YAGBA PERSPECTIVE

Before You Build Something People Want

How YAGBA Complements Y Combinator and Founder Institute

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'Make something people want' is one of the most powerful instructions in startup history. But before founders build the 'something', they need disciplined evidence about the 'people' and the 'want'. That is the space YAGBA is designed to occupy.

The phrase is memorable because it cuts through the noise. A startup is not a logo, a pitch deck, a registration certificate or a collection of impressive features. It must create something that people genuinely value. Y Combinator has turned that principle into a global entrepreneurial discipline: launch, speak with users, learn quickly and improve the product.

Yet the instruction contains an assumption that is easy to overlook. What exactly do people want, and how do we know? Founders routinely mistake polite interest for demand, a general complaint for a serious pain point, or a socially important challenge for a viable business opportunity. They can spend months building a technically competent solution around a problem that is weak, occasional, already tolerably solved, or disconnected from anyone's willingness and ability to pay.

This is not a criticism of Y Combinator or the Founder Institute. Both have made major contributions to how startups are selected, developed and accelerated. It is an argument that the startup journey contains three distinct questions: Is the problem strong enough? Is the founder capable and appropriately aligned? Can the team build, learn and create a scalable company? YAGBA, Founder Institute and Y Combinator place different weight on those questions. Seen together, they are more complementary than competitive.

THREE POWERFUL LENSES ON STARTUP FORMATION

Y COMBINATOR: BUILD, LAUNCH AND LEARN

Y Combinator's motto—"make something people want"—captures an action-oriented model of venture development. Its own essential startup advice urges founders to launch, talk to users, use what they learn to improve the product and repeat the process. The market provides the discipline. Founders are expected to reduce speculation by confronting real users and real behaviour.

That approach is enormously valuable. It moves founders away from prolonged planning and towards evidence generated through use. It also recognises that a startup rarely discovers the correct product through theory alone. The solution becomes sharper through a cycle of building, observation and iteration.

The danger appears when ecosystems imitate only the visible surface of this model. 'Build fast' can become a licence to build prematurely. Demo days, prototypes and pitch competitions may be treated as proof of progress even when founders have not established whose problem they are solving, how frequently it occurs, what people currently do about it, or why the proposed change matters enough to drive adoption. Y Combinator's deeper discipline is learning from users; copying speed without copying the learning discipline misses the point.

FOUNDER INSTITUTE: ASSESS AND DEVELOP THE FOUNDER

Founder Institute begins from another crucial insight: the founder is not incidental to the venture. Its Entrepreneur DNA Assessment examines multiple dimensions of entrepreneurial potential, including collaboration, perseverance, proactivity and problem-solving. Its programme then uses structured milestones, demanding sprints and continuing feedback to move idea-stage and pre-seed founders towards a fundable company.

This focus corrects a common weakness in startup selection. A persuasive idea presented by a founder who cannot adapt, persist, recruit, listen or execute is unlikely to travel very far. Founder quality matters, and structured accountability can expose the distance between enthusiasm and entrepreneurial behaviour.

But founder strength and problem strength are not the same thing. A highly capable founder can pursue a weak problem with impressive efficiency. Perseverance can keep someone committed to an assumption that should have been abandoned. Execution ability does not, by itself, establish that the customer pain is urgent, poorly served or commercially meaningful. The founder therefore needs to be assessed, but so does the problem.

YAGBA: ESTABLISH WHETHER THE PROBLEM DESERVES A VENTURE

YAGBA emerged from a recurring pattern I observed while working with entrepreneurs through Innovation SL. Founders were often ready to describe their apps, platforms, technologies and revenue projections, but much less able to define the problem with comparable precision. Broad challenges such as unemployment, waste, agricultural losses, weak healthcare access or financial exclusion were presented as if their social importance automatically proved the viability of a particular business.

YAGBA slows down this premature movement from concern to solution. It asks founders to demonstrate that the problem is real, sufficiently painful, inadequately addressed, commercially relevant and aligned with their capacity to act. Its five dimensions provide a structured way to undertake that problem due diligence.

Your Context defines exactly who experiences the problem, where it occurs, under what conditions and within which economic, social or institutional constraints.

Actual Pain examines what affected people genuinely lose: time, income, customers, productivity, safety, dignity or opportunity. It also tests frequency, intensity and the workarounds people already use.

Gap and Gravity asks why existing alternatives are insufficient and whether the problem is urgent, persistent and consequential enough to justify change.

Business Relevance connects the pain to an identifiable customer, user or payer. It examines whether value can be created and captured rather than assuming that every important social problem is automatically a viable commercial opportunity.

Alignment tests whether the founder has the insight, access, credibility, capabilities and commitment needed to pursue this particular problem responsibly.

The framework can be supported by a 25-indicator diagnostic and an evidence review, but the score is not intended to manufacture certainty. Its purpose is to make assumptions visible, improve the quality of founder judgement and identify where further validation is required before more resources are committed.

A founder should not receive credit merely for having a solution. The founder should first earn confidence that the problem is worth solving.

DIFFERENT QUESTIONS, DIFFERENT EVIDENCE

The simplest comparison is not that one model is better than the others, but that each directs attention to a different unit of analysis. The distinctions below are useful shorthand, not exhaustive descriptions of three much richer approaches.

Framework	Primary lens	Practical question
YAGBA	The problem	Is the problem sufficiently real, painful, underserved and commercially relevant, and is the founder aligned with it?
Founder Institute	The founder and company-building discipline	Does the founder show the attributes, commitment and execution behaviour needed to build an enduring company?
Y Combinator	The product, users and growth	Can the team build rapidly, learn from users and turn that learning into something people use, value and increasingly demand?

Interpretive comparison by the author; each organisation addresses additional dimensions beyond the primary lens shown.

As a memorable shorthand, we might say: Founder Institute validates and develops founders; Y Combinator validates solutions through building and market learning; YAGBA validates problems through structured evidence. The qualification matters. Founder Institute also works on markets and products. Y Combinator cares deeply about founders and problems. YAGBA includes founder–problem alignment. The value of the shorthand is not categorical purity, but clarity about the question that can otherwise be neglected.

THE TITLE BEGINS WITH 'BEFORE', NOT 'INSTEAD OF'

YAGBA is not an alternative to building. Nor can a diagnostic prove in advance that a startup will succeed. A strong problem can still attract a poor solution. Customers may dislike the product, distribution may fail, economics may not work, competitors may respond, and the team may be unable to execute. Problem evidence reduces one major source of avoidable failure; it does not eliminate uncertainty.

The appropriate sequence is therefore cumulative. First, establish that a problem is worth serious attention. Second, assess whether the founder or team is suited to pursue it. Third, test solutions through actual behaviour, use and payment. Fourth, determine whether the resulting venture can operate, finance and scale. These activities can overlap and loop back on one another, but none should be silently substituted for another.

A founder who completes a YAGBA assessment should not emerge saying, 'My idea has been validated.' The more accurate conclusion is: 'We now understand the problem more clearly, we know which claims are supported, and we know which assumptions must be tested next.' That is a stronger starting point for the disciplined execution encouraged by Founder Institute and the rapid market learning associated with Y Combinator.

WHY THIS MATTERS PARTICULARLY IN EMERGING ECOSYSTEMS

Premature building is wasteful everywhere, but the cost is greater where early-stage capital, specialist talent and reliable market data are scarce. In Sierra Leone and many comparable ecosystems, one failed prototype grant may consume resources that cannot easily be replaced. Founders may have limited access to research services, formal customer data or experienced product teams. Entrepreneurship programmes may also reward visible outputs, apps, pitch decks, registrations and demo days—more readily than the slower work of interviewing customers, examining alternatives and documenting evidence.

There is another complication. Development priorities can create strong incentives to frame a venture around a major social challenge. A problem may genuinely matter to government, donors and communities but still lack a viable customer or payer for a commercial venture. Conversely, a seemingly modest operational headache may generate strong demand because it is frequent, costly and attached to a clear budget holder. YAGBA helps distinguish moral importance from business relevance without diminishing either.

This distinction also improves capital readiness. Not every good enterprise should pursue venture capital. Some are better suited to grants, concessional finance, bank lending, patient capital, revenue-based finance or traditional equity. A rigorous understanding of the problem, customer and value pathway helps founders identify the form of capital that fits the venture rather than presenting every enterprise as a VC opportunity.

How accelerators and ecosystem organisations can use the three lenses

Entrepreneurship support organisations do not need to choose among these approaches. They can combine their strongest principles into a more complete venture-development pathway. Selection can examine both founder potential and problem evidence. Early programme stages can require founders to define the customer, document pain, analyse workarounds and test commercial relevance. Only then should resources intensify around prototyping, product iteration, traction, governance and investment readiness.

In practical terms, a YAGBA-led accelerator can begin with problem validation, move into solution validation and conclude with venture readiness. Founders with weak problem evidence are not necessarily rejected; they may be redirected towards further discovery. Those with strong problems but weak alignment may need a co-founder, specialist partner or a different role. Those with strong problems and capable teams are better positioned to benefit from the demanding execution and market-learning disciplines that leading accelerators represent.

Investors also benefit. A founder's pitch can be assessed not only for the attractiveness of the proposed solution, but for the quality of the problem evidence beneath it. This creates a more useful conversation: Which claims come from direct observation? Who pays? What alternatives are already tolerated? What would cause switching? How frequent and costly is the pain? Why is this team particularly able to act?

Towards a stronger standard of startup readiness

Startup ecosystems have become very good at teaching founders how to describe solutions. We teach business models, pitch decks, market sizing, traction metrics and fundraising. All are necessary. But when the original problem statement is vague, every later calculation rests on a weak foundation. A precise revenue model cannot rescue an imaginary customer. A polished pitch cannot make an occasional inconvenience urgent. A determined founder cannot force a market to care.

The next generation of accelerator design should therefore recognise problem readiness as a distinct stage. Before asking what founders will build, we should ask what they know. Before rewarding confidence, we should examine evidence. Before discussing scale, we should establish whether there is a sufficiently strong problem to scale a solution around.

Y Combinator's instruction remains right: make something people want. Founder Institute's insight remains right: the quality and behaviour of the founder matter profoundly. YAGBA adds a prior discipline: demonstrate that the problem is real, painful and commercially meaningful—and that you are appropriately aligned to solve it.

Before you build something people want, prove that the 'want' is anchored in a problem worth solving.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Francis Stevens George is the Founder and CEO of Innovation SL and the developer of the YAGBA Problem Definition Framework. YAGBA stands for Your Context, Actual Pain, Gap and Gravity, Business Relevance, and Alignment. The framework is designed to help founders, accelerators, investors and enterprise-support organisations evaluate problem strength before committing heavily to solution development.

SELECTED SOURCES

Y Combinator, "YC's Essential Startup Advice."

Y Combinator, "What Happens at YC."

Founder Institute, "Entrepreneur DNA Assessment."

Founder Institute, "The FI Agentic Program."