

The Creative Imperative

By *Ronald Brown*

American business is going through an awakening. It started about a decade ago, but a book by Daniel Pink called “A Whole New Mind,” published in 2005, helped frame the public discussion. Fast forward to May 2010, when IBM conducted a research study of 1,500 CEOs in 60 countries and 33 industries.

What Pink predicted, and what IBM heard loudly and clearly from CEOs, was that the most important skill for future business success was creativity. The Information Age is giving way to the “Conceptual Age,” as Pink put it, where creative thinking skills will be more essential than critical thinking skills.¹

CEOs, facing ever-increasing complexity in the world around them, ranked the need for creativity ahead of even vision.²

That’s a problem. Our institutions, from local elementary schools to our largest corporations, to the near exclusion of everything else, teach linear and rational problem-solving techniques.

Creativity, even the kind represented by music and art classes, is hard to find. Creative problem solving as a strategic tool is rarer still (outside of advertising and design firms).

A while ago, I watched a program about Albert Einstein on PBS. One day, as he looked out his window of the Bern, Switzerland patent office, he imagined an elevator on the side of a building across the street.

He thought, “If the elevator went into a free fall, what would happen to the people inside?” My thought was that

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March Event Review: “What Should Your Next Release Contain? Ask the CRM” with David Taber, author and CEO of SalesLogistix

by Dan Galatin

David Taber, the CEO of SalesLogistix, presented at the March 2nd meeting of SVPMA. He discussed how to use data in customer relationship management systems to help plan product releases.

Mr. Taber began by describing the challenges in gathering requirements from customers one-on-one in the traditional way. Customers don’t know what they need and don’t care about the product as much as the product manager. It takes a long time for them to understand and perceive the importance of emerging technological trends. Where to get objective, defensible data on which to base product decisions? Mr. Taber recommended starting with a theory, a “business thesis” of a suspected customer need. Rather than starting with the features that com-

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Explaining What You Do: A Product Manager's Perspective

By Jeremy J Waxman

Two of the most common questions asked of product management professionals are *what is a product manager* and *what do they do?* The answers to these questions can be tough and vary greatly because there are multiple ways to define the role of product management within an organization. In addition, actual responsibilities can differ from person to person even within the same organization. However, the core structure of a product management organization should always remain constant regardless of company

or industry. The following terms provide some common strategic basis to assist a product manager in answering the previously stated tough questions.

Crystal. A product manager must be effective in using a *crystal ball* and must be *crystal clear*.

A product manager drives the roadmap as well as the organization forward by understanding multiple areas including, but not limited to: competitive landscape, market analysis, innovation, and company goals & objectives. Combining all of the components together enables a product manager to look into their *crystal ball* to decide what is needed for organizational success. While developing this “crystal ball mentality” from technology partners to sales & marketing to operations to executives, a product manager makes every effort to avoid surprises. By involving as many of their stakeholders as early as possible in the product management process and by being *crystal clear*, they provide the proposed product and the product management organizational visibility and avoid the dreaded “why this product” or “why this direction” questions. This preparation and research are vital to the project manager’s success, since a product manager will always remain flexible, but stopping a train in motion and turning it completely around is a very difficult task at best.

Important Bull (“ble(s)”). A product manager always develops products that are *viable*, *flexible*, *sustainable*, *capable*, and *attainable*.

No matter what phase of the product management process, a product manager focuses on a *viable* solution that is attainable in the limited amount of time and resources provided. The product manager also ensures that the product is *flexible* and able to adapt to ever changing industry and company goals and incorporates a *sustainable* product lifespan. When moving through the creation phase a product manager ensures that the available development resources, either internal or external, are *capable* of delivering the solution requested and the solution is *attainable* within the resource, timeline or product constraints. Considering the important “Bull” throughout the process enables the product manager to have long-term success and helps define their role within the organization.

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SVPMA is an all volunteer non-profit association for Product Managers in Silicon Valley and around the San Francisco Bay area.

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- To provide a forum to share day-to-day experiences and insights in Product Management
- To create a safe network of peers
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End2End Glue. The product manager is the glue that holds an organization together.

From concept to post-launch support, the product manager owns the product even if it is not in their job description. No matter how it is sliced, in-bound, out-bound, or both, product management is the *glue* between product development and all of the internal and external business touch points and interfaces. It is important to remember that the product manager is responsible for the product, in every way.

Distributed Responsibility, but Overall Accountability. A Product manager is accountable for all of the results of a product offering.

In most every situation, any result (either positive or negative), can be traced back to the product manager. The challenge of a product manager, therefore, is to pre-plan for mitigating any negative impacts that may occur. From development to collateral generation to support, the product manager may have little direct responsibility, but is accountable for virtually everything as a whole. All situations can be traced to product management as the source, such as:

Revenue/Operational Expense

- Positive: Increased revenue and/or decreased operational expense as *a result of an accurate & effective business case*
- Negative: Revenue expectations are not met and/or there is an increased operational expense *caused by unrealistic expectations or projections and inaccurate business case*

Developed Solution

- Positive: The solution functions as expected when launched is a *result of detailed and effective requirements created using an iterative approach with the development team.*
- Negative: An inaccurate solution with high-severity defects *caused by inaccurate and incomplete requirements documentation.*

Launch Timelines

- Positive: A project launched on-time and within budget *caused by a successful and impactful interlock with the development organization in an iterative manner.*
- Negative: The launched is delayed and comes in well over budget as a result of the “throw requirements over the fence” approach caused by little to no interlock with development.

From software development to pharmaceutical product manufacturing, product management is just that – managing the product. The strategic components can be adapted and applied, regardless of the industry and assist in answering the questions of *what is a product manager and what do they do?* ☞

[Jeremy J Waxman is a seasoned, results-centric Product Management and Product Marketing executive.](#) Currently the Sr. Product Manager for Payments, Services & Communications at Dell, Jeremy has extensive experience in the software and payments space. Prior to Dell, Jeremy built and managed product management and product marketing teams at various small software companies working with some of the largest financial institutions in the United States.



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April Event Review: The Quest to be Market-Driven with Mike Gospe of KickStart Alliance

By Cindy Solomon

At the April 6, 2011 meeting of the Silicon Valley Product Management Association meeting held at Tech Mart in Santa Clara, Mike Gospe presented “The Quest to be Market-driven: what product managers and product marketers need to do to become the customers’ advocate.”

Mike Gospe is an accomplished leader, marketing strategist and corporate executive. He is co-founder of KickStart Alliance, a sales and marketing leadership consulting team where he drives integrated marketing and voice-of-the customer programs, including Customer Advisory Board (CAB) meetings. He’s the author of “Marketing Campaign Development“, a faculty member of San Francisco State University where he teaches the course “Essentials of Integrated Marketing” and a frequent guest speaker at companies, marketing associations and university business schools. His talk addressed the subject matter of his newly published book, “The Marketing High Ground”.

Mike began his career with an engineering perspective having obtained a BSEE from Santa Clara University in semiconductor fabrication. Early in his career when he was involved with a marketing project at Hewlett Packard, he kept running into trouble with confrontational engineers. When he mentioned his degree, the engineers said they would have been nicer had they known his background. Gospe’s message is that whoever understands the

customer best, wins. He wants to ensure that product managers provide information so that the best product decisions are always made. This requires taking responsibility for understanding customers, their pain points, and their buying process better than ever before. For businesses to thrive in the 21st century, product managers and product marketers must become the definitive source of customer knowledge.

Gospe presented his process for arriving at the ability to illustrate the persona as a reflection of the target market, craft a clear positioning statement that defines and differentiates the product or service, and design a set of relevant use-case scenarios and key messaging to engage the persona.

He said that it sounds cliché to be “market driven”, although it’s a topical idea. Everyone says they are market driven, when in fact they’re not. He asked the audience for a show of hands on the following questions:

What kinds of organizations are we in?

Who thought our product management organization was undervalued?

Who felt the role we’re in is underappreciated.

Do we feel like we’re on the receiving end of whatever engineering dishes out?

Who finds ourselves defending roadmaps only to be swayed by those that yell the loudest?

“While these three best practices are simple, they should not be taken lightly. They require serious attention, and it takes practice to get them right. Consider them tools marketers can use to drive internal conversations so that the best product, roadmap, and campaign decisions will always be made.”

Gospe presentation encompassed examples of implementing the following tools:

- Personas: To better understand and empathize with the target audience.
- Positioning Statement: To better understand your value and differentiation from competitive alternatives
- Message Box: To better communicate your value and relevance of your use cases to the target audiences

Gospe defined the “marketing high ground” as a spe-

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Upcoming Events:

June 1st Monthly Event - Ann Ruckstuhl, Symantec

June 18th Workshop - Mayla Clark, MC Training

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cial place where you know the market so well, so deeply, that you become acknowledged and valued internally as the “customers’ advocate.” With this knowledge comes confidence in understanding the target customer and producing impactful lead generation campaigns. No longer are debates driven by random opinions; they are founded on customer use cases, market data, and customer feedback. This is what it takes to earn, then command, a seat at the leadership table.

In Gospe’s own words from his forthcoming book: “Traditionally, certainly in Silicon Valley, companies are founded by technologists. Executive staff members, engineering, operations and sales leaders are often added long before a marketer. And who can argue success when a company’s products continue to sell without the aid of a marketing leader?”

“The answer is not to suggest that a marketer should overstep or replace the leadership of engineering or sales. Instead, the real long-lasting value a marketer can bring is to rise to the role of leading the executive team, and by extension the rest of the organization, to the **high ground**.”

In companies where no one owns the high ground, it often looks like:

- Marketing and sales departments are unaligned, lack clear goals and objectives
- Engineering and product management teams work in silos, focused on isolated features
- Frustrated marketers have to continually rewrite messaging that is never accurate
- Marketing campaigns are poorly executed and don’t produce quality inquiries and leads
- Decisions are made based on “whoever yells the loudest” instead of an aligned and focused team effort

Gospe presented the tools that will gain respect for marketing:

- Share, communicate, evangelize
- The Message Box
- Positioning Statement
- Customer & Product Use Cases
- Personas

Start by answering these questions:

- Who are we targeting?
- What are they trying to do?
- Why is our solution best?
- What’s our story?
- How will we execute our vision?

Tips on how to begin

- Become the customers’ advocate by knowing what questions to ask
- Help colleagues by guiding them through these best practice exercises
- Challenge assumptions, but diplomatically and constructively
- Don’t frame your recommendations on personal opinion
- Lead by example

Owning the High Ground Means . . .

- Becoming the definitive source of voice-of-the-market knowledge
- Sensing
- Gathering
- Synthesizing
- Applying
- Managing

1. **Create a Persona:** a fictional representation of a very real market segment that enables marketing empathy with the target market so that messaging matches up with creative approaches to cut through the clutter.

Who they are:

Identify a target segment

Focus on responsibilities:

What problems do they have?

What goals, objectives do they share?

Where they work:

New prospects or current customers?

Classify the ideal company

Why they are a good target:

Add psychographics

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groups.yahoo.com/group/SVPMA/

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What are they thinking?
Do they need to be educated?

- Evidence they are a good target:
- Name, age, gender
- Title/responsibilities
- Role in the purchase process
- Attitude
- Reputation
- Values
- Fears
- Pet peeves
- Information sources

2. Build a Positioning Statement: Many marketers throw a multitude of features and benefits at prospects requiring them to sort out what’s really important. More is not better. Hone a simple statement that identifies the target market (via the persona), names the product and maps it to an appropriate category, prioritizes a benefit most relevant to the persona, and clearly distinguishes its uniqueness against the nearest competitive alternative.

Positioning Statement Format
To: (target persona) _____
(product name) _____ is the one
(category) _____ that
(key customer benefit) _____ unlike
(nearest competitive alternative) _____ competitor

3. Draft Your Story
[The Message Box](#) tool challenges the marketing team to develop a crisp story to engage the prospect in a dialog focusing more on the prospect than it is about the product. Marketers must first show they understand the problem the customer is facing, then offer a set of criteria that can be used to solve the problem. Then and only then should marketers tell pros-

pects how and why their products are better than any alternative. The story ends with an affirmation of the value provided and how other customers have benefited from the products and services.

Questions to answer:
What’s our story?

Because nobody likes to be sold to, messaging must have relevance. Messaging must tell a story.

What makes a good business story?
Tell the customer use case story

The Message Box – A tool for telling your story

- Engagement Message: What *issue* of theirs will get their attention? What *problem* of theirs can you solve?
- Solution Message: What are the *criteria* that must be met to best address the persona’s problem?
- Reinforcement Message: Describe your solution and how & why it is the best option
- Value Message: As a result of implementing your offering, how will their life be better than before?

Engage the persona with a problem or opportunity they care about. Offer some thought leadership on how the hero can restore balance. Tell how and why your solution will help them prevail. Highlight the value and rewards they’ll receive from using your products or services.

Gospe’s message is that market-driven does not mean marketing-driven. The high ground must not be limited to just marketers and product managers. The journey to the high ground begins by helping the team get comfortable with these initial steps. Socialize the output and align the organization by using the persona to better understand and empathize with the target audience. Use the positioning statement to better understand your value and differentiation from competitive alternatives. Apply the message box to better communicate your value and relevance of your use cases to the target audiences. He left us with a challenge to engage these best practices, evangelize their use and encourage others to participate. ☘

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they'd all be killed. Einstein decided on something more profound: that they would drop to the ground at the same rate as the elevator. Somehow, from that insight, he got to the notion that gravity can bend time.³

Talk about connecting the dots.

I like using Einstein as an example of creative genius because there has never been a study that shows a direct correlation between pure intelligence and creativity. It is easy to assume that because he was so smart, he was naturally creative.

While you do have to be smart enough to recognize when inspiration presents something useful, that is due more to experience and preparation than to intelligence.

Einstein was creative and innovative because of the duality and maturity of his thought processes.

The most productive problem solvers are those who use both thinking styles, creative and critical, interchangeably; achieving what is called "whole brain" thinking.

Each style plays a separate role but they interact with and reinforce each other. Much of Einstein's brilliance had to do with his ability to toggle back and forth.

How important is this? Einstein considered his creative thinking skills more valuable than knowledge itself.

Wow.

So the question is, can creativity be taught?

And the answer is, yes, absolutely. But that is not to say everyone will learn equally.

There are creative people who seem to have a genetic advantage to process the unknowable and non-understandable. Einstein's brain was 15% larger than normal in one critical region.

However, creativity is such an essential strategic imperative that even a little improvement can provide tremendous leverage. And we better hurry. No less than our global competitive advantage is at stake. ☚

Notes:

¹Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

²IBM press release, May 18, 2010, <http://www-03.ibm.com/press/us/en/pressrelease/31670.wss>.

³Gary Johnstone, *Einstein's Big Idea*, NOVA, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/einstein/about.html>.

*Ronald Brown is a successful startup CEO who has written a book on team innovation and creative problem solving called *Anticipate. The Architecture of Small Team Innovation and Product Success*. You can find more information at www.browncompany.com, or contact the author at rbrown@browncompany.com.*



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pose this need, start with understanding the target user – the customer you’re selling the product to. You can use your CRM system to help accomplish this.

A major caveat to this approach is much of the data in CRM systems is sales-focused and not particularly actionable for PMs. The most valuable data contained in the CRM system proper is typically contacts. In addition, CRM systems are typically linked to several other back-end systems that can provide valuable information. For example, customer case and bug-tracking systems can serve as “built-in” voting systems for product areas that need attention. Customer portals can illuminate who is using your product and how, in an unbiased manner. As you process the data, you (or someone you hire) should have a good working knowledge of statistics to ensure that trends you believe you’re spotting are significant. Also, the usual caveats about the objectivity of sales data and self-selection bias apply.

“Hidden gems” include information about product return requests in the customer support system, as well as customer support surveys. Pre-sales engineers’ commentary, such as proof-of-concept forms, can be a good source of information and makes the SEs feel listened-to. Customer forums can provide more input on areas that you are already investigating. “Ideas” and voting systems in the customer support forum work particularly well; PMs can gather feedback on ideas by submitting them anonymously, like just another customer. In determining the value of information from the CRM system, you should evaluate the maturity level of the system as a whole.

According to Mr. Taber, “nirvana” is linking the CRM

system to the product itself and making customer interaction part of the user interface. Certain user actions may trigger dialogs that ask the user for feedback on the product. The UI should allow users to report problems, and the product should gather (anonymous) usage statistics. Customer input should go into the CRM system so it’s linked directly to information about the customer. These suggestions apply equally well to enterprise products as they do to consumer products. Keeping track of customer experience in an automated fashion lends itself particularly well to SaaS products.

Some product problems are not with the feature set but with other factors such as product quality, messaging, and not targeting the right customers. If any of these are wrong, your feature set will be wrong. To solve product problems, consider looking at the out-of-the-box experience (Is the product easy to use?) or ease-of-purchase problems. It’s also important to understand sales conversion failures and where your sales model doesn’t correspond to reality. Consider surveying sales prospects immediately after an opportunity falls through. Try to detect any impedances in the sales process.

In summary, according to Mr. Taber, it’s crucial to have solid, objective data that backs up your arguments during the product planning process. ☘

Dan Galatin has 18 years combined experience in product management and software engineering. He is currently a Senior Product Manager at Keynote Systems and can be contacted at dgalatin@yahoo.com.

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