



WANT TO JUMP-START YOUR PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT? REVERSE ENGINEER YOUR FUTURE

Working backward from a fictionalized launch can greatly decrease the time-consuming product definition process.

By Joe Tradi



So you've come to the realization that you're suddenly in the position to play catch-up with your competitors. Reasons why don't matter right now, but getting a competitive product to market as quickly as possible does.

When trying to get back in the game, a product manager is faced with two choices: zig while they're zagging, that is, create a product around a value proposition that hasn't been addressed by the competitors yet, or leapfrog the competition and create a product that takes the existing value proposition to a whole new level. Both are viable strategies and either approach will work with the processes outlined later in this article.

A real-life case at Intuicom provides some tangible examples of how to accomplish these strategies. Intuicom sells wireless broadband solutions into the intelligent transportation market. Typically, this involves both hardware (radios and switches) and software. Customers increasingly judge the value of these solutions based on the proprietary software used to discover and configure the radios.

Intuicom decided to differentiate itself by leapfrogging the competition with its software. This required a crash program for the traffic market (no pun intended). The

goal was to get the new product to market in three months, less than a third the normal development time. To meet this ambitious goal, drastically shorten the product definition and use-case creation process.

Clearly, a new approach had to be developed.

LOOKING FOR SHORTCUTS

A time-honored catch-up tradition in product development is to reverse engineer the competition's product. One of the major drawbacks of this approach is that the result tends to be a "me too" product that only brings you to parity. You can also bet that by the time you've accomplished this, the competition is ready to release the next version of their product, putting you behind once again.

Instead, we thought, why not reverse engineer our own future product?

The decision to turn the product development process on its head wasn't taken lightly.





Figure 1: Typical Product Development Process

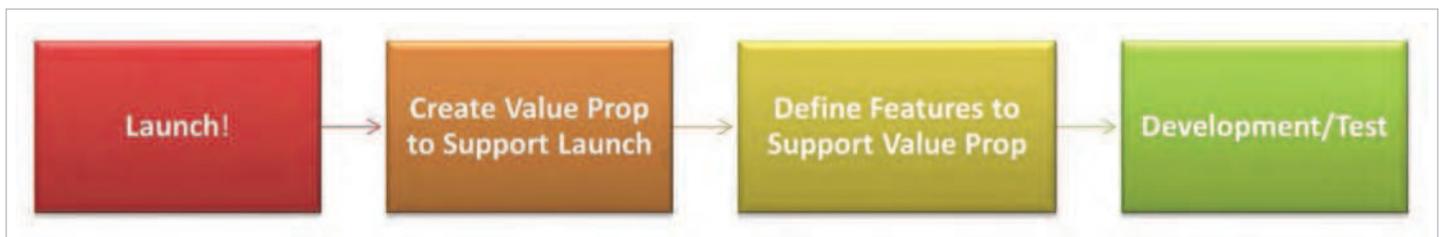


Figure 2: Reverse-Engineering the Process

We needed buy-in from executive leadership and a team willing to forgo tried-and-true methods. Traditional product development often resembles the process in Figure 1. Ideas are generated, market research is conducted to vet their viability and the product is designed, developed, tested and launched.

To shorten the process, we took a different approach (see Figure 2). Similar to a thought experiment, we imagined we'd just finished a product that was leaps and bounds ahead of anything existing in terms of customer benefits. Then, we created the launch campaign and value proposition that supported our thought experiment product. From here, we were able to discern what features were needed to support those imagined benefits.

CREATE A FICTIONAL PRODUCT

From this experience, we developed a method to create a fictional killer product by working backward to make it a reality in record time. The method is outlined below.

Step 1. Assemble the team. Assemble a small, multidisciplinary team, including product management, engineering, sales, marketing and production. Make sure everyone on board has the right temperament. A high comfort level with ambiguity is a must.

Assign a voice of the customer. Someone to play the role of your most demanding customer (real or imagined) is key. This person will keep asking for more value in specific ways and push to make it easier to solve their problem. It is important for this role to be free of constraints. Customers don't care about your internal challenges. Remember, no one wants to buy your product. They want to buy what your product does for them.

Assign a competitor proxy. Equally important, someone should stand in for your chief competitor. This will help uncover what makes your competitor nervous—often a good source of opportunity. What are they afraid you might do? Reality check with the voice of the customer.

Step 2. Launch your fictional product. Assume the product has already successfully launched, and you've left the competition in the dust. Brainstorm what that product would look like. This should be a completely blue sky exercise with no restrictions. The voice of the customer should be very vocal here as well as the rest of the team. Also, watch what makes your competitor the most nervous.

Some important questions to explore here include: What are the features that antiquate everything on the market? Can you build an effective, giant-killing campaign around these

features? If not, what else is required?

Step 3. Build your marketing campaign. Think about the value proposition.

- Create some mock advertisements to launch the product. What are the benefits you're pushing? What features are supporting your claim?
- Write the news release for the product. What hook are you using to capture the editor's attention?
- Develop a product demo script, being sure to point out the unique features and how they solve customer problems in ways the competitors can't touch.
- Write the creative input form you would supply the advertising agency to create the entire marketing campaign.

This exercise will help you create a list of features as well as a pretty good idea of their priority.

Step 4. Design your product. Now that you have a pretty good idea about what this wonder product looks like, it's time to dissect it. Go back to the exact features that are supporting your launch.

- You should have a good idea about how these features work without needing to create an exhaustive book of use cases. Be sure your independent customer advocate is there to ensure you've got it right.

- The competitor stand-in should try to create competitive responses to your unique features. Make sure you address any weaknesses the competitor might point out to customers.
- Keep the team together as a working unit. Rather than follow a linear process, you'd be surprised what you can accomplish by using concurrent work streams.
- Expect the development process to be chaotic. "Ordo ab chao," or "order from chaos," as Nietzscheans like to say.

Step 5. Launch for real. If you've kept your goals in mind and worked backward to support the successful fictional launch campaign, your actual campaign should be pretty close in spirit to where you started. You should also have saved a considerable amount of time in defining your product.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Plan the campaign as if you have the product. Create value proposition and positioning to support your fictional campaign.
- Create your feature sets to support your campaign. (i.e., What keeps your competitors up at night?)
- Establish minimum performance levels at the beginning. The temptation will be great to release into the market as soon as possible. Make sure you have some benchmarks you need to hit first.
- Give process a break.
- Begin with the end in mind. Define your product to support your eventual success, as defined by the campaign you imagined at the beginning of the process.

CASE STUDY: INTUICOM, INC.

Intuicom's current wireless network configuration and monitoring software, Broadband-Pro™ 2.0, was developed, tested and released in six months using the product development method outlined in this article. The previous, more traditional development process for Version One took 24 months. Deployment of the new software among existing users far outpaced the adoption rate, so much so that a new online portal was created to meet demand.

"What last took us two years, we accomplished in just less than half a year," said Jeremy Hiebert, director of

traffic sales for Intuicom. "This allowed us to position ourselves very well against the competition. On top of that, with these new products, customer satisfaction is the best it's ever been."

In addition to the new software, Intuicom's latest product line of broadband radios, the Nitro58™ family, was conceived, developed, tested and released in just six months using this same method. This aggressive timeline allowed Intuicom to beat the competition to market with many features by shortening a hardware development process from more than a year to less than half that time. Customer demand exceeded expectations and also resulted in an influx of new resellers.

Peter Miller, Intuicom director of engineering, agrees the new approach provides real benefits.

"Changing our approach to this model resulted in faster time to market and more cooperation across disciplines, which provided us with a real competitive advantage," Miller said. ✓



Joe Tradii is director of product management and marketing at Intuicom, Inc. He has served in a variety of management positions at leading companies including Microsoft, AT&T Wireless and Verizon Wireless.

"If you've kept your goals in mind and worked backward to support the successful fictional launch campaign, your actual campaign should be pretty close in spirit to where you started. You should also have saved a considerable amount of time in defining your product."

