A free, monthly newsletter on product management, new product development, and team management. Published by Doug Ringer.

DOUG RINGER'S
Product Development Accelerator Newsletter

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Published by Doug Ringer
(502) 509-9746
doug@dougringer.com
www.dougringer.com
www.dougringer.com/blog
newsletter@dougringer.com

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Beware of VOC–The Customer is Often Wrong

We are told that the cornerstone of any successful product is the information gathered from the customer–aka "VOC" or voice of the customer. While there are requirements for a minimum viable product, the layering-on of features, bells, and whistles can simply be the lazy marketer's version of "keeping up with the Joneses."

A better way is to eschew their demands, be creative, and be bold enough to attempt to create the next iPod, automobile, Velcro, Facebook or other world changing device.

The Customer is Too Close to Their Problem

The number one problem with VOC is that we interview the very people who are closest to the problem. Counterintuitively, these are the last people we should discuss this with. We are the experts in the marketing and product development field and to properly apply our expertise, we need to know the problem being solved. If we talk to the end customer first, then our viewpoint will be skewed and our mindset will be narrowed.

Instead, inquire to simply determine the core and ancillary objectives. Do not inquire about past successes and failures or what the competition is doing better, and worse. Keep your mind free from such distractions and focus on the outcome. Refinement will occur later.

Ignoring Demands is the Better Path

Many times I've heard the product "must have" this and "must have" that. Sometimes it is true, but usually the reason is "because it's always been done like that." BIABDLT is possibly the worst reason for doing anything, ever.

Actively ignoring the tribal knowledge typical in most organizations and asking simple, probing questions will take you down the more difficult path. Following your own fact-finding process provides the best option for creating solutions to the correct problems instead of the problems that are perceived.

Reapplying the pertinent portions of your organization's tribal knowledge afterwards is a positive use of bureaucracy and should be applied in these types of situations.

Giving Less is Providing More

During market investigations, you will find that many features are requested simply because the users are familiar with them and expect to them to be included in the new product, on top of the new functions. The main problem with this thought process is that new and better methods for providing the benefit may be pushed aside to make room for the tried and true. This is the antithesis of innovation.

The layering of new on top of old only for the sake of maintaining the old features is a retrograde approach. Discarding the old for more effective methods is the gateway to innovation and simplicity.

EXAMPLE

I am an Apple fan. My family uses iPhones, iPads and iMacs and MacBooks. We like them because they are simple to use, fairly bulletproof (though the last 2 iOS upgrades have been a bit dodgy) and they are not overwhelming.

Comparing Apple office productivity tools to Microsoft Office may seem like a joke on the surface, since Office offers a far longer list of functionality than the Apple tools. However, unless you are a super user of spreadsheets or word processors, the simplistic tools from Apple are more than sufficient. I would argue that their simplicity makes them superior for most work.

(Disclaimer: I have no financial interest in Apple and I have used Microsoft Office since its inception)

Conclusion

Don't be mindlessly customer-led. Innovation requires you to lead your customers into new experiences, services, and, ultimately, benefits. Be confident in your ability to ferret-out the important details of your market. Apply equal and ample parts of creativity and persistence to devise the product or service that best meets your constituents' needs. Do not settle only for that which they asked.

Doug Ringer, the author of "The Profit Imperative" and "The Product Rocket," works with leaders who want to think strategically, grow dramatically, compete successfully, and develop profitable habits within their organizations. He has devoted his career to maximizing the value of product development projects and services. He has worked across 20 states and in 3 continents, and has been privileged to assist GE, Ericsson, Honeywell, Meritor, and others. Doug lives with his family in Fort Collins, Colorado.

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