Interest	Estimated project impact	Estimated priority	How to serve the stakeholder?
team	• Develop product • launch product • ... • ...	• high+	1	weekly meetings
Investors	• finance the project • support the project with resources/network • ... • ...	• high+	2	Monthly/ quarterly meetings
Customers	• buys the product • Supports the brand • ... • ... •	• Medium	2	Newsletter/ website
Suppliers	• provide the project with supplies to function and run smoothly • ... • ... •	• High	3	Quarterly meeting
Partners	• promotes the brand • connects brand with new audiences • increases awareness to the brand •	• Medium	3	Quarterly meeting
Employees	• customer satisfaction • enhance customer experience	• High	2	yearly
Competitors	• Influences sales	• ?	3	Not
Government	• Influences legal requirements	• Medium	3	Yearly

Appendix B

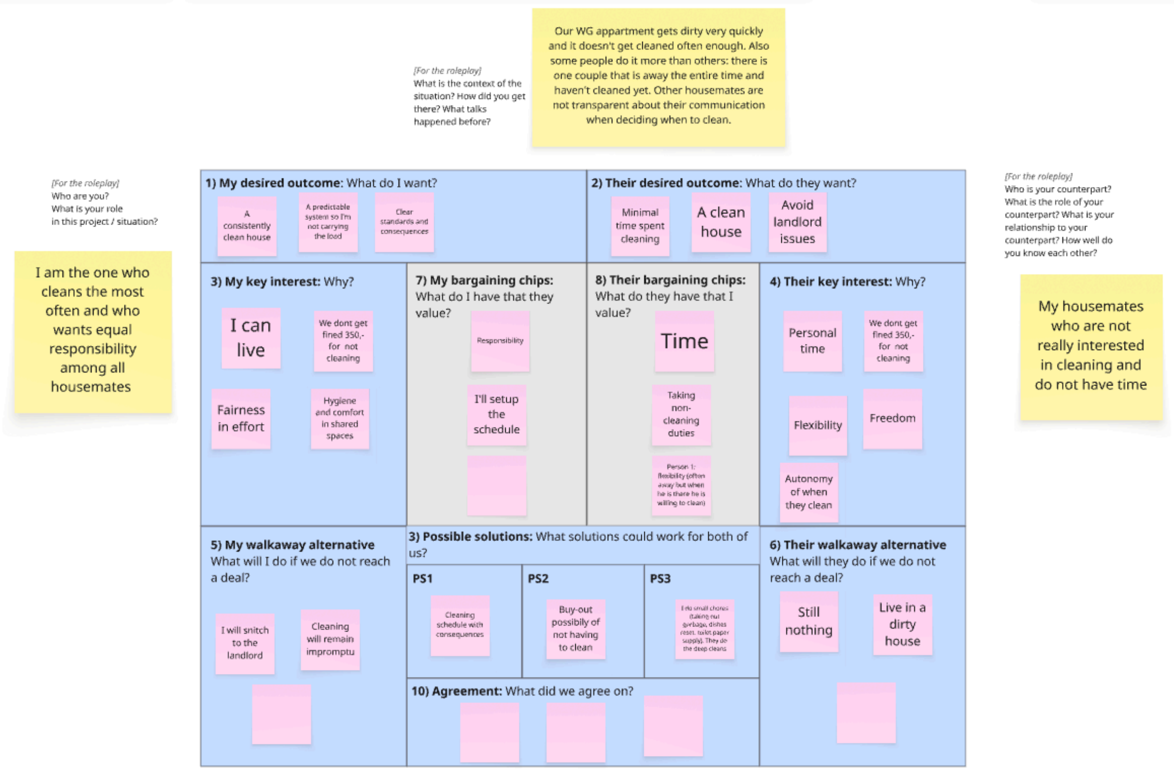
Example slides pitch deck





Appendix C

Negotiation canvas



Philips sign