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Building the Skier's Boot

How Armada listened to its community and developed a ski boot that solves real problems

Armada is a brand that comes from the freeski community. Freestyle, freeride, athlete culture, and closeness to the scene have always shaped its identity. When Armada set out to develop its first ski boot, one thing was clear: the world did not simply need another ski boot. It needed a product that solved real problems.

The development process therefore did not begin with features, design sketches, or technical assumptions. It began with a systematic analysis of the needs of freestylers and freeriders. Armada did not want to listen only symbolically. It wanted to understand deeply: Which problems truly matter to the community? Which needs remain unmet today? And where is the greatest potential for innovation? Together with Phormolog, this became a HotTopics process that combined qualitative in-depth interviews, observation, and quantitative prioritization. In this way, closeness to the community became reliable knowledge, and that knowledge became the foundation for the AR ONE.

A BRAND FROM THE COMMUNITY

Armada has never been just another ski brand. Armada grew out of a scene: freestyle, freeride, creativity, athlete culture, and the desire to think about skiing differently. The brand does not stand for a purely technical understanding of products. It stands for real skiing: days in the park, in powder, in the backcountry, on side hits, rails, pillow lines, and steep slopes. It stands for people who do not just use skis, but live skiing.

This closeness to the community is more than brand romance. It is a development principle. Armada does not think about products from the inside out, but from the scene outward. The brand does not first ask which features it can add. It asks what its riders truly need so they can ski better, more freely, and with more confidence.

That is precisely the difference between a product supplier and a community brand. A community brand does not develop for anonymous target groups. It develops for people whose language, routines, pain points, and expectations it understands.

THE WORLD DOES NOT NEED ANOTHER SKI BOOT

Against this backdrop, entering the ski boot category was a major step. Ski boots are not a simple line extension. They are technically complex, expensive to develop, and extremely sensitive for

skiers. A ski can inspire. A ski boot can determine the entire day: control, pain, confidence, landings, performance, and whether the skier has to think about the boot at all.

For Armada, it was therefore clear: the world did not simply need another ski boot. It needed a ski boot that solved real problems.

The AR ONE was not meant to become a feature statement. It was meant to become an answer. An answer to problems that freestylers and freeriders actually experience in everyday skiing: poor heel hold, pressure points, blisters, shin and toe pain during landings, insufficiently direct ski control, liners that give out too quickly, and the old trade-off between comfort and performance.

The central promise was therefore: Building the Skier's Boot. A ski boot that is not built for its own sake, but so skiers can stop thinking about their boots and focus on skiing again.

LISTENING BEFORE DESIGNING

Such an ambition cannot be fulfilled in passing. Anyone who wants to solve real problems must first understand those problems precisely. Not superficially. Not only through isolated conversations with athletes. Not through internal assumptions about what the community probably wants. But systematically.



Dr. Mark Markus



Mag. Hannes Selhofer

The development of Armada's first ski boot started with a simple question: Which problems matter most to freestylers and freeriders?



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Armada applied exactly this mindset to understanding its users. Closeness to the community was the starting point. But closeness alone was not enough. Affinity had to become knowledge. Knowledge had to become priorities. And priorities had to become a product logic that would make the new ski boot safer, more relevant, and more successful.

What may initially look like a detour is, in reality, the fastest route to a better product. Companies that deeply understand which problems customers truly want solved before development begins reduce the risk of costly wrong turns. Especially in a new product category such as ski boots, this understanding is not merely helpful. It is the best insurance against the wrong priorities.

**THE HOTTOPICS METHOD:
FROM LISTENING TO PRIORITY**

Armada therefore decided to start the development process with a systematic analysis of customer needs. The right method for this was Phormolog's HotTopics. It is based on Clayton Christensen's Jobs-to-be-Done approach and combines qualitative depth of understanding with quantitative prioritization.

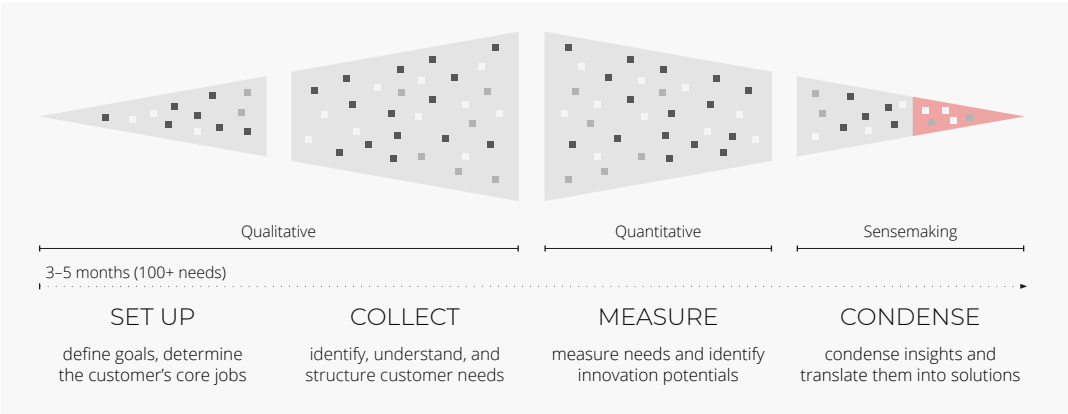
**PEAK PERFORMANCE
REQUIRES A SYSTEM**

By turning close relationships with the community into structured research, Armada created a reliable basis for product decisions.

This approach can be compared with elite sports. Anyone who wants to achieve top performance does not simply train more. They train differently. Nutrition, recovery, technique, training plans, equipment, mental attitude, and data analysis all work together. Peak performance does not come from greater effort alone, but from a systematic approach.

Four Steps to Real Customer Needs

The HotTopics method identifies hidden customer needs and uncovers new business potential in four precise steps:



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UNDERSTANDING DEEPLY BEFORE DESIGNING

Armada knew that anyone developing a ski boot for a demanding community must not jump into solutions too early. First, the team had to understand what freestylers and freeriders actually experience when using their boots. Where does pain occur? Where is control lost? Which compromises do they accept today? And which requirements are so important that a new ski boot will be judged by them?

The HotTopics process therefore began with a qualitative phase. Eight in-depth interviews and one observation in a ski area examined how skiers actually use their boots. The conversations took place partly on site and partly online, and each lasted one to two hours. The focus was not only on technical requirements, but on the entire usage context: routines, frustrations, pain, uncertainties, expectations, and emotional moments.



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The interviews were conducted along a detailed job map. Fourteen usage situations were considered, including putting on ski boots, closing buckles, stepping into bindings, skiing downhill, jumping, performing tricks, walking in the boots, and drying and cleaning the boots.

EXPERIENCES BECOME NEEDS

This qualitative work produced 88 customer needs. That was the first major value of the process: the community was not described in abstract terms, but translated into concrete needs. Functional, emotional, and social requirements became visible. The discussion was not only about hold, flex, or liners. It was also about trust, control, freedom from pain, safety during landings, and the feeling of being able to rely on the ski boot.

Yet this is also where the limits of qualitative research become clear. Deep listening produces many valuable insights. But not every insight is equally important. And not every important need is poorly fulfilled in the market. It is like searching for gold nuggets: in the qualitative phase, a lot of earth is moved. Only afterward does it need to be sifted. Only then does it become clear which insights truly carry weight.

THE COMMUNITY PRIORITIZES

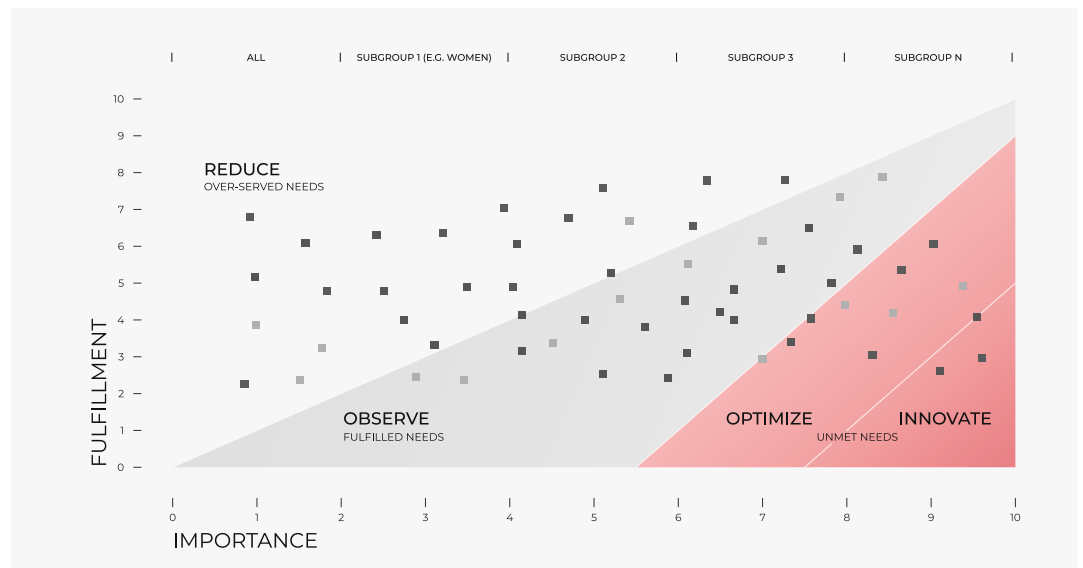
From the 88 needs, a set of 67 needs was selected and then quantified in an online survey. Here, Armada used its strength as a community brand: the survey was sent directly to its own community. Within a short time, 223 valid questionnaires were returned. Participants engaged deeply with the survey and also left more than 200 qualitative comments, some of them very detailed. The high level of engagement showed how relevant the topic of ski boots was for this community.

In the survey, each need was rated on two criteria: How important is it? And how well is it fulfilled today? This is where the HotTopics method gains its real sharpness. What matters is not the needs people talk about the loudest. What matters are the needs that are highly important and insufficiently fulfilled at the same time. That is where the greatest potential for growth and innovation lies.

Interviews and on-snow observation revealed 88 functional and emotional needs across the full ski boot experience.

A survey of 223 skiers then showed which needs were most important and least well served by existing products.

Customer Needs at a Glance – What They Really Want



MANY INSIGHTS BECOME A CLEAR DEVELOPMENT PICTURE

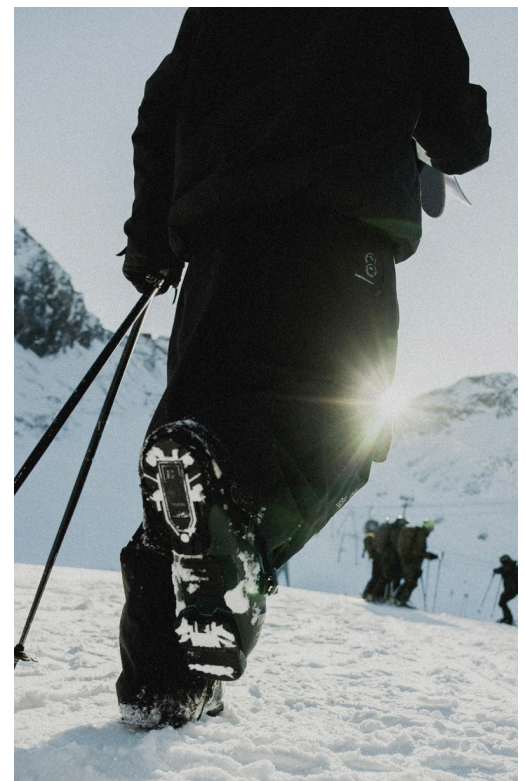
The analysis identified common expectations as well as clear differences between freestyle and freeride users.

Only this prioritization turned many individual observations into a clear development picture. Armada had already heard, sensed, or known many topics from the scene. But now it became visible which of them truly had priority, for which target groups they were especially relevant, and where the new ski boot needed to focus most strongly.

This became particularly clear in the segment analysis. For freestylers, toe protection during landings and progressive flex were central. Jumps and tricks create high forward pressure. When the skier lands, the toes must not painfully hit the front of the boot. At the same time, the ski boot must remain stable during hard landings, rotations, and tricks. The flex must not collapse; it must respond in a controlled, progressive, and reliable way.

For freeriders, a different profile emerged. Here, it was especially important that the ski boot enables direct and precise ski control. Anyone skiing off-piste needs confidence in every movement. The ski has to respond immediately, without energy being lost in the boot. At the same time, secure heel hold, prevention of blisters, and robust, replaceable components were relevant for the entire community.

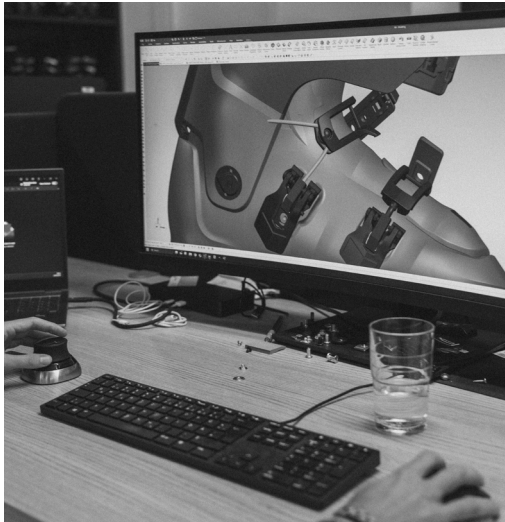
Armada therefore did not have a loose collection of opinions. It had a prioritized map of needs. It showed which problems truly count, which target groups set which priorities, and which requirements the new ski boot had to fulfill. Only this clarity made targeted development possible: not gut feeling alone, not a feature collection, but a precise foundation for a product developed from within the community.



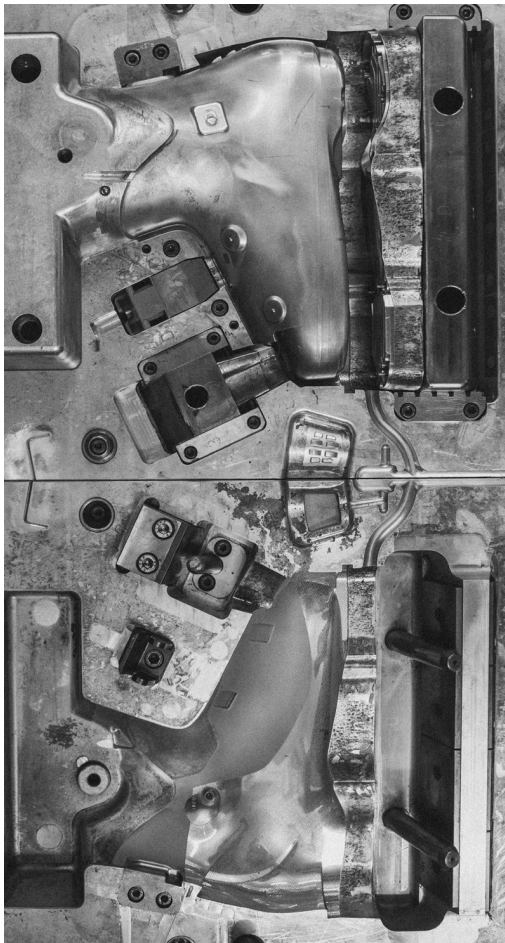
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FROM THE MAP OF NEEDS TO PRODUCT ARCHITECTURE

Once the HotTopics results were available, the next challenge began. Insights alone do not develop a ski boot. Needs had to become technical solutions. This is exactly where the quality of customer-centered engineering becomes visible: it does not treat data as a side recommendation, but as the starting point for product architecture.

Armada trusted this foundation. Instead of falling back on familiar standard solutions, the development team translated the most important needs step by step into concrete design principles. The central product idea was a hybrid cabrio construction: a ski boot that combines the comfort and progressive flex of a cabrio boot with the power transmission and precision of a classic four-buckle boot. This responded to a core conflict in the community: skiers wanted comfort and mobility, but did not want to give up control, stability, and performance.

THE CRITICAL POINT: FEATURE LOGIC, NOT FEATURE VOLUME

The decisive point is not that the AR ONE has many features. The decisive point is that these features follow a logic. They are not a random collection of technical possibilities, but answers to concrete needs.

In this way, the map of needs became a product architecture. Every central need received a technical counterpart. The individual solutions had to fit together like puzzle pieces: heel hold was not allowed to create pressure points. Comfort was not allowed to weaken ski control. Damping was not allowed to come at the expense of performance. Progressive flex was not allowed to feel unstable.

This is the real achievement: Armada did not develop a ski boot that can do as much as possible. Armada developed a ski boot that answers the right problems. The HotTopics results provided the direction. Engineering turned that direction into a product.

The hybrid boot architecture addressed a central conflict: skiers wanted more comfort and mobility without losing precision and power.

The key was not the number of features, but the logic behind them: each solution responded to a prioritized user need.

How Needs Became Solutions

THE LINER SHOULD LAST LONGER AND NOT LOSE ITS FIT QUICKLY.

Premium liner and stabilizing construction: The liner is treated as a performance element. It supports foot hold, comfort, and durability.

THE FLEX SHOULD REMAIN PROGRESSIVE DURING JUMPS AND LANDINGS.

Natty Flex: The ski boot gives way controllably at first and firms up as pressure increases. This creates support during landings, tricks, and high forward forces.

THE SKI BOOT SHOULD ENABLE DIRECT AND PRECISE SKI CONTROL.

Hybrid cabrio construction: Progressive cabrio comfort combines with four-buckle power. The ski responds more directly without sacrificing comfort.

THE FOOT SHOULD SIT SECURELY IN THE SKI BOOT, ESPECIALLY THE HEEL.

Slingshot Buckle: Special buckle with redirected pull wraps foot and ankle, actively pulling heel into pocket. Creates more hold without compressing foot tighter.

PRESSURE POINTS, BLISTERS, AND BOOT MOVEMENT SHOULD BE REDUCED.

Customizable shell and liner: Memory Fit, heat-moldable liners, and pre-shaped heel/ankle areas secure the foot while reducing pressure.

THE SKI BOOT SHOULD SUIT DIFFERENT SKIING STYLES.

Flex gradations and model range: Different flex variants address freestylers, freeriders, and all-mountain skiers in a differentiated way.

LANDINGS SHOULD FEEL LESS HARSH ON THE FEET, SHINS, AND BODY.

Kush Damping Boot Board: A dampened intermediate layer reduces impacts and vibrations. Especially relevant for freestylers with repeated hard landings.

THE SKI BOOT SHOULD BE ROBUST, SERVICEABLE, AND USABLE OVER THE LONG TERM.

Replaceable hardware and spare parts: GripWalk soles, replaceable components, and service-friendly hardware make durability repairable.

NEED

Solution



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CUSTOMER CENTRICITY DOES NOT END WITH THE INSIGHT

Innovation depends on many things: technology, timing, design, brand, sales, and execution capability. But at the beginning there is almost always the same question: Does the new product solve a problem that truly matters to customers?

For Armada, that question had guided the AR ONE from the beginning. The task was not to add another product to the category, but to solve the problems that mattered most to freestylers and freeriders.

Good insights are the first step. But they are not enough on their own. What matters is whether a company is willing to follow them. Customer centricity does not end with a presentation. That is where it truly begins: when engineers, product managers, and designers consistently align their decisions with the most important unmet needs.

That is exactly what Armada did. The brand trusted the map of needs and used it as a consistent development principle.

The reactions show that this path was understood. GearJunkie described the AR ONE as "smooth, easy to engage, and legitimately progressive", and highlighted solid heel hold as well as all-day comfort. Evo wrote that Armada entered the boot category with a ski boot that fits well, is fun to ski, and offers something distinctive in an already crowded market. Powder also emphasized strong heel hold, progressive flex, and direct power transmission - the same points Armada had defined as central development goals.

The commercial success confirms this direction. According to project information, Armada doubled its original sales expectations in the first winter. Even more important: the ski boot was visibly accepted by the community. That is not a coincidence. It is the result of a process that began with real listening and ended with consistent execution.

The Armada case therefore shows what customer-centered innovation can achieve. It does not eliminate every risk. But it reduces the biggest risk: developing past the customer. Companies that first understand what people truly need do not develop more slowly. They develop more precisely. The apparent detour through in-depth interviews, observation, and prioritization becomes the safer path: toward products that solve problems, exceed expectations, and succeed in the market.



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Armada made customer centricity a development principle by translating prioritized needs into product decisions.

Strong reviews, community acceptance, and sales above expectations showed that listening to customers had reduced the risk of developing the wrong product.