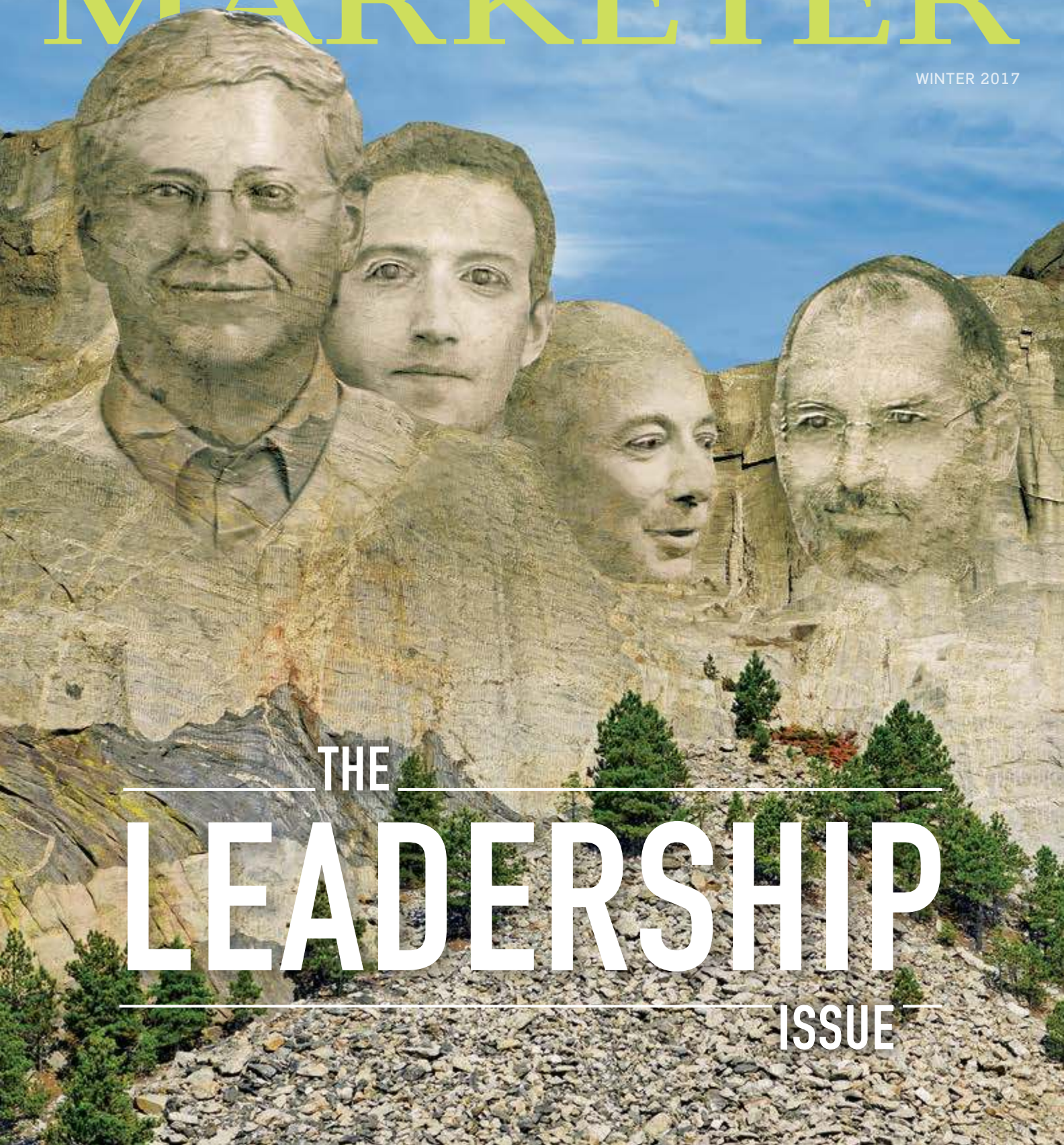


THE PRODUCT MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING AUTHORITY

# PRAGMATIC MARKETER

WINTER 2017



## THE LEADERSHIP ISSUE



## WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER?

IT ISN'T BEING THE MOST LIKED. Nor is it being the most feared.

It's not a reflection of the longest hours, the best motivational speeches or the highest ratings in 360 reviews.

No, the best leader is the one who is the most irrelevant.

Sounds strange, right? But a good leader makes all members of the team better—better than they were before, better than the competition, better than themselves. A good leader makes the team members so good, in fact, that they don't need the leader anymore.

So what does this path to irrelevance look like?

We've got a great lineup of authors to help answer this question. Art Petty takes look at the seven most important skills for leaders in today's world of change, while Pragmatic Marketing instructor Kirsten Butzow focuses on fostering innovation in a fast-paced world. Meanwhile, noted military expert Dan Ward shares the FIRE method for leading rapid innovations, and Shawn Busse discusses the parallels between basketball and business. Plus, we've got even more articles with great tips and best practices you can start implementing immediately.

Whether you are just starting out, or are already leading teams of hundreds, we hope you enjoy this issue.

Happy reading,



Rebecca Kalogeris  
Editorial Director  
[editor@pragmaticmarketing.com](mailto:editor@pragmaticmarketing.com)



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# THE LEADERSHIP ISSUE

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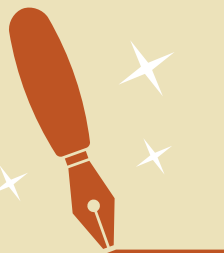
## SURVEY 2017

# How do you see product management and marketing evolving in the next 3 to 5 years?



When our 3,500+ survey respondents listed more than 500 different titles for their roles, we weren't surprised that they also shared diverse opinions about the future of their field.

### ROLE DEFINITION



"I see it becoming a professional designation."

"It will become more important and increasingly standardized."

"More schools and universities will add a formal product management track. Graduates interested in product management careers are frustrated because schools push them into tracks that don't prepare them for the role."

"The role will become more recognized so I don't have to explain in detail what I do for people to understand it."

"More defined and less jack-of-all-trades."

### CEO OF THE PRODUCT



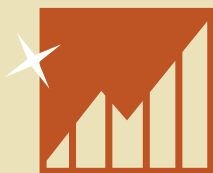
"People are starting to see the harm caused by the phrase, 'a product manager is the CEO of their product.' It's an oversimplification. Hopefully, eliminating it will reduce the random tasks people throw at product managers under the guise of 'You own the product, so you need to figure this out.'"

"Our organization is transitioning to one where the product manager is CEO of the line and owns the go-to-market strategy sales success."

"It will become the driving force behind software products. Product managers will take on more of a CEO role for their specific product."

"Product management will come closer and closer to the CEO, driving company strategy."

## BIG DATA



“More analytics, more data-driven, higher technical expertise required of marketers.”

“Big data will become more of a focus and expand the depth of understanding we have of our customers and their habits.”

“Everyone thinks data science and data-driven decisions are the future. So far, it’s just confusing us and slowing us down further.”

“A lot more metric-focused and a lot less technical.”

## INNOVATION



“More involved with innovation instead of just being a product steward.”

“More focused upon innovation as the market is moving faster and faster.”

“Innovation and speed to market will become more important than single features.”

“Innovation will become a greater challenge for established companies due to the growing need to satisfy annual shareholder gains vs. long-term sustained growth.”

## AGILE



“As an industry, we have gotten TOO agile. The pendulum will swing back to support more long-range planning and de-emphasize the predominantly reactive market strategies that are popular today.”

“With increasing virtualization, I see product managers becoming product owners in an agile development environment.”

“Need to be more aligned with agile development.”

“It will become more agile and dynamic, with a demand for faster response times and products.”



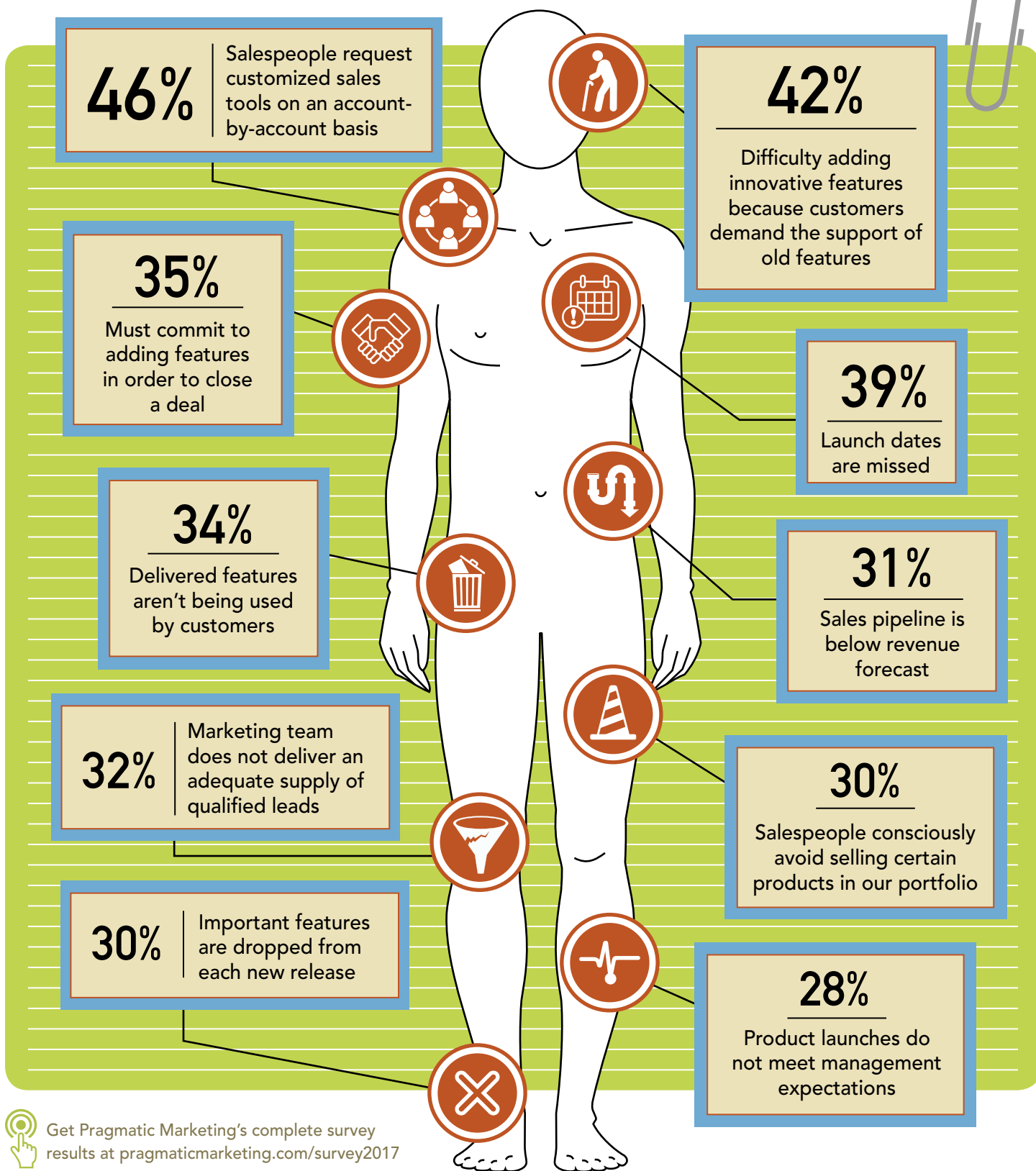
Get Pragmatic Marketing's complete survey results at [pragmaticmarketing.com/survey2017](http://pragmaticmarketing.com/survey2017)



SURVEY 2017

# What's Ailing Product Professionals?

What's ailing the respondents of our 2017 Product Management and Marketing Survey? These were the common symptoms that popped up as 'always' or 'frequent' occurrences.





## TRAVEL TIPS FOR ROAD WARRIORS

# Bustling Brussels

Not only is Brussels one of the world's most international cities and the capital of Belgium, it's also the capital of the European Union and home base of NATO. An added bonus: The city boasts serious gastronomic chops and is renowned for the quality and range of its beers and chocolate. And if that isn't enough, french fries were invented here.

### **Manneken Pis** | [manneken-pis.com](http://manneken-pis.com)

The city's top landmark is a small bronze statue of a little boy peeing into a fountain's basin. Created in 1618, the whimsical Manneken Pis is dressed in various costumes several times a week. In fact, you can see more than 800 of those costumes in a permanent exhibition at the Museum of the City of Brussels.

### **La Grand Place** | [lagrandplace.org](http://lagrandplace.org)

La Grand Place, the main town square since the 12th century, is just a short walk from the Manneken Pis. A designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, the square is a unique mix of elegant 17th century architecture and modern social life, perfect for people-watching.

### **The Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert** | [grsh.be/en](http://grsh.be/en)

This arcade is a wonderful place to stroll, even if you're not a shopaholic. Established in 1847, it's one of Europe's oldest shopping arcades, featuring a glass ceiling that protects pedestrians from the elements and lets in natural light. You can enjoy luxury boutiques, clockmakers, chocolate shops and a variety of restaurants.

### **Belgian Comic Strip Center** | [comicscenter.net/en/home](http://comicscenter.net/en/home)

A visit to the Comic Strip Center is mandatory if you grew up on *The Adventures of Tintin* or the Smurfs (both creations of Belgian artists). In addition to the permanent exhibitions, which feature these two icons and more, there's a reading room with more than 3,000 comic books translated into more than 36 languages.



### **Sablon Antiques Market** | [sablon-antiques-market.com](http://sablon-antiques-market.com)

If you're an antiques lover and are visiting Brussels on a weekend, check out Sablon, Europe's oldest antiques market and one of the best. Start at the Grand Sablon Square and then meander down the side streets to explore even more shops.

### **Parc du Cinquantenaire** | [brussels.info/parc-du-cinquantenaire](http://brussels.info/parc-du-cinquantenaire)

The name means "park of the 50th anniversary," and the 90-acre park is full of treasures, perfect for a walk or relaxing by the fountain. In addition to an arcade and sculptures, the park is home to the Royal Art and History Museum, AutoWorld (a vintage-car museum), the Islamic and Cultural Center of Belgium and more.

### **Aux Armes de Bruxelles** | [auxarmesdebruxelles.com/en](http://auxarmesdebruxelles.com/en)

If you're interested in sampling authentic Belgian fare, check out Aux Armes de Bruxelles. Located in the heart of Old Brussels, this brasserie has a reputation for respecting traditional Belgian cooking; the emphasis is on seafood. Specialties include mussels (the national dish of Belgium), oysters and lobster.

### **The Beer & Chocolate Tour**

[thebrusselsjourney.com](http://thebrusselsjourney.com)

Why not kill two birds with one stone and savor two of Belgium's top treasures—beer and chocolate—on one delectable walking tour? Explore small taverns and sample beers that are specific to Belgium. Plus, taste chocolates from some of the city's most exclusive chocolate makers, all while absorbing the city's history.



### **A La Bécasse** | [alabecasse.com/en](http://alabecasse.com/en)

Translated as "In the Snipe," or "The Woodcock" (depending on who is translating), this pub dates back to 1877. You'll discover a large variety of Belgian beer to pair with traditional small plates such as steak tartare or, during the summer, sliced bread served on a wooden board topped with soft white cheese and radishes.



# Everything you need to turn **ideas** into **revenue**.



Pragmatic Marketing offers a complete curriculum designed to help you build and market products that resonate. Our courses provide real-world insights, actionable best practices and proven tools that will maximize your impact.

So, whether you're charged with deciding what to put on the shelf, or how to make it fly off the shelf, we have a course (or two or three) for you.





Ask the Experts:  
Do you have  
any tips for  
implementing  
market  
visits at my  
company?

**N**OT ONLY CAN MARKET VISITS CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE, they can also change the focus of your product and your company. However, until you actually start doing them, there's no way you can internalize the impact they will make on your life.

While many of us are accustomed to sharing information that our clients want, market visits require us to come in and do the opposite of that, which can create some discomfort. The best way to overcome that discomfort is simply to dive in and do one. Here are some tips to help you get started.

Be clear about the types of people that you want to connect with and think about where you can find them. Do they attend the same conferences that you do? Do they post on the blogs that you read?

Initially, it may be easier to reach out to potentials rather than current customers. These are people in the market who aren't yet leads in your system, but they are representative of the segment that you're trying to reach. They look like your buyers or users but don't have any preconceived ideas attached to your product or company.



Stacey Weber, Instructor  
Pragmatic Marketing

Although you will want to spend some time preparing for your market visit, you really want to focus on being curious. Ask yourself, "What are the things that I don't know?" The one question I like most is, *why*? Ask people *why* they do something a specific way. How is that working for them?

With potentials, you want to understand why they are not buying your product—and if they haven't bought your product or a competitor's product, what are they doing instead?

Imagine the beauty of discovering this information early on. For example, if you learn that potentials want your product once you tell them about it, you can avoid doing any additional, expensive product development work and bring product marketing into the mix instead.

Position your market visit as a conversation between somebody who knows a lot and somebody who's really curious and wants to learn more. Once you conduct multiple market visits, you'll begin to identify trends and find the things that are most important to focus on. **PM**



Do you have a question for our experts? Send us an email at [experts@pragmaticmarketing.com](mailto:experts@pragmaticmarketing.com).

# Rethinking Leadership:

THE

# CRITICAL SKILLS IN A WORLD OF

**T**AKE A FEW MOMENTS AND MAKE A LIST OF EVERYTHING THAT JUMPS TO MIND about the behaviors of effective leaders. Think back to training programs you've attended, books you've read or the nearly infinite number of articles you've encountered that all sound something like: *X Tips to Become the World's Greatest Leader*.

Lock in those thoughts for a moment. Take notes.

Now, think about the great—and lousy—leaders you've worked for during your career. What did the great ones do that you and others responded positively to? What did the lousy ones do that made people want to jump ship? Write the behaviors down.

Got those locked in your gray matter or scribbled down in front of you? Now review those behaviors.

I've run this exercise live in many workshops, and I suspect your results are similar. Terms that speak to respect, feedback, coaching, direction-setting, words/actions matching, and trust and credibility make up the bulk of the lists. Something called "authenticity" shows up as well, although the definition is just a bit squishy. Most of these are important, timeless leadership behaviors and attributes, and we all aspire to display them in our own endeavors.

However, the world is changing faster today than at any other point in civilization. And while these behaviors are inviolable, they aren't enough when it comes to navigating change and uncertainty at scale. Along with these tried-and-true behaviors, all of us must cultivate and master a new set of survival skills as leaders. Our companies, teams and careers depend upon it.

## LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM VIDEO GAMERS

Gamers learn to master new tools and tricks through experimentation and repetition. In massive online role-playing games, teams assemble spontaneously to combat adversaries and threats. Individuals assume roles as leaders or contributors, depending upon the situation and their skills. They might die a few times on the way to success, but they work hard to master new skills and acquire and learn how to use new tools on the fly.

Welcome to the new world of leadership—a perpetual exercise in leveling-up skills in preparation for a sudden threat or emerging new



# S LEADERS NEED CHANGE

BY  
ART PETTY

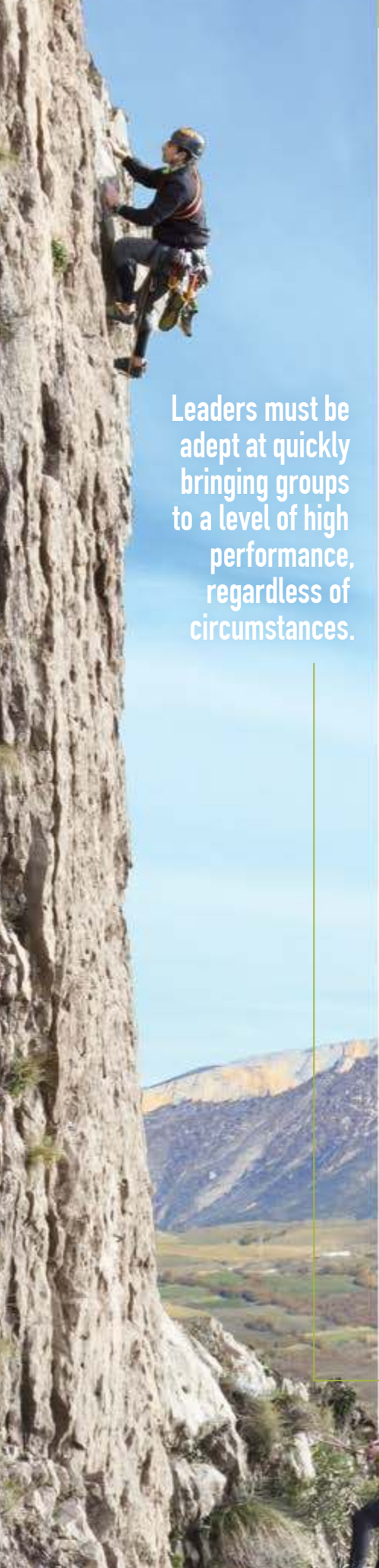
opportunity. As an executive coach, I've observed individuals in a variety of roles who have cracked the code for leading and succeeding in this environment. They are adept at helping groups succeed at navigating change to seize opportunities or fight off unanticipated adversaries. And while many of these individuals lack the heft of titles that suggest leader, they are leading by their actions. To a person, these professionals display what I describe as the seven level-up skills.

Success as a leader (and as a contributor) in this era of change requires a new performance gear for all of us. The individuals poised to survive, thrive and lead in this world are those who cultivate and apply these seven skills.

## THE SEVEN LEVEL-UP SKILLS

- 1 Rewire**—Every cell in your body screams fight or flight in the face of unanticipated change. We have to learn to ignore those instincts and seize the opportunity inherent in an unanticipated change in our company, industry or job. Leaders in this era frame change as opportunity, not obstacle, and they infect their teams with this attitude.
- 2 Relearn**—Most companies look at the world through the lens of their industry and history. Tomorrow's leaders must help their teams and companies see the world more broadly, spot trends and environmental changes that foreshadow threats or opportunities, and then move their teams into action.
- 3 Retry**—Tomorrow's leaders must attack their challenges in the spirit and format of the scientific method. Instead of giving hollow lip service to experimentation, they must teach their teams to take risks and leverage failures in pursuit of future successes.
- 4 Rethink**—One core behavior for leading in this new world is to adopt the approaches of modern warriors who are challenged to build rapid trust in life-or-death settings with perfect strangers. The term "caring" will be added to the lexicon of essential leadership behaviors.
- 5 Recommit**—Guiding teams to high performance accelerates your career and saves your organization. Tomorrow's leaders must be adept at quickly bringing groups to a level of high performance, regardless of circumstances.
- 6 Reorient**—People with the political power decide what gets done and who does it. Tomorrow's leaders must be students of power and politics, striving to cultivate and project power for the purpose of generating positive change and innovation.
- 7 Rebrand**—A powerful personal brand has never been more important, yet many people fail to understand how others see them. Effective leaders will not only tune in to how people perceive

Tomorrow's leaders  
must attack their  
challenges.



Leaders must be adept at quickly bringing groups to a level of high performance, regardless of circumstances.

them, they will deliberately manage their brand personas to grow power and strengthen their effectiveness.

These skills are at the core for all of us when it comes to developing as leaders. The hard work of learning and mastering these skills defines the level-up challenge in front of us. Consider the very real case of Amy (name has been changed). As a senior product manager, she changed the fate of her organization by applying the level-up skills. I suspect most product managers will recognize this situation.

### THE CASE OF AMY

Amy was worried about a problem that no one else seemed to see. Her team was responsible for identifying new product and service ideas and bringing them to life. In her assessment, there was nothing new on what was a jam-packed product roadmap. The approved projects were either extensions of existing product-line offerings or crafty repackaging initiatives for older products that the company wanted to move down-market to new price-sensitive audiences. While every item on the roadmap had been vetted and approved by executives and enthusiastically endorsed by the customer council, it bothered her that the totality of the company's development efforts concentrated on tuning and tweaking ideas from the past. She intended to solve this problem.

### THE SITUATION

Amy's instincts were good, but her problem was larger than she imagined. Her company was wired to optimize around an industry customers and competitors knew well. Armed with the confidence gained from many years of success, management had little inclination to change the formula.

The scorecard metrics showed high marks and the historically strong financial results suggested that the company had cracked the code of sustaining success. While Amy looked at a roadmap of projects focused on tweaking the past and saw red flags, the tone emanating from the company's top leaders and managers was one of optimism about the organization's bright future.

In this environment of success and optimism, to gain support for her concerns, Amy needed to maneuver carefully or risk being labeled a naysayer. Get it right, and she would strengthen her position in her company and likely enjoy career growth. Get it wrong or mismanage the process, and she risked being marginalized—or worse.

### IN AMY'S WORDS

"I concluded that it would be politically naïve to 'cry wolf' about the dangers I saw in the company's future while everything we were doing seemed to be working. Instead, I focused on what I could control, and that was the work of my team. I knew that I needed to help them change their perspective and gain new insights that would pollinate new ideas, so I sat down with them and let them know the following:

- The bad news was that I was cutting the budget for attendance at industry-focused events and workshops.
- The good news was that I was allocating this budget for use in exploring new markets and technologies.

They were initially confused, but I shared my belief that our company's success and our team's growth and further success required fresh ideas, and that the best way to get these ideas was to move outside of our traditional industry and customers.

I identified some potentially interesting events in industries far removed from our own, and I gave the team an assignment to spend time looking at seminars, workshops, trade associations and other events that might serve as test cases for our new work as anthropologists.

The team surprised me with the volume of ideas they generated. We down-selected to three different settings where we could attend and observe. We set up three teams of three and agreed to visit the events and note big trends and noisy issues. We would identify interesting business approaches that were working for market innovators and leaders and look for ideas or insights by talking with as many people as possible. My only requirement was for everyone to take detailed notes and share their findings with the group when they returned.



While the teams were off observing and learning, I worked with facilities to turn a small, unoccupied office on our floor into our idea room. My intent was to capture the key observations, insights and ideas on flipcharts in this room and leave them visible as tools to build new ideas off of over time. I didn't know how important this room would be for us.

As the teams returned with their notes, we set up a series of debriefing sessions. The rest of the group was encouraged to ask questions, and all findings, questions and raw ideas were captured on flipcharts in our idea room. While the first session was a bit unstructured, the team enjoyed discussing and exploring the activities and trends of markets different from our own.

After we completed the first cycle of visits and debriefing sessions, something interesting happened. The team members began to ask important questions, including "How might we use that approach?" and "How might that technology help our customers solve some of their vexing problems?"

The questions again generated a series of brainstorm ideas and the need for more investigation. We down-selected to a small number of interesting-sounding explorations and the teams self-organized to dig deeper into the ideas. As they uncovered additional findings, they noted them in the idea room, which soon captured the interest of executives and other colleagues in the company. Part of our job became leading regular briefings in the idea room, describing various insights and explorations. This proved critical for gaining executive support for the next step of turning ideas into formal explorations or experiments.

Fast-forward 10 months from our initial team meeting. Our exploration and experiment led to one new product idea for a new market that received executive approval and two new strategic partnerships intended to help our current customers solve some big problems we would not have uncovered without our new worldview. Additionally, we uncovered some great approaches to serving customers in other markets that we used to strengthen our own support processes. The concept of looking outside our industry was so well received that we now include current customers in the processes. In turn, they replicate this for their own businesses, relying upon our help as valued partners."

### 11 REASONS WHY I LOVE AMY'S APPROACH

Amy's approach incorporates the entire spectrum of the level-up skills, and it is frankly brilliant in fomenting a quiet revolution in the company's approach to innovating.

- 1 Amy recognized a looming problem for her company that was mostly invisible to others.
- 2 She was politically adept enough to understand that simply voicing the problem would be ineffective and would label her as a negative influence inside a company where everything worked fairly well. She did not have the political heft to gain serious consideration for her agenda. Instead, she needed to finesse the situation.
- 3 She managed what she could control—the work of her team—while building political capital.



- 4 She took the time to gain her team's support by providing context for the situation and framing—but not dictating—the approach. She framed the need to go to other markets and let the team decide where to look and invest.
- 5 The visible content in the idea room helped create memories to stimulate further discussion and a means for building on ideas.
- 6 Instead of positioning the work of exploring new markets as a task, it was defined as a process intended to lead somewhere. For the team, it became a mission.
- 7 Team members were empowered by the freedom to look for new opportunities.
- 8 The process ultimately connected the observations to her company.
- 9 She built critical political capital by sharing the findings and ideas with executives and other stakeholders. The political capital was used to translate ideas into actions in the form of experiments or further exploration.
- 10 The process ultimately yielded tangible actions in the form of a new product idea, new service approaches and new partnership opportunities.
- 11 The process was legitimized by the inclusion of customers in the exploration work.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Leadership is always relevant, and the right behaviors are absolutely necessary for success in guiding and motivating others. However, it is essential to move beyond just the foundational behaviors that occupy the traditional narrative for leadership and focus on cultivating the skills necessary for survival in a hostile and foreign new world. The seven level-up skills offer a tangible starting point for you to rethink and revise your work as a leader. **PM**

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Art Petty** is an executive and management team coach and keynote speaker. He has two-plus decades of experience as a marketing, strategy and sales executive in software and systems. Art is an avid writer on the topics of leadership and management and is the author of *Leadership Caffeine for the Project Manager*, *Leadership Caffeine: Ideas to Energize Your Professional Development* and co-author of *Practical Lessons in Leadership*. He also writes the Management Excellence Blog at [artpetty.com/blog](http://artpetty.com/blog) and serves as the leadership and management expert blogger at The Balance (part of About.com) at [thebalance.com](http://thebalance.com). In his spare time, Art serves as a graduate management educator at DePaul University.



# FOSTERING INNOVATION

## IN A FAST-PACED WORLD

BY KIRSTEN BUTZOW

**C**ONSIDER THIS: 50 YEARS AGO, THE LIFE expectancy of a Fortune 500 firm was approximately 75 years. Today, it's less than 15 years and continues to decline. Eighty-eight percent of the original companies listed have either gone bankrupt, merged or—if they still exist—fallen off the Fortune 500 list. The reason? A failure to keep up with the accelerated rate of innovation required in today's fast-paced world.

We like to think great innovation is based on magical ideas conjured up by visionary geniuses. At the risk of dashing that fantasy, the reality is more simple. When we break down innovation into its most basic form, we see that it is actually a byproduct of the successful execution of three key business elements:



- A corporate culture that empowers and unleashes employee innovation
- A relentless focus on opportunities that have the best return on investment
- The continuous discipline to manage the things that matter most

### EMPOWERING CULTURE

The most important element dictating whether or not innovation will succeed is company culture. Culture doesn't mean proclaiming that your company is innovative. Instead, culture is shaped by a mosaic of shared rules, practices and artifacts that are not only expressed in formal ways, like organizational charts, job descriptions and the physical layout of your office, but also in informal ways, like social networks based on personal relationships both inside and outside the office.

Establishing a culture of innovation means you can point to specific, tangible things within your company that confirm and reinforce innovative practices. To establish a culture that drives innovation, you must start with an understanding that innovation occurs when you are passionate about solving problems for people outside the walls of your company. If you want to cultivate a culture that fosters innovation, you have to start by empowering employees to unleash this passion.

Unfortunately, while marketing and product teams are often told to be strategic, understand the market and spend time with customers, too often companies don't practice what they preach. Instead, employees are chained to their desks, managing checklists, returning emails and attending meetings.

In Pragmatic Marketing's 2017 annual survey of product managers and marketers, more than 3,500 respondents said their corporate cultures are decidedly inward-facing. They reported spending 72 percent of their time on tactical activities. If we believe that the source of innovation is solving customer problems, this statistic shows we are not supporting the cultural practices that inspire innovation.

Worse, there may be a sense that giving the team time to talk to customers or identify new market opportunities is an unaffordable luxury. You might hear things like, "We don't have budget to spend time in the market" or "I can't really have you take time away from the office." Then you do something incredibly risky: make stuff up. And the company never stops to think that when it builds products without market knowledge, it is ultimately more expensive and risky than establishing a market-driven culture.

Establishing a culture of innovation means that you must empower your teams to be market-driven by encouraging them to get outside the office. Encourage them to spend less time on emails and meetings and more time on market interactions. Then set a quantifiable goal. For example, for the next 12 months, you could target at least 10 percent of their time outside of the

office, talking directly to the market. This way, instead of building products based on assumptions, you listen to your customers and prospects and solve their actual problems.

### RELENTLESS FOCUS

Another reason innovation often fails is a lack of focus. If you run toward everything that looks like the next big thing or spend all your time chasing the competition, it's easy to get sidetracked or lost.

According to a CareerCast survey, 62 percent of workers rate their jobs as highly stressful and list unpredictability as their most common stress factor. A lack of focus can create stress in your business. And when you are stressed, it is difficult to perform at optimal levels.

When you run around in an endless maze chasing big ideas or trying to execute the strategy of the day, it is hard to focus, much less to find the path forward. Your ability to pursue the best opportunities that will achieve a maximum return is inhibited. And your entire job can quickly become a frenzied response to urgent and demanding requests.

True innovation stems from an ability to say no. You need to focus your energy on things that have the greatest potential return for the least investment possible or, as Steve Jobs so eloquently put it, "Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things."

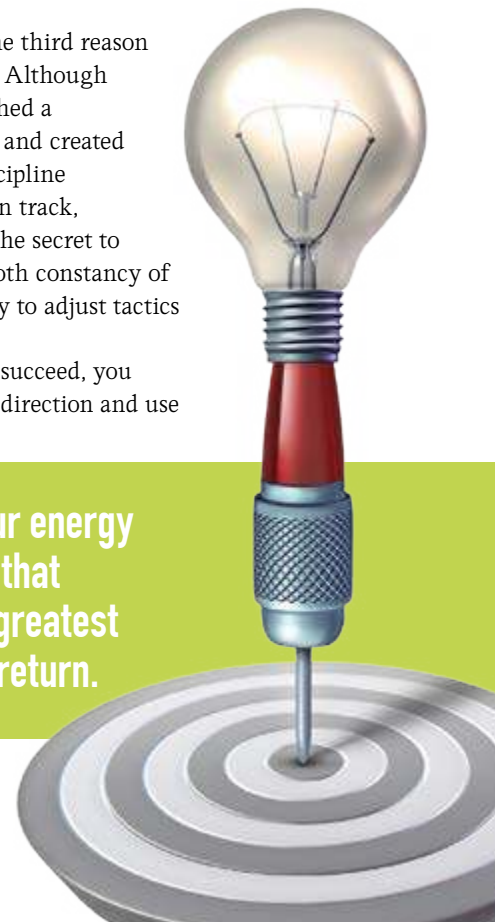
To help drive focus into your business, start by having a clear answer to two simple questions: Who are you trying to delight? And what will you build to delight them? In other words, how will you allocate your resources to build products that satisfy your biggest market opportunities and produce the greatest returns?

### CONTINUOUS DISCIPLINE

Lack of discipline is the third reason innovation often fails. Although you may have established a market-driven culture and created focus, without the discipline to keep the first two on track, innovation will fail. The secret to long-term success is both constancy of purpose and the agility to adjust tactics when needed.

For innovation to succeed, you must understand your direction and use

Focus your energy  
on things that  
have the greatest  
potential return.



that information to drive organizational alignment. However, maintaining directional clarity at today's speeds can be challenging. It took 38 years for television to be adopted by 50 million users. Twitter acquired the same number of users in just nine months.

The velocity at which you have to respond to the market has changed dramatically. And development methodologies have evolved in response to that shift, which is why we have created and embraced agile. By doing work in smaller chunks, you can rapidly prototype and learn, yielding fast results, which is a powerful concept.

However, "Are you agile?" might be one of the most loaded questions in technology. Agile means a lot of things to a lot of people. Without the discipline to stay on track, agile can actually derail rather than foster innovation. Why? Because you risk simply accelerating the pace of unwanted products.

Done right, agile incorporates more discipline and more defined rigor and builds in more opportunities to say no. But if you are going to rely on agile to drive innovation at today's speeds, there are two key elements of discipline you must master.

The first is to have the discipline to stay on course until you have delivered a potentially shippable product. Because of its iterative nature, agile's development checkpoints—requirements, design, build and user validation reviews—occur more frequently. This frequency increases your chances of becoming derailed.

Agile discipline means leveraging these touchpoints to stay on track until you have delivered a potentially shippable product. So even though opportunities to review your product development initiatives may present themselves with a greater frequency, you can't bungee in at the sprint touchpoints with new ideas until an iteration has been completed and tested with actual customers.

Teamwork is the second key element of discipline. For agile to work, you must fully integrate all parts of the development process. Requirements, design, build and test must be nested



**For innovation to succeed, you must understand your direction and use that information to drive organizational alignment.**

together and stable. The most successful agile teams work closely together and members remain constant. A team must be disciplined to stay on course and avoid allowing outside distractions to derail iterations.

But just as it's important to stay the course through each product version, it's also important to learn how to embrace and harness instability. This is something that requires constant work and discipline to manage. The days of building 50-page business plans designed to avoid risk are gone. Instead, you must plan for change by shifting your mind away from thinking that failure is not an option. Pursue failure and incorporate it into everything you do. Remember, every time you fail, you learn.

At the end of the day, your goal is to build remarkable solutions. But you are also running a business. Therefore, to succeed at innovation, ensure that the solutions you build are repeatable, scalable and profitable.

Ask yourself what type of company you want yours to be. One that has locked innovation in a trap? Or one that sets innovation free by establishing a culture that empowers employees to innovate by spending time outside the office, focuses energy on opportunities with the best ROI and is disciplined about staying on track?

The only way to set innovation free is to value learning from the market at least as much as you value launching your product into the market. [PM](#)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kirsten Butzow** has 20 years of experience leading technology companies, including Fujitsu, Pearson and Blackboard. She has held vice president roles for the past 10 years, allowing her to bring a strong executive perspective to her role as a Pragmatic Marketing instructor. As a leader, she has directed product management portfolios, created business plans and strategic product roadmaps and implemented many aspects of the Pragmatic Marketing Framework. Contact Kirsten at [kbutzow@pragmaticmarketing.com](mailto:kbutzow@pragmaticmarketing.com).

#### SURVEY SAYS...

Pragmatic Marketing recently conducted our 17th annual survey for product management and marketing professionals. Among the findings:

##### AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS SPENT MONTHLY

ATTENDING  
MEETINGS

  
**40** HRS

MANAGING  
EMAIL

  
**32** HRS

TALKING TO  
CUSTOMERS

  
**8** HRS



Get Pragmatic Marketing's complete survey results at [pragmaticmarketing.com/survey2017](http://pragmaticmarketing.com/survey2017)



FAST

RESTRAINED

INEXPENSIVE

ELEGANT

# THE FIRE METHOD

How Fast,  
Inexpensive,  
Restrained and  
Elegant Methods  
Ignite Innovation

BY DAN WARD

**I**N DECEMBER 2010, AT A TINY RESEARCH FACILITY IN FREEZING-COLD Rome, New York, U.S. Air Force scientists cut the ribbon on a supercomputer named the Condor Cluster. Operating at 500 TFLOPS—trillion floating-point operations per second—it was the fastest supercomputer in the entire Department of Defense and the thirty-third fastest in the world. Contributing to its awesomeness was the price tag—the Air Force only paid 10 percent of what it would cost for a comparable supercomputer. On top of that, the Condor Cluster uses a mere 10 percent of the electricity typically required by similar machines, which means it's got a smaller carbon footprint and is less expensive to operate. Not a bad day's work.

One other interesting fact about the Condor Cluster: It was built out of 1,760 Sony PlayStations. True story.

In other parts of the Department of Defense, results were decidedly less awesome. Just three months earlier, in September 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear arguments related to the U.S. Navy's A-12 Avenger airplane, known to some as the Flying Dorito because of its triangular shape. Begun in 1983 and envisioned as an all-weather, carrier-based stealth bomber/attack jet, the Avenger

program was terminated in 1991, at which point the Navy had spent \$2 billion but received nothing for its money beyond a really exciting case study in failure for students at the Defense Acquisition University.

After almost 20 years of litigation, the nation's highest court was finally going to consider whether the government's decision to cancel this bloated project was justified. Resolution was apparently not to be, and in May 2011 the court returned the case to the lower appeals court instead of deciding, so the saga continued.

We could spend all day looking at similar examples from all the military services, highlighting the ups and downs of defense technology. The Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force all have their own stories of critical new gear being delivered in a matter of weeks, right alongside stories where billions and decades are spent to deliver exactly nothing. Of course, these highs and lows are not limited to the military. NASA has some of the best failure and success stories around. For that matter, the federal government does not have a monopoly here.

Why do some programs deliver their product under budget, while others see their costs expand by orders of magnitude? Why do some deliver ahead of schedule, while others experience endless delay after endless delay? And, most critically, which products work better—the quick and thrifty, or the slow and expensive? Which situation leads to superior equipment?

After a few years of conducting informal research into these questions, I spent 18 months at the Air Force Institute of Technology looking at them more rigorously. The pattern that emerged is this: The most successful project leaders from government and industry alike tend to deliver top-shelf stuff with a skeleton crew, a shoestring budget and a cannonball schedule. In interviews I read and those I personally conducted, project leaders continually echoed one theme: "We had no time and no money. We were just lucky to have a small team of really creative, dedicated people and we got it done."

In contrast, project leaders who are cursed with large budgets, large teams and long schedules generally have a difficult time delivering even a fraction of the promised capability, an outcome often blamed on an excessively cumbersome process. Interestingly, when faced with

cancellation due to severe cost overruns and delays, these leaders typically respond, "If I had a little more time and money, I could fix this."

Yes, those who had the largest budgets were most likely to ask for more money and least likely to deliver an actual working product. Those with the smallest budgets were most likely to have cash left over after delivering 10 pounds of awesome on a five-pound purse. The faster, cheaper stuff also tends to perform better in actual use than the slower, more expensive stuff. The idea that spending less time and money leads to better outcomes sounds a bit like claiming that

moderate amounts of red wine and dark chocolate are good for you. Surely this is too good to be true. And yet, as with the aforementioned health benefits, the data are compelling.

We haven't said much about complexity yet, so let's remedy that right now. Successful project leaders tend to place a premium on simplicity in their organizations, processes, documentation and technologies. They tend to view simplicity as a desirable attribute and pursue opportunities to simplify when they are able.

FIRE codifies the practices, principles and tools used by some of the best technology developers in the world—people who sent spacecraft on intercept courses with asteroids or who built fighter planes that dominated the skies of World War II. FIRE also describes the way clever toy designers teach science lessons that are actually fun.

One final note: While improving one's process might be a fun way to spend a sunny July afternoon, FIRE is emphatically not a process-improvement

initiative. Given the modern popularity of process-improvement methodologies, that last sentiment bears repeating: FIRE is not about process improvement.

The primary objective is to improve our objectives and outcomes rather than our processes. There is a tremendous difference between them. Clever project leaders should certainly make an effort to streamline, simplify and accelerate their processes, but the bulk of their attention is rightfully spent on the product itself and on taking care of the people who make it.


The reason for this is simple. Process-centric improvement efforts have a maddening tendency to be process-centric, despite official protests to the contrary. This myopic orientation



**Successful project leaders tend to deliver top-shelf stuff with a skeleton crew, a shoestring budget and a cannonball schedule.**



frequently overshadows both the team members and the product itself and instead focuses on delivering a set of lovely, full-color, hypothetical process flow diagrams that signify nothing.

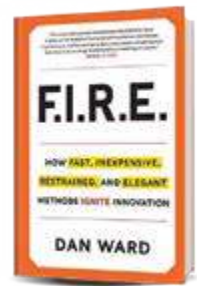
In contrast, FIRE is all about helping people make good decisions as we design and create new things. These little guidelines don't dictate behavior, nor do they represent a step-by-step formula. Good luck trying to build a process flow diagram out of them. Instead, this heuristic approach echoes Visa CEO Dee Hock's explanation of how he succeeded in founding the Visa credit card association: "We have no precise plan, only a clear sense of direction." 

Book excerpt from *F.I.R.E., How Fast, Inexpensive, Restrained, and Elegant Methods Ignite Innovation* by Dan Ward. Copyright © 2014 by Dan Ward. All rights reserved. Published by HarperCollins Publishers.



#### About the Author

**Dan Ward** served in the U.S. Air Force for more than 20 years, where he specialized in leading high-speed, low-cost technology development programs. In 2012, he received the Bronze Star for his service in Afghanistan. After retiring at the rank of lieutenant colonel, he launched Dan Ward Consulting LLC to help clients reduce the cost, time and complexity of delivering world-class innovations. He is the author of two books. Learn more about Dan at [thedanward.com](http://thedanward.com) or follow him on Twitter @thedanward.



### The four components of FIRE combine to create a heuristic-based approach. Here's the meaning for each component:

# F

#### F Is for Fast

This is about defining a project objective that can be satisfied on a short timeline, not one we know full well will require 20 years to accomplish. But here's the twist: We must not be content with the superficial appearance of speed, where we appear to be moving quickly but are in fact spinning our wheels or running in the wrong direction. Nor should we pursue speed at the expense of doing good work. This means no cutting corners, no skipping essential steps in the development process. The project is only fast if we do quality work on a short timeline.

# I

#### I Is for Inexpensive

It's important to have a small budget. That may be an unpopular position in an environment in which budgets equal prestige, but in my experience I've found that the ability to deliver meaningful capabilities on a shoestring is actually a widely respected skill, even in the cash-rich defense business. Being inexpensive is about designing our organizations and processes with thrift in mind and solving problems with intellectual capital instead of financial capital.

# R

#### R Is for Restrained

This is the common thread that runs through the whole FIRE concept. It is a preference for self-control, tight budgets and small teams, short schedules, short meetings and short documents.

# E

#### E Is for Elegant

The E in FIRE stands for elegant in the sense of "pleasingly ingenious and simple." It's important to have a low level of complexity. Embracing elegant simplicity means designing our organizations and processes with simplicity in mind. It's about stating goals clearly and incorporating mature, proven technologies into our designs. True sophistication, true design maturity and true process maturity are shown through deep simplicity, not through brain-meltingly complex diagrams and structures.

Don't be content with the superficial appearance of speed.



Learn to lead strategically in our **Foundations** course.  
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# WHAT BASKETBALL TAUGHT ME ABOUT BUSINESS

BY SHAWN BUSSE

**I'VE GOT A CONFESSION TO MAKE.** As a kid, I was an awful athlete, especially when it came to team sports. While I took a few stabs at soccer and baseball, I just couldn't manage to overcome my introverted nature and awkward growth spurts.

However, as a business owner of almost two decades, my fascination and appreciation for the value of teamwork have grown immensely. And so—while I was never really an athlete of note—I've become an avid fan of the Portland Trail Blazers. They provide a continuous study of what works (and what doesn't) when it comes to teams. Across 20 years, the team has seen some remarkable highs and terrible lows. To start, let's look at three fundamental hazards that bring down even the best of teams.

## 1. You Can't Win With Bad Apples

Remember the "Jail Blazers?" In the early 2000s, when Portland's team made the news, it was not for their athleticism but for their criminal activity: fighting in public, drugs, felonies, you name it.

The self-serving nature of this group

more or less ensured that the concept of teamwork never made its way to the court. Despite their raw individual talent, the team lost game after game, guaranteeing the demise of Portland's basketball hopes for nearly a decade. This leads to the second fundamental hazard.

## 2. You Can't Afford a Bad Hire

The detrimental influence of the Jail Blazers malcontents had an echo effect on the team's revenue for years to come. The graph to the right illustrates the cost of the Jail Blazers in game attendance alone, but that doesn't even scratch the surface of additional losses in ticket prices, sponsorships and damage to the brand. In short, the franchise lost over \$140 million in ticket sales and took nearly seven years to regain its pre-Jail Blazer success.

The lesson here is that even the relatively brief duration of this "bad apple" team had astronomical financial consequences. The same can be said for a business. Studies

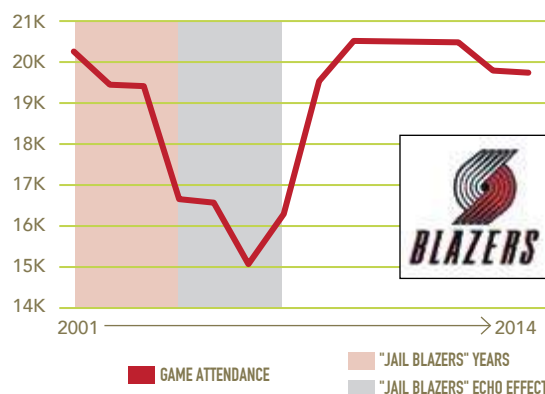
put the negative productivity impact of just one bad apple at 30 to 40 percent, and there are multiple other direct costs of a disengaged employee.

## 3. Attitude Counts

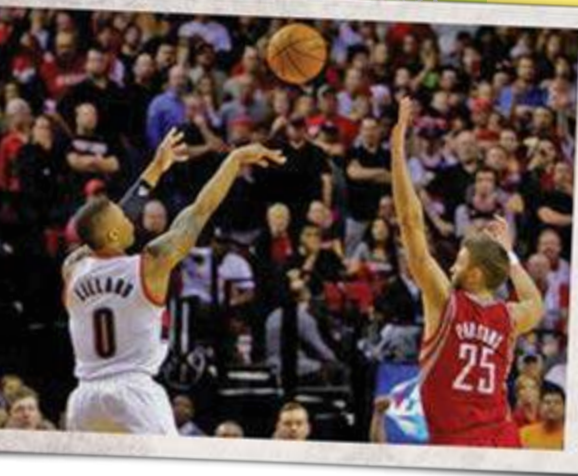
In 2014, Blazers guard Damian Lillard hit the greatest shot in Trail Blazers history, making a 25-foot three-pointer off an inbound pass that started with 0.9 seconds left in the game.

But in watching that legendary game against Houston, the victory wasn't just

TRAIL BLAZERS GAME ATTENDANCE







CRAIG MITCHELL/DYER-USA TODAY SPORTS



because of Lillard's game-winning shot. Indeed, if you watch how each team's players interact with one another, you'll see moments that are less remarkable, but actually more significant than Lillard's buzzer-beater.

Here's what I mean: Both teams had incredible athletes capable of game-changing plays; but whereas Portland's players convey a sense of optimism and camaraderie, that spirit was missing from the Houston side. And if you watch multiple games between these teams around this period in history, you'll notice nearly every game highlights the difference in leadership style. Houston is actually a more experienced team with "better" players, but they seldom lift each other up or elevate one another in difficult times. In contrast, Lillard and his teammates bolstered up everyone around them, even the players who weren't as strong. By working together, they succeeded against a stronger opponent.

Business is no different. We all have ups and downs. We win sales; we lose sales. Our proposals are adopted; and they're shot down. We have great days at the office, and days best forgotten. However, if leaders cultivate a culture of mutual respect, camaraderie and shared objectives, the company performs better, achieving higher revenue, better customer service and improved retention.

And now for the opportunities.

### 1. Winning Is About the Whole Team

Even though Lillard made one heck of a shot, for me the real story is how the whole Blazers' roster created that opportunity for him. In the business world, even the best salesperson will do better if they have the full support of marketing, customer service and operations.

### 2. A-Players Call for the Ball

In the video, seconds before his dramatic shot, Lillard can be seen streaking across the court, clapping his hands together to let teammate Nicolas Batum know he is open, focused and ready to make the play. That

sense of engagement and urgency is the hallmark of a top performer, whether in the NBA or working as an entry-level employee. And commitment is meaningful to the bottom line. Studies show that highly engaged employees contribute more than 30 percent more to profits than those who merely show up.

### 3. Practice Seals the Deal

Last year, the Trail Blazers were widely predicted to be among the worst teams in the Western Conference thanks to the loss of four of their five starters, including Wesley Matthews and Robin Lopez. Instead of rolling over and playing the loser that everybody predicted, the team showed their

vigorous commitment to practice, teamwork and a willingness to play their hearts out. Their season celebrated many upsets, including steamrolling the Golden State Warriors, a team on pace to finish with the best record in NBA history. Despite the odds, head coach Terry Stotts once again led the team to the second round of the playoffs.

As a diehard Trail Blazers fan and a consummate student of leadership, I am looking forward to the 2016-17 season with the knowledge that my hometown team has the potential to grow. In the meantime, I'm going to focus my own game on exactly the same things

the Blazers have taught me about business: great coaching, top-notch recruiting, smart strategy and a laser-like focus on teamwork. [PMA](#)

**HIGHLY-ENGAGED  
EMPLOYEES  
CONTRIBUTE  
30 PERCENT MORE  
TO PROFITS THAN  
THOSE WHO MERELY  
SHOW UP.**



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Shawn Busse** has an incredible knack for finding opportunities and helping small businesses thrive. As CEO of Kinesis, he provides companies with the tools they need to connect marketing, HR, finance and employee engagement to improve company performance. Shawn enjoys helping business leaders discover the power of this convergence as they work hard to create not just a business, but a legacy. Over the last 18 years, Shawn has led numerous transformational business efforts; his fundamental approach to doing business is summed up in two words: win-win. Contact Shawn at [shawn@kinesisinc.com](mailto:shawn@kinesisinc.com) or connect with him at [linkedin.com/in/shawnbusse](https://www.linkedin.com/in/shawnbusse).

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# Explaining UX to Kindergartners:

## Plus a Few Lessons for UX Designers

BY TEENA SINGH

**A** FEW MONTHS AGO, MY SON'S KINDERGARTEN TEACHER ASKED me to share what I do after I drop my son off at school. I had to follow on the heels of one mother who is the vice principal of a middle school and another who is a professional stylist for children. My curious 5-year-old was able to enthusiastically recount in great detail what the other mothers do for a living and their impact on the world. Thankfully, I believe my job impacts the way people work—and the world itself—by making workers more effective and productive. But I worried I would not be able to explain this meaningful work to my son and his classmates. After all, Caroline's mother made her role come to life by taking my son's class to her middle school, where they saw older students walking through the halls and visited her office. Wren's always put-together mommy brought in clothes and a makeup bag she uses in professional photo shoots and showed photos and magazines where her work was featured.

How could I explain that I create HR enterprise software to a group of rambunctious 5-year-olds? I pondered showing them some of the screens we had usability tested a few weeks back. Nope, that wasn't going to hold their attention. The standard PowerPoint that I share with clients to explain user-centered design wasn't going to cut it either.

I figured that I might not be able to explain creating experiences with enterprise software, but I could give the little ones a lesson in the basics of user experience. I decided to take a page (okay, maybe pages) out of Don Norman's book *The Design of Everyday Things* to aid my discussion and make it more hands-on and interesting for the class.

Here is the primer, with some lessons for enterprise UX design sprinkled within.

**1****Usefulness**

I started by showing the class a picture of a pair of rain boots with the toes cut out. "What do you think of these boots?" I asked the class.

The children pealed with laughter. "Those rain boots won't work!" "Your feet will get all wet!"

I explained that these boots are exactly as they noted: not useful.

**Lesson for UX designers:** Make sure the products you design are useful and solve the user's problem. Create solutions that don't force users to use a workaround. This enables users to achieve their goals in a meaningful, productive way.

**2****Call to Action**

Next, I reached for an iPad and showed a screen from a children's game. I asked the class what they would click on to start this game.

The eager class belted out that they would click on the green arrow. Instinctively, the children knew where to press to start the game.

**Lesson for UX designers:** Using bold childlike imagery or text isn't the solution for enterprise software, but the user interface must include a clear call to action for each task so that users may efficiently complete their work in the system.





## 3

## Mental Model

Next we walked over to the light switch in the corner of the room. I asked the children, "How would you turn the light on?"

A number of the children burst out:

"To turn the lights on, you push it up!"

"The light switch works the same in my room!"

"You push down to turn the light off!"

I took a moment to explain that through use, we come to expect certain actions or tools to work in a consistent and known manner.

**Lesson for UX designers:** Design interfaces and experiences that match the user's mental models. As Wikipedia states, a mental model is an explanation of someone's thought process about how something works in the real world. It is a representation of the surrounding world, the relationships between its various parts and a person's intuitive perception about his or her own acts and their consequences. Mental models can help shape behavior and set an approach to solving problems (akin to a personal algorithm) and doing tasks.

Consistency is critical when selecting widgets or placing navigational objects on the user interface. A user must be able to complete tasks in an efficient manner; having known navigational or gesture patterns in place creates a seamless user experience.



## 4

## Pain Points

Next, I passed juice boxes around so they could touch and feel a physical object and provide feedback.

As the children tried to sip their juice, I heard a number of comments:

"Can you help me take my straw out of the wrapper?"

"I can't put my straw in the box."

"Can I have a tissue?"

After my end-user observation, I asked the thirsty kindergartners about the issues that arose with the juice boxes. The expert end users described their challenges:

- The straw can be hard to remove from the box.
- Putting the straw in the juice box is difficult; little fingers often tried to insert the wrong side of the straw into the box.
- The juice can easily spill when the student accidentally squeezes it.
- It's hard to know if you have finished drinking the contents of the juice box.
- You can't see what the juice looks like.

**Lesson for UX designers:** Understand your users. For enterprise software, your user might not be the person purchasing the software. Continuously improve the design of your product by testing it with end users and understanding their wants, needs and pain points.



My examples were complete and I had a bunch of sugar-happy students on my hands. I took a few minutes to explain the concepts we had discussed and experienced. Then, I summarized what I do at my work to the class: "I make sure that your mommies' and daddies' work can be done in the most effective and efficient manner possible."

My presentation done, I left the school feeling that perhaps there were some design thinkers in the group who might just have been inspired.

That night at dinner, my son said, "Mommy, I am glad you make it easier for people to do their work! Did you bring any of those extra juice boxes home?"

It goes to show you that everything you need to know you learned in kindergarten. And once in while it's good to get a reminder of that simple approach to learning. [PM](#)



## About the Author

**Teena Singh** is a seasoned UX/CX professional with over a decade of expertise. She works at the intersection of customer engagement, user experience and product strategy. Her passion and experience lies in advocating the user's needs, improving their experience and sharing their story. Connect with her on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/teenasingh](https://www.linkedin.com/in/teenasingh) or on Twitter at @teenapocket.



# The Product Manager vs. the Strategist

Behind the Roles that Shape Your World

BY JULIA MITELMAN

**Y**OUR LIFE IS CURATED. THE COFFEE YOU'RE DRINKING, THE VIDEOS YOU'RE streaming and that pair of Converse you're wearing—all your choices were driven by what was available and desirable. But who put those options there? Who decided that Nestlé should create an espresso machine? Who made YouTube a household name? Who told Nike to purchase Converse?

Product managers and strategists drive such decisions, and thus shape your world. Both choose which problems to solve and which goals to go after. Both turn grand visions into tangible goods and market realities.

But their worlds are often disparate. Product managers and strategists see things through different lenses and maintain often-opposing priorities. Most companies value one or the other, and keep the two worlds separate. In such a system, product managers and strategists provide competing perspectives, rather than empowering one another to create exponential wins for both customers and the business. However, they're actually two halves of a functional whole. To address the range of challenges modern markets present, both perspectives are necessary to win and keep winning. But to understand how the two can collaborate, we must first understand how each thinks.

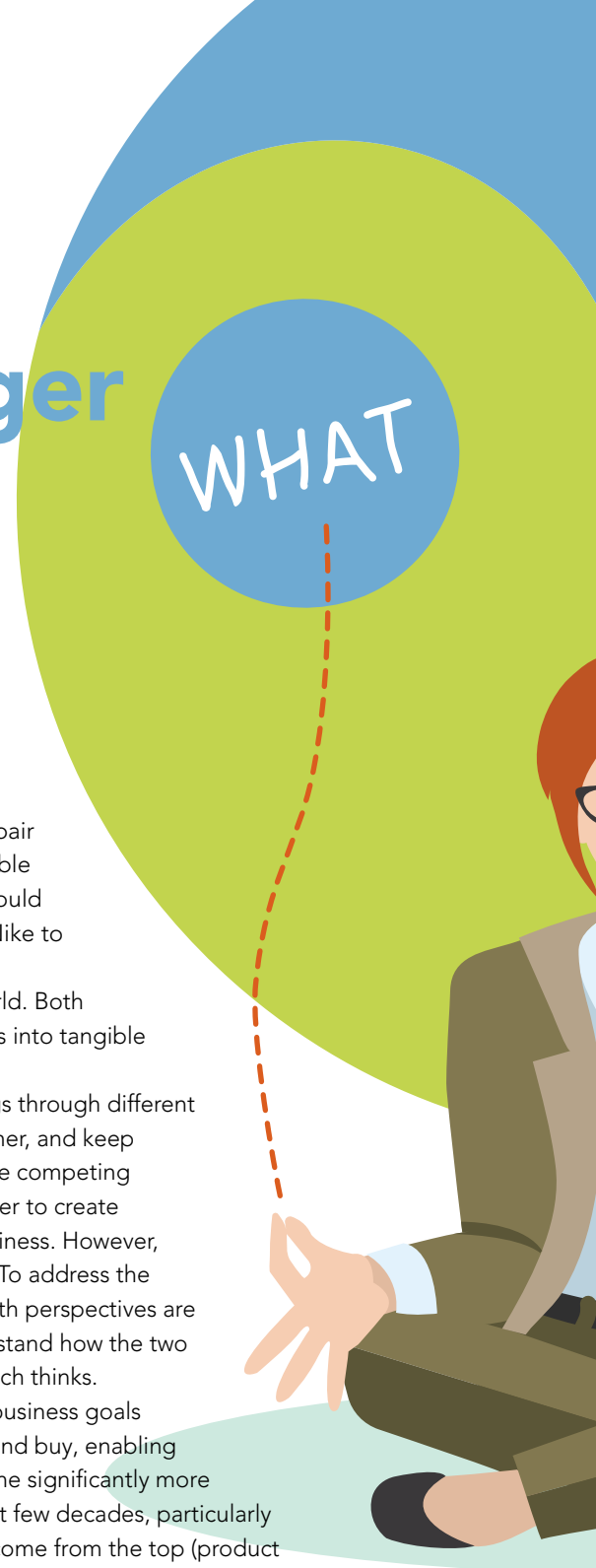
**Product managers and strategists see things through different lenses and maintain often-opposing priorities.**

Product people connect customer needs with business goals to produce goods and services that people use and buy, enabling the company to compete. As a field, it has become significantly more important to effective competition within the past few decades, particularly as the tech industry has risen. The direction can come from the top (product executing on executives' visions) or from the bottom (product weaving features into marketable stories).

Strategists consider the external and internal landscape to identify market gaps and opportunities, enabling the company to compete. As a field, it's often held close to the executive team. The role is mature, but the nature of strategic work has changed significantly in past decades: Competitive advantage has shifted from being the best at a particular thing to being the most adaptable to evolving markets and customer needs.

When the two come together, companies often find breakthrough successes. Perhaps one of the clearest recent examples of this is the Nespresso system: The *product* addressed a strong (mostly unmet) need for high-quality but also high-convenience espresso, while the *strategy* enabled Nestlé to sustain growth through subscription sales and hardware licensing.

To put it simply, both product and strategy aim to fulfill a company's *why*. Product begins with the *what* and strategy begins with the *how*.







# HOW

## How Each Role Thinks at Each Stage

*Note: The definitions of product management and strategy are fuzzy and ever-evolving, so consider this a starting point to enable better collaboration, rather than a set of hard-line distinctions.*

### Breaking into the Market

Product people find gaps of unmet needs using market research. They identify problems with the strongest market impact by prioritizing the list by highest pain or widest reach. For example, YouTube allowed customers to share and consume large video files by simultaneously downloading and watching them (a.k.a. streaming), rather than having to wait for the entire file to download first—a particularly important need given the speed of the internet in 2005. Product people pursue solutions to impactful customer problems, which then produce value for the business through direct or indirect sales.

Strategists find gaps in the market via competitive analysis. They identify the biggest opportunities by considering what highly successful competitors are doing which they could do better, or areas competitors might have missed, which they could easily address. For example, Trader Joe's realized that rather than selling private-label products as a cheaper alternative, it could reframe those products as a marker of quality and relevance for customers. Strategy determines which opportunities can produce maximum new customer and business value.

### Breaking Through to the Top of the Market

Product people win by addressing important unmet needs or by addressing met needs better than their competitors to the point that they drive customers to switch products. For example, the iPod, while not the first digital music player, introduced the shuffle feature and was the first to display names of songs instead of file names, creating a superior experience. Product focuses on a clever *what*.

Strategists win by capturing opportunities in unique ways. They have figured out how to sell the same things cheaper (e.g. through strategic partnerships or complementary revenue streams) or how to create new value from what they've already got (e.g., by addressing new markets). For example, Uber accomplished both of these simultaneously by realizing they could provide cheaper taxi services by turning their customers into suppliers via UberX. Strategy focuses on a clever *how*.

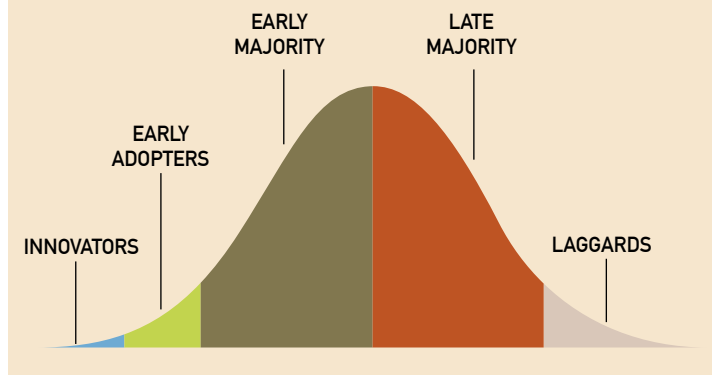
### Scaling Success

Product people scale their solution by meeting the needs of wider audiences.

As their products are adopted by more diverse customers, they adapt their products to these new customers who have different needs. This is known as the Technology (or Product) Adoption Curve.

Strategists scale their solution by improving the business model to undercut competitors and create new value. They might forge new partnerships to cut costs, identify new marketing channels by which to reach customers or find new revenue streams for the same opportunities. The Business Model Canvas is a useful tool for identifying these opportunities.

### TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION CURVE





### Maintaining a Competitive Advantage

Product people continue to create new or complementary features and products to address evolving customer needs. Once they've solved one customer problem, they might unlock related or adjacent customer problems. For example, as Google became a dominant email provider with Gmail, the offer of a matching calendar, and eventually a suite of productivity apps, was a natural progression of user needs. As competitors catch up, markets reshape and customer expectations change, product people evolve their products, continuously searching for today's most relevant needs. To advance, adaptability is key.

Strategists continue to find new ways to create value for the business and for customers as competitors, markets and customers change. For instance, once they create a set of strategic partnerships for one product, they might realize they could leverage the network to easily create another one. Amazon did this by turning its internal virtual server system—which was created to increase Amazon's retail efficiency—into an external product that acts as its own revenue stream, Amazon Web Services. As new competitors enter, markets grow or shrink and customer expectations change, strategy continuously searches for new ways to gain the edge. To advance, flexibility is key.



### Reconciling Product and Strategy

Some companies, particularly within tech, have figured out how to leverage the best of both worlds. Facebook, for example, is widely believed to have originally won the market by creating exclusivity around social networks, a strategic decision rather than one that directly solved a need. But this exclusivity was created around real-life networks, a decision which (knowingly or not) addressed a customer need by enabling people to use their real identities and create an online life that complemented their real lives.

**Balance product and strategy by crafting solutions that empower business and solve problems for customers.**

Fast-forward a decade and Facebook is building drones to bring internet access to remote areas (a strong customer need), addressing the strategic problem that it has saturated its accessible markets. Facebook has arguably mastered the balance of product and strategy, crafting solutions that empower their business by solving problems for their customers.

Amazon is (perhaps controversially) another elegant example of this balance—its commitment to passing

profits back to customers in the form of low prices gives it a strategic advantage almost impossible to crack (even when competitors attempt to temporarily take on losses), and this business model only remains sustainable as long as it is a market leader. Amazon has created a cycle in which it takes the lowest profits, so it can offer the lowest prices and attract the most customers, which keeps it alive despite having the lowest profits. Customer needs are met in the best way possible through a strategy that is incredibly difficult to replicate.

These examples and the interplay between product and strategy that we see today is only the tip of the iceberg. Most modern companies still prefer—or excel—at one or the other, and the roles rarely speak, each often lacking an understanding or awareness of the other. Imagine how much more value we could create for businesses and customers alike if we changed that. [PM](#)



### About the Author

**Julia Mitelman** is an entrepreneurial strategist at OneLeap in London. Previously, she was a product manager on Windows 10 at Microsoft. She graduated with degrees in psychology and computer science from Harvard College, where she founded several student ventures and led a tech startup accelerator program. Julia is passionate about understanding and evolving ways of working across industries to match modern markets; find more thoughts on this at [medium.com/@juliamitelman](https://medium.com/@juliamitelman).



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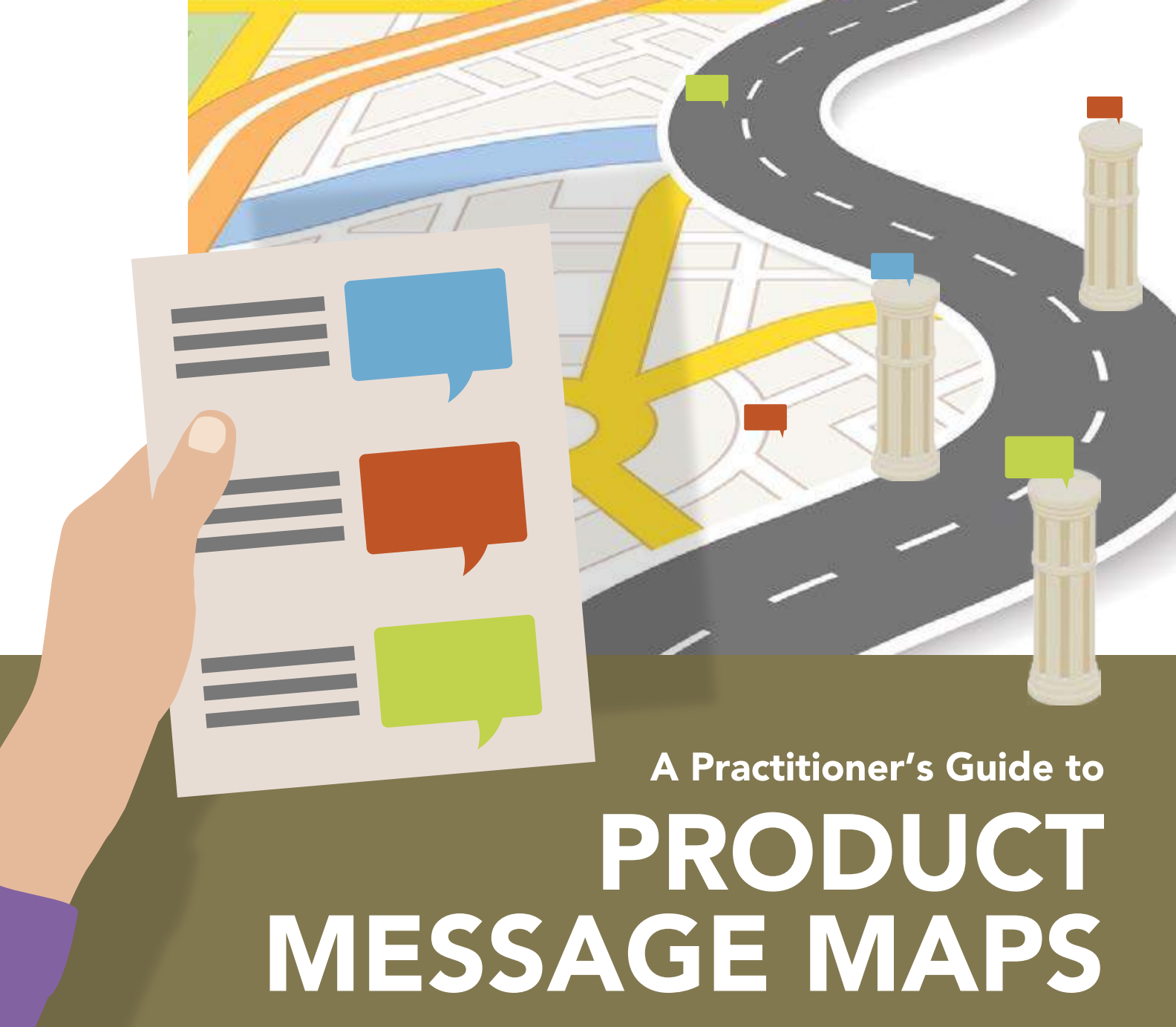
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# A Practitioner's Guide to PRODUCT MESSAGE MAPS

BY  
STEVE PIPER

**I**NDULGE ME FOR A MINUTE. BEFORE YOU READ THIS ARTICLE, click on your company's website and view the page associated with your flagship product. Jot down the key message headings. Now open the datasheet for that product and compare the message headings to those you wrote down. Do they match? Are they even close?

If your company is like most, the answer is "no." That's because few high-tech vendors take the time to create product message maps and apply them to their marketing communications. Instead, they essentially reinvent the wheel with each new content piece, resulting in disjointed, inconsistent messages and confused buyers. If you wonder what message maps are, why they are important and how to create one, read on.

## Message Map Basics

Product message maps are internal documents, typically owned by product marketing. They serve as a messaging structure for developing product-related marketing communications, such as web content, blogs, product collateral and news announcements. And they also serve as a messaging structure for white papers, presentations, webinars and product videos.



Message maps simplify the process of developing product-related content because they remove the need—and the temptation—to diverge from the agreed-upon messaging. By communicating the same overarching themes and supporting points across all marketing communications, you constantly reinforce these key product messages to your core audiences. This consistency strengthens your product positioning and minimizes misunderstandings and confusion.

Unfortunately, there's no universal message map template or structure. If you ask 10 product marketers about message maps, you'll probably get 11 responses. But at the very least, a solid product message map will contain three components.

### Message Pillars

These are the most important ingredients of your product message map. You'll use these words or phrases throughout your marketing communications to summarize your product's core value propositions. Three message pillars are ideal because things that come in threes are usually more memorable. (Don't believe me? Google "rule of three" to learn more.) Four message pillars are acceptable, two are too few and five are too many.

### Proof Points

These statements validate and expand on your message pillars. Proof points often relate to product features or attributes, but may also pertain to third-party tests, industry awards, media reviews or product certifications. They should appear in the decreasing order of importance that they impact revenue. When you develop content for multiple marketing communications, you can rephrase your proof points so that no two marketing communications read exactly the same, while still providing consistent messaging.

### Product Positioning Statements

These typically include a product positioning phrase, sentence and paragraph. In the case of a one-product company, they may evolve into the corporate tagline or the standardized description about the company that appears at the end of press releases. More broadly, companies can use this information for subheadings on product brochures, within executive summaries of white papers, or as product descriptions for award nominations.

### Message Map Creation

Building effective product message maps is a team effort that require a lot of work. But when you are finished, you will be able to reap the benefits.

### Preparation Phase

You'll need to collect and document extensive information before attempting to create a message map. Here's a list to get you started.

- Product information—Category, components/features, typical use cases, unique advantages (e.g., first, best, only) and potential buyer objections
- Target buyers—Buyer personas, customer needs and challenges, target verticals, target organization size and target buyer job titles
- Competitive landscape—Names of competitive companies and their products, competitor advantages and disadvantages, and data from customer win/loss interviews

### Messaging Workshop Phase

Book a meeting room for a day—preferably off-site to minimize interruptions—for you and six to eight colleagues (representing product management, product marketing, sales and development) to review and agree on the relevance of the information you aggregated during the preparation phase. Use this information as the basis of a brainstorming session on candidate message pillars and underlying proof points. Your goal should be to achieve consensus on three or four message pillars.

### Development Phase

Now it's time to apply what you learned in your message workshop and the themes you developed to construct the first draft of your product message map. Polish them into succinct words or phrases and propose copy-ready proof points, listing them in decreasing order of significance to back up each message pillar. Then send the draft to your colleagues and ask them to validate the map or propose changes.

### Maintenance Phase

The message map is a living document. As your product and market change, and competing products evolve, update it and your underlying marketing communications accordingly.







Typically, message maps are refreshed prior to major product-update launches.

### Message Map Benefits

When you create and consistently use a product message map, you reap a variety of benefits. First, it reinforces key messages. By repeating your message pillars and selected proof points in a variety of marketing communications, you'll reinforce your product's key value propositions with customers, partners, journalists, analysts and even your sales team. It is especially helpful to prospects who are trying to discern your product from those of your competitors, and it will help increase your product's win rate.

Next, a product message map will improve your understanding of the product. If the message map is succinct and steers away from the typical marketing hype, your product's most compelling attributes will bubble up to the top. This will

**Repeating your message pillars in a variety of marketing communications will help increase your product's win rate.**

ensure your audience gains a positive impression of your product in less time, reducing sales cycles.

Finally, you will save time and effort.

The person who develops content for your website is often different from the one who creates the product datasheet. And still others may develop content for white papers, presentations and other marketing communications.

With a product message map in place, everyone is singing from the same sheet of music, reinforcing consistent message pillars and underlying proof points. And because everyone is using the same outline, it helps avoid expensive, time-consuming rework, even when you use outside agencies. At the end of the day, creating marketing communications based on well-constructed message maps will help increase win rates, reduce sales cycles and significantly reduce content-development costs.

### When to Seek Out Assistance

With so many ingredients coming into play, crafting product message maps can be complicated. That's why some companies seek help from outside experts. The following are four ways that external contractors and marketing agencies can help

with preliminary information-gathering and the creation and execution of product message maps.

### Gather Competitive Intelligence

A crucial prerequisite to message map development is knowing how your product compares to its competitors' products. High-tech vendors often drink so much of their own Kool-Aid that they have difficulty objectively viewing their own products. By working with an unbiased outside contractor or agency, you can fill in competitive-intelligence gaps and validate—or dispel—existing assumptions about your product's competitive advantages and disadvantages.

### Conduct Customer Win/Loss Calls

Every high-tech vendor should regularly interview customers who chose its product over the competition, and vice versa. I recommend conducting at least 10 win interviews and 10 loss interviews per competitor each year. Leveraging a third party to conduct these calls can often elicit more candid customer responses. The competitive insights gained from customer win/loss interviews will help validate—or sometimes contradict—the proposed pillars and proof points within your message map.

### Facilitate Message Map Workshops

Leading message map workshops isn't easy, especially if you've never done it before. Consider hiring an experienced outside resource to help accelerate the process and bring a fresh perspective to the table.

### Develop Content

Once your message map is approved by stakeholders in sales, marketing and engineering, it's time to create or refresh content by incorporating the message pillars, proof points and positioning statements. If your marketing team doesn't have the right talent and bandwidth to do this, your best bet may be to work with an outside contractor or marketing agency. Just make sure they have the right background and experience to write about your product and industry.

Whether you do this in-house or hire an outside firm, creating an effective product message map is not only an art but also a science. And when it's done right, your message map will pay dividends for many years to come. [P.M.](#)



### About the Author

**Steve Piper** is co-founder and CEO of CyberEdge Group, an award-winning marketing and research consulting firm serving 100+ high-tech vendors. Steve has over 20 years of high-tech marketing and product management experience with companies like Citrix, NetIQ and Sourcefire. Steve has helped dozens of high-tech vendors refine their product messaging and positioning. Contact him at [steve.piper@cyber-edge.com](mailto:steve.piper@cyber-edge.com).



BEGIN YOUR

# Revenue Marketing Journey



## Four Steps to Move from Traditional Marketing to Revenue Marketing

BY  
DEBBIE QAQISH

**WHAT HAS CHANGED SO MUCH ABOUT B2B MARKETING IN THE LAST FEW YEARS** that we're now using a term like revenue marketing? In a nutshell: accountability. Ask yourself these two questions: Do you currently have any kind of revenue accountability? And if you don't have revenue accountability today, will you be held accountable in the next 12 months?

B2B marketers are in a period of extreme transformation. Roughly 85 percent of B2B marketers are feeling intense pressure to add direct revenue accountability to their job description. The imperative for marketing to directly connect to revenue is coming at the marketer from every part of the organization:

- Today's CEO is asking, "How can marketing today help us achieve growth and competitive advantage?"
- Today's CFO is asking, "What revenue impact is marketing making and what's the ROI?"
- Today's COO is asking, "How can marketing help increase operational efficiency and effectiveness in the marketing and sales process?"
- Today's VP of sales is asking, "How can marketing help us find substantially more sales-ready leads and get them through the sales funnel more quickly?"

This demand to show credible financial results lands squarely on the plate of today's CMO, who is now charged with leading transformation and change in order to meet the requirements of the organization. In this pressure-cooker environment, the CMO can view the situation as either the sky is falling (disaster) or there is a silver lining to this cloud (opportunity).

Let's take the silver-lining approach because, for most B2B marketers, this environment of transformation represents one of the best periods for career and contribution potential in the history of the field.

### What Is Revenue Marketing?

Revenue marketing is the combination of strategies, processes, people, technologies, customer focus and results that does the following:

- Drops sales-ready leads into the top of the funnel
- Accelerates sales opportunities through the sales pipeline
- Measures marketing based on the repeatable, predictable and scalable contribution to pipeline and revenue
- Improves the ROI of the sales and marketing continuum





## The Model

The Revenue Marketing Journey™ (RMJ) is a simple model that The Pedowitz Group created to help marketers understand this new landscape, to identify where they are today and where they need to be. The model presents four distinct stages to achieving revenue-marketing status: traditional marketing, lead generation, demand generation and revenue marketing, the final stage. Marketers in the revenue marketing stage directly connect to revenue in a repeatable, predictable and scalable manner. They have become an economic engine for the organization.

Since its introduction in early 2011, the RMJ has been tested with thousands of marketers and has proven to be an easy way to set a course for any marketing organization to more concretely connect with revenue. Let's review each stage of the journey.

## Traditional Marketing: The "Make It Pretty" Department

Characterized by the Four P's—product, promotion, placement and price—traditional marketing is what is still being taught in school and what most marketers experience every day. For many B2B marketing organizations at this stage, marketing has little political clout, doesn't have a seat at the revenue table and is seen as the "make it pretty" department. Senior executives in this organization don't realize the revenue impact that marketing could make on the company.

Traditional marketers are focused on creating and implementing marketing strategies and tactics without good insight into the impact of those initiatives. They typically report on a host of activity-based metrics, such as number of ads and impressions. For many companies, this is largely a blind spend, represents a huge budget and provides metrics that key executives don't care about.

What we're talking about is moving beyond these traditional marketing activities to include a more relevant and effective way of marketing, one that eventually earns marketing a seat at the revenue table. The next three phases include defining characteristics and specific metrics because understanding what you are measuring gives you better insight into what your business is really all about.

## Lead Generation: Bad Leads to Sales, Quicker

The first big step toward revenue marketing is making the transition from traditional marketing to lead-generation marketing. At this stage, it is marketing's responsibility to provide as many leads as possible to sales. Many organizations have had a lead-generation strategy for years, but the leads they turn over are not fully developed, meaning they are not sales-ready. The reason leads are passed to sales before they are ready is that sales has to make calls—it's their job. They can either cold-call or call someone who has filled out a form or downloaded a white paper.

These leads typically come from trade shows, website visits or general forms and are passed to sales for follow-up. If the lead closes, that's great. But if the lead does not close, it typically gets lost or marketing may buy that lead again and start the process all over again.

Most companies at this stage have an email system in place, but their lead-generation practice is often one-dimensional and there are many manual processes on the backend to get bad leads to sales more quickly. Metrics tracked at the lead-generation stage generally include number of emails sent, open rate, click-through rate, number of forms submitted, percentage of forms completed and number of leads sent to sales. Once a lead is passed to sales, marketing's job is finished.

A marketing group at this stage is moving in the right direction but is still viewed as a cost center to the organization.

## Demand Generation: Quality vs. Quantity

The move from lead generation to demand generation is a gigantic leap for most



organizations. Demand generation is defined as the combined set of activities across both sales and marketing that puts high-quality leads (sales-ready) into the top of the sales funnel and accelerates opportunities through the pipeline.

Marketers at this stage are focused less on quantity and more on handing over quality leads to sales. The synergy and co-dependence between sales and marketing is beginning to develop. Companies moving into demand generation have typically invested in a marketing automation system that is integrated with their CRM. The metrics tracked are also significantly different from prior stages in that they change from being activity-based metrics to revenue-performance metrics. This is a big change for many marketing organizations.

Key metrics in the demand-generation stage include:

- The number of marketing qualified leads (MQLs) sent to sales
- The percentage of MQLs sent to sales that actually convert to opportunities
- The percentage of those opportunities that convert to close
- Marketing's contribution to the overall pipeline
- The average number of days to close

The demand-generation stage is characterized by developing processes that will eventually lead to an ongoing and predictable revenue contribution from marketing. Marketing is now reporting on what it has accomplished in a meaningful way to the business, so senior executives begin to realize the ultimate contribution marketing can make.

### Revenue Marketing: Who Moved My Cheese?

The revenue-marketing stage includes everything in the demand-generation stage with one major difference: The revenue generated and attributed to marketing is now repeatable, predictable and scalable. Revenue marketers use marketing automation technology integrated with CRM to determine how many MQLs are sent to sales and are able to forecast their overall conversion rate. Just like a VP of sales, revenue marketers can walk into a CEO's office with a forecast that aligns tightly with sales all the way through the lead funnel.

At this stage, not only can you report on what you did last quarter as far as your contribution to pipeline and sales, but you can also predict future contribution. Marketers at this stage are seen as a revenue investment and marketing as a revenue center. The role of marketing in the organization has fully transformed from being a cost center to a revenue center.

### The Word From Sales

At the same time that marketing is transforming, sales is engaging in a similar transformation. Today's buyer is typically

70 percent through their buying process before a salesperson is even aware of a prospect's interest. Prospects go online and mine much of the information they need, and in this process, sales is disintermediated—left out in the cold.

Sales is struggling to win in this new digital world and is turning to marketing for help. On average, a high-performing marketing group provides 30 percent of the pipeline opportunities. In low-performing companies, this number is much lower. The result is that many sales organizations are still cold-calling and are largely responsible for their own lead flow. Ideally, marketing should be responsible for filling the top of the funnel, leaving the sales team to work qualified opportunities that are more likely to result in closed business.

For the last five years, CSO Insights has reported on the state of the sales and marketing relationship. What they see in best-performing sales and marketing organizations is a real appetite from sales to more closely align with marketing to enhance the lead flow and opportunity pipeline.

Clearly, there is a need. Sales leaders have named the alignment of sales and marketing their No. 1 initiative and CxOs are turning to marketers for help with revenue. Now it is up to marketers to respond. The technology is available and the need is apparent—the time for the revenue marketer is here and now.

So, the question is, "What are you going to do about revenue?" If you haven't yet been asked this question, you will be soon. And if you haven't begun your Revenue Marketing Journey or you are stalled at an earlier stage, 2017 is the year to get it figured out. The role of marketing has forever changed. You can see this as gloom

and doom or a wonderful, splendid opportunity. Revenue marketers proactively seek, explore and take advantage of the opportunity. What kind of marketer are you? [PM](#)

“  
**What  
are you  
going to  
do about  
revenue?**  
”



### About the Author

**Debbie Qaqish** is the queen of revenue marketing. Passionate about marketing's new role as a revenue creator, Debbie inspires others to embrace revenue accountability. She has been helping B2B companies drive revenue growth for over 35 years. She is author of the award-winning book *Rise of The Revenue Marketer* and host of WRMR Power TalkRadio for Revenue Marketing Leaders, which showcases marketing executives from companies like GE and Microsoft. A Ph.D. candidate, Debbie also teaches an MBA course at the College of William & Mary on revenue marketing. Contact Debbie at [Debbie@Pedowitzgroup.com](mailto:Debbie@Pedowitzgroup.com) or connect on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/dqaqish](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dqaqish).



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A man in a dark suit and tie stands in a large, dimly lit room with tall columns and a large window on the right. The lighting is dramatic, with the man's face and suit highlighted against the dark background.

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# What Does the VP of Product Really Do?



BY BRIAN DE HAAFF

**GET A LOT OF EMAILS EVERY DAY. SOME ARE FROM JOB CANDIDATES.** Many are from customers. There is plenty of junk as well. So when I get a thoughtful question from a friend, it stands out. The other day, I received just such an email. A friend working at an emerging B2B software company emailed me for some advice. He asked, "What do you recommend I do to become vice president of product?"

I took a few moments to consider the question before I responded, because each company has its own approach to building products. As the CEO and co-founder of Aha!, a roadmapping software for product managers, I have an opportunity to interact with a wide swath of organizations. In the past three years, I've spoken to more than 100 VPs and at least 1,000 companies about product management. Some are more sales-driven and others are technically oriented. No two companies are the same. But I've found a few commonalities that transcend specifics of industry or place.

All product leaders start out optimistically believing that they can make their product and team great. Although they are expected to make the right strategic decisions, most do not have enough time in the day to accomplish everything they need to do. But the most successful people have a clear vision

of where their product is headed and allow customers to help shape how they get there. These successful leaders have a plan based on clear goals and work on what creates the most value. They are not afraid to gently ignore the rest. In many companies, that person is the VP of product.

In the end, my friend's question was deceptively simple. Knowing that I could not possibly zero in on exactly what he needed to do at his company, I decided to think about what it is that most VPs *really* do.



## Represent the Customer

The VP of product brings the customer into the organization. It is not enough for the team to prioritize the features needed to make the customer happy; the VP of product must consider the complete product experience. That means considering the customer at every stage of product development.



## Set Product Strategy

It is the VP's job to ensure that the entire company understands the vision and direction for the product. Yes, this is a shared responsibility with the CEO and other



executives, but the VP of product has a unique responsibility to communicate and reinforce that strategy across teams.

They need to run sessions with the product team and customer-facing teams, as well as sales, support and the executives. But it is not enough to set up meetings and sit back. They need to truly understand what each party is hearing and thinking, and then bake those learnings into their strategy. Success comes when they can improve plans based on what they learn and create internal alignment and excitement. I know this because I did it while working at one of the largest tech companies in the world. I spent a lot of time (more than I would have liked, actually) meeting with every group that had a major stake in the direction of the product portfolio. I asked about their aspirations for the product and spent time explaining the strategic alternatives that we had to choose from. These meetings helped refine the roadmap and led to an important acquisition to expand the types of customers that we could serve.



### Ask Hard Questions

Building a great product is not a popularity contest.

The VP of product must ask the tough questions that nobody else wants to. They keep the customer in mind while questioning how planned work relates to the product's purpose and goals. When the rest of the team is doing the work, it is the VP's job to ask, "Are we building what matters?"

The exact question will be more nuanced and likely quite a bit longer. For example, at the large tech company above, I asked, "Why are we focused on rolling this new product out to the entire sales team when we have not proven we can sell it with a smaller expert team first?" A bit longer, yes. But the essence is the same.



### Bring the Company Together

Great products are the result of a team effort. That is why the VP of product acts as a cross-functional

leader, bringing the organization together to meet business goals. A good VP helps their team understand why they need to work across the business to make the product—and, ultimately, the customer experience—better. But what does that look like?

Well, it's important that this person is one of the company's best storytellers. You heard that right—the VP needs to be able to spin a yarn. I held annual sales kickoff events and put energy into media and analyst outreach. I knew that a compelling narrative would energize the team, giving them something to rally around when things got challenging. The resulting

interviews and articles got internal teams excited and gave them something to share with customers.



### See the Future

There is no such thing as a crystal ball, and the VPs of product have the experience (and the scars) to prove it. However, they can draw on a deep knowledge of their product and the industry to predict the future. It's their responsibility to set the product and the company on a course to stay relevant and valuable.

The ability to look ahead pays dividends. Truly seeing the future leads to key investment decisions, including which products to mothball and which businesses to partner with or acquire. The idea of doubling down on experience and product knowledge might steer some people toward a myopic

worldview. But the best VPs, the ones who always seem to be one step ahead, have an insatiable curiosity.

They read a lot, listen more than they speak, engage in activities outside of their industry, and draw on all of that information for insights and predictive decision-making.

So, what did I tell my friend—the one whose email prompted all of this? When I finally replied, I outlined these core responsibilities. I explained that there is no single path to becoming a VP of product and that the day-to-day work will vary depending on the company. I also noted that the role requires immense fortitude—but that the rewards far outweigh the hard days in between. I also encouraged him to start building these skills now in his work in product management.

You may not have a VP of product within your organization, but you probably have someone who does this kind of work. Whatever you call this person at your company, we all know that a big title comes with big responsibility. And that responsibility can topple a product when it is not taken seriously. If you love product management, the role of VP of product is an exciting challenge—one that allows you to shape not only your product, but your entire company. **PM**



### About the Author

**Brian de Haaff** seeks business and wilderness adventure. He has been the founder or early employee of six cloud-based software companies and is the CEO of Aha!—the world's No. 1 product roadmap software. His last two companies were acquired by Aruba Networks and Citrix. He writes extensively about product and company growth and the adventure of living a meaningful life. Learn more about Aha! at [aha.io](http://aha.io) and join the product management conversation at [roadmap.com](http://roadmap.com). You can also follow Brian at [linkedin.com/in/bdehaaff](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bdehaaff) or on Twitter at [@bdehaaff](https://twitter.com/bdehaaff).

Building a great product is not a popularity contest.



# THAT “GIRL” FROM PROCUREMENT

BY GREG  
ADAMS-WOODFORD



**O**RGANIZATIONS ARE ONLY AS GOOD AS THE TALENT THEY EMPLOY, but finding that talent can be a massive challenge. Managers frequently rely on standard operating procedures and boring talk tracks to interview and fill open positions. These mind-numbing interviews result in a 50/50 chance of hiring the right individual, the individual who is not only qualified but has that certain something.

So how do you do it? How do you find the talent to accomplish the tasks in the job description *and* to make those unexpected yet valuable contributions to your team?

## FIRST, LISTEN

I've spent years uncovering, mentoring and supporting hundreds of talented individuals and have learned the importance of listening to those around you. When you pay attention to your entire organization, you will identify talent you might not otherwise notice. But if you robotically focus on reviewing applications and setting up interviews, you may miss an opportunity to hire unconventionally, which can drive true innovation.

It's like casting actors in a play or movie. It isn't just about



what appears on their acting resume, their past experience or how they read the script. It's about how they respond to the role, how they interact with the other actors and how empathic they are.

### FLIP THE SCRIPT

The typical interview occurs in an office or a conference room where the hiring manager (interrogator) sits across from the interviewee (suspect). It's a scene that could be lifted from a 1930s film noir. Everyone knows the score. You sit there, I sit here. I ask the questions, you answer on-script.

But if you want to disrupt this hiring process, there is a way: improvisation. Think about it. With improv, you don't adhere to a script. And you follow only one rule: You must reply "Yes and ..." to any idea put forward. This sets the stage for a real conversation that builds on ideas rather than stifling them.

Improv is an unconventional approach and a difficult one, so it's important to keep an open mind. Successfully incorporating it into the hiring process requires commitment from the leadership and team.

### THAT "GIRL" IN PROCUREMENT

We all know her from the movies and from every office where we have ever worked. She sits quietly in the cube in the way back, doing excellent work that few—besides finance—appreciate. You might see her at the odd happy hour, but you probably don't say hi. She knows her role and it's not a speaking part; she's an extra. But she aspires to a starring role. It's just that she rarely gets an audition, and if she does, her experience or some preconceived notion of what she does gets in the way. I know this woman and I have known many similar people in my professional career: hard-working, talented, driven and waiting for someone to recognize them.

A few years ago, I joined a company as the new director of product management. I quickly learned that the scope of products I was hired to manage had changed to include two additional products. This increased the revenue I was responsible for to approximately \$100 million. I needed help quickly.

I jumped on the HR merry-go-round to post an opening for an associate product manager. And we all know what that means: Post a boring but approved job description, interview 10 strangers using the same tedious script, ask questions, take notes, try to tell a joke or two to make it more bearable for everyone involved. In the end, everyone walks away with smiles, polite handshakes and a "We will be in touch" sendoff.

At the same time, one of my first tasks in this role had been to get rid of thousands of out-of-date but high-quality educational resources. When I went to investigate how and why to make this happen, I was told to





talk to procurement. The woman I met there had a broad understanding of how things worked. She showed drive, intellectual curiosity and the ability to think in a way that was off-script. Her abilities were more comprehensive than her title. I knew she was the right person to fill my open position.

When I shared my choice for the new position, my manager scoffed and said, “That girl from procurement?” He questioned my ability to recognize and acquire talent. He informed me that upper management would never allow something like this to happen.

This was a man unfamiliar with the “Yes and ...” improv model. I responded, “Yes, and we can change the way things are done. We can demonstrate that we aren’t like everyone who came before us.”

**“Yes, and we can change the way things are done. We can demonstrate that we aren’t like everyone who came before us.”**

I didn’t convince my boss initially, but I continued to advocate for my candidate. Finally, after a month, the “girl” from procurement had a shot at the role.

I knew I needed her innate ability to solve complex problems, her attention to detail, analytical intellect and

sense of humor. I suspected this role might benefit her career and grow the revenue of my product line.

But first I had to find out if she was interested. She was not specifically trained for product management and had no prior experience in this area. In fact, she was studying supply-chain management. But I assured her that we would provide her with all the support she needed to become successful and convinced her to apply for the position. She applied and so set the stage for her interview or “audition.”

### THE AUDITION

Let me set the stage: We’re in my office. I sit in a big black chair with a window directly behind me, making it hard for the candidate to see me. She walks in, smiles politely, nods and then promptly follows the script to sit and appear confident yet eager to get the role. But part of the mystique in this audition is the power that a manager conveys. Think about the word “manager.” The definition is “a person responsible for controlling or administering.” One word always sticks out to me: control. After all, that is what a manager does. And that is typically how managers are judged in performance and bonus reviews.

I immediately broke with convention and stood, announcing that we were taking a walk and

could talk along the way. I like this approach, as it removes the crutches people use from the equation. And it can lead to revealing interactions. You get to know the person as a vulnerable human being, rather than as a question-answering automaton.

Since I already knew her from previous interactions, I opted to take a different strategy with the “script” and improvised. I also did most of the talking. I knew that she would be dealing with customers and sales and wanted to know how she would handle a one-sided conversation.

In later conversations, she shared her discomfort: She had come to the interview prepared to answer questions and wasn’t expecting to be “talked at.” I suspect she was a little offended that I dismissed the work she had done to prepare.

### EXTENDED RUN

Luckily, this drama had a happy ending. I hired the woman from procurement into the associate product manager position. Our team members and the business immediately understood her positive impact. First, she successfully sunsetted a \$70 million product. Next, she launched two new products. One gained a 4X margin on investment. The other was a major initiative that gained positive early market acceptance.

Yes and ...

- We threw the script away.
- We grew the organization by organically hiring internally—against common wisdom—inspiring others to seek opportunity.
- We increased revenue despite not hiring experts.
- We assisted in the transformation of the culture of a large international publisher even though we were a small entity.
- That “girl” from procurement became one of the major contributors to the business and a fixture in the success of the team.

Yes and ... the theater of power is unintuitive, but when you deconstruct it, it opens up unlimited possibilities in the human drama. Just ask the “girl” from procurement. [PM](#)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Greg Adams-Woodford** has more than 15 years of experience in the digital education, technology and financial services industries. As executive vice president of creative and product development at the New York Stock Exchange Government Services, he led all aspects of product development and helped transform his departments into some of the most innovative and respected within the company. He also served as vice president of product management and development at Pearson. Contact Greg at [gaw@kenekt.io](mailto:gaw@kenekt.io).

# A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Put this issue's ideas into action.

## Lead by Consensus

Gain your team's support by providing context and framing—but not dictating—the approach.

**Art Petty**

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## Establish a Culture of Innovation

Understand that your company's source of innovation occurs when you are passionate about solving problems for people outside your company.

**Kirsten Butzow**

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## Avoid Complexity

Design organizations and processes with simplicity in mind.

**Dan Ward**

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## Attitude Counts

Cultivate a culture of mutual respect, comraderie and shared objectives to improve performance, achieve higher revenue and deliver better customer service.

**Shawn Busse**

page **19**

## Continuously Improve

Improve the design of your product by testing it with end users to understand their wants, needs and pain points.

**Teena Singh**

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## Maintain a Competitive Advantage

Create new or complementary features and products to address evolving customer needs.

**Julia Mitelman**

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## Strengthen Your Product Positioning

Focus on the same overarching themes and supporting points across all marketing communications to reinforce key product messages.

**Steve Piper**

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## Define Your Metrics

Be clear about what you are measuring to gain better insight into what your business is all about.

**Debbie Qaish**

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## Create a Vision

Establish a plan based on clear goals and work on what generates the most value.

**Brian de Haaff**

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## First, Listen

To identify talent you might not otherwise notice, pay attention to your entire organization.

**Greg Adams-Woodford**

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