

Product development, expand the scope for exceptional effect

Product formalization -- one of the most important activities your company can do isn't always approached methodically. Follow proven technique to insure that yours are among the small percentage of products developed reaching the market and success.

Where do product ideas come from? Market scans? Employee idea contests? Clever engineers? Any or all of these may be the initial source of ideas, and some are very good ones too! But as the saying goes "Ideas are dime a dozen." It is the *development* of the idea that is where savvy is required. Once a survey was done in a major communications company design engineering department. The results were astonishing! A number of ideas that came up are now *common* all over the world! (The cordless telephone was one of them, and this 5 years or so before the first one was marketed.) Not a single one of them was developed by that company. While there may have been reasons, the example shows how abundant ideas can be when stimulated. Channeling this creative effort can be formidable. Here are some sensible tips to help you in your product development.

Avoid the "our baby" syndrome.

Babies are created when the people who give birth to an idea are responsible for making the idea a success. While this can be good, often ego becomes bound up with the concept and any comment or suggestion is construed as criticism of "baby". Soon the emotional baggage is so great that any number of lesser ideas would have worked out better! This syndrome can best be dodged by stressing company goals, and that individual performance isn't under consideration. It is a fine line to walk, you can go into the other ditch with the "NIH factor" or "familiarity breeds contempt" approach. These are discussed later, along with the discipline required to "develop the core first" which may be confused with the "our baby" syndrome, but is actually completely different and essential. The key? When you start recognizing emotional responses, nip it in the bud, which may require realignment of personnel. In

delicate situations you may need to move development off site. At this point contact a technical assistance firm to externalize the program.

Customer input, who are they, who could they be?

We've all seen the cartoon where the "busy" medieval king doesn't have time to see the salesman (selling machine guns) because he has a war to fight (with spears and arrows.) The corollary is true, there may be people out there that are desperate for a product like yours. Do a formal or informal survey of your target group, and some who are not potential customers. You will never find better fishing if you stay at the same old hole. Ask open ended questions (essay type) and have a number of people examine the response to get their "reading". Get together with the development group and brainstorm. It may open a new market, with fairly minor investment of time.

NIH, bane of new development.

Not Invented Here. This is an outgrowth of the "our baby" syndrome. It states that "if it isn't our baby, then nobody gets a baby". Here again ego and emotional coupling are in play. Design departments may be good at what they now do, but that's what they do, what they have been doing. Any *new* idea, whatever the source, is summarily rejected. "Reasons" the new idea is no good are legion. NIH is so potent because, admitting ideas from somewhere else are good, is to say that they have not done their job... to come up with good ideas. This most likely isn't the case but, at this juncture, it may pay to "buy" the new product... developed off site to your specifications. It is probably unwise to force ideas on others with distorted perceptions. And we are not talking

about bad people either, many are good people that feel threatened or fear the unknown (new technology or approach.) Grandpa used to raise poultry. He would induce newly hatched birds to eat by putting shiny marbles in the feed. The bird would see the shiny marble and peck at it. Being hard and the surface slippery the birds beak would glance off, resulting in a mouthful of feed! Once they realized there was no problem eating feed, in fact it was good, they would eat hungrily. Sometimes you need a few shiny marbles to move people to the next stage. Bring a product in from outside, let them work with it in their own time, become familiar with it. The rest will come naturally

Good ideas from inside, does familiarity breed contempt?

It doesn't have to. Over the years I have observed a tendency for companies to go through a series of "golden ones" A "golden one" is someone that comes in from outside the organization, with ideas that management is fascinated with. The golden ones are then given freedom and power to pursue their wonderful new ideas. Trouble being that this status is transient and seems to last at most for two or three years. Then a new golden one comes on the scene and charms management, is then empowered, etc. The root cause was recognized thousands of years ago ("a prophet is without honor in his own country".) "I know him well, therefore he can't be much good!" It seems to defy logic! Yet, let's recognize it, that *is* the way we are. You may have some of the finest people in their field working for you, use them. If they need additional resources consider a technical assistance firm. This will provide them with new approaches, and yet be tempered with their experience in field.

Use successive refinement.

This technique, used by software developers, can peel an unwieldy but good idea into a practical, profitable idea. An example of this: A project to produce a life test system, customer has provided a wish list. Constraints are manpower, time. At first a grandiose "does all" system was delineated. After a quick back of envelope time line was drawn, it was immediately apparent that it could not be done and meet schedule. Ideas were tossed around until a second, pared down version was envisioned. Another back of envelope time line, another refinement of what could be done. The end? A version, much

reduced in size, yet providing most of the functionality and desired features of the original wish list. Since resources were short, one outside technical assistance firm was used to do the bulk of the design, with yet another firm contracted by the customer doing the remainder.

Develop the "core" product first.

When a new technology comes on line it is normal for some to take a while to understand, while others "catch the vision". Those that catch the vision often start unbridled extrapolation of the idea, wanting to incorporate their own ideas into the product. Marketing departments are notorious for this (perhaps being more eager.) This is to be avoided unless everyone agrees the additional features are necessary (really necessary, not just that someone thinks they are necessary.) Develop the core product first, then add features in a structured way. It is like the difference between shooting a rifle and a shotgun. A rifle delivers large amounts of energy quickly to a precise location. A shotgun delivers small amounts of energy relatively slowly over large areas. There is a place for each, which one would you want to use if you had only one shot? Stick with core development, fending off the features that would creep into the design. (Another name for this is "creeping features syndrome.") Off site development using technical assistance firms may be advantageous to maintain focus.

Conclusion

Seize good ideas no matter where they come from. Properly qualify them with marketing surveys and questionnaires. Avoid the emotional attachment of "our baby" or NIH. Refine the concepts and ideas so they fit your company's capabilities and strengths. Avoid letting unnecessary features creep in. Use technical assistance firms when appropriate. Approach the market with the confidence that you have done your best.

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