



White paper

What do customers really want?

Developing products and services people want

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When developing products, how can you really know what customers want and are willing to pay for? If you spend your hard-earned development dollars on features that users won't pay for, then you are wasting your time. Customers pay for things that solve their problems, even if those features are unexciting.

Listening to customers is the biggest factor in determining what customers really want. Sitting and talking with customers puts you into a completely different frame of mind. It turns the lights on and makes you want to go back and give them exactly what they asked for. There is a fundamental entrepreneurial factor that is satisfied by listening to actual customers, and delivering products designed just for them. When you've experienced that exchange you know exactly why products exist – to solve customer needs. The understanding passes from head-knowledge to heart-knowledge.

But what if you don't have customers yet? The principle is the same; you must go outside your own realm and talk with people. Try using friends, family, and colleagues. Explain what you are trying to accomplish, and ask for objective input. When you get your feedback, start small and build a foundational product that you can sell. Don't develop deeply until you get actual customer feedback. Don't develop features exhaustively until actual customers ask for them, and don't make things up. Wait to hear it from others.

Whether you talk with actual customers or surrogate users, make sure you get detailed requirements and clearly identify the problem they need to have solved. Don't rush off to implement the feature. Take the time to explore the need fully, and document it. The act of writing requirements on paper causes you to think differently. As you document the need, and the feature requirements to meet that need, try to consider possible users beyond your focus group, but not too far. Don't exaggerate, but make sure the feature meets everyone's needs.

Requirements and feature designs have a way of improving with age. Try holding onto your design for a few weeks and revisiting it with a fresh look. Try doing this repeatedly to the same design, and you'll find that it "ages" nicely before it is revealed to the public. Aging can save your feature from disaster. As you release your feature, consider rolling out the full glorious design over several micro-releases. This gives you even more time to chew on the grand design and make course corrections along the way. It also gives customers a simpler feature to start with. Don't worry, they'll always come back and ask for more and they won't fault you for starting simple.

Prototyping and usability are key elements to a good design. Start with simple artist renditions, screenshots, or mockups that contain no working functionality. Let your focus-group customers tell you how they would use such a feature. Can they understand it? Do they think they can use it? Does it ease their pain? Again, aging such prototypes, and revisiting them weeks later can often make you slap your head and say, "that looks goofy." After using rudimentary mockups, you may consider building more extensive prototypes, or even building a simplified version of the actual product. Again, let your customers see it and tell you how it looks.

Finally, consider viewing the development effort as subservient to sales. Consider that one function of development is to eliminate barriers to sales. Development is there to eliminate reasons for customers to go elsewhere. They solve customer needs, and that makes customers come back to purchase more. Keep a running list of the top barriers to sales. These are the top features of your product that customers are complaining about, or that you perceive to be needed to sell more product. Revise the list as you implement and roll out new features. This approach will keep you close to the customer and more in tune to what they really want.

About Us

Scoutwest, Inc. develops and publishes project management and time tracking products for consulting, manufacturing, government, and general business applications.

Thousands of small to large businesses, in dozens of countries worldwide, trust their mission critical business processes to Scoutwest products. Standard Time® and Standard Issue® work together to offer well-rounded project management solutions.

We specialize in packaged software for timesheets, project management, time tracking, defect tracking, and issue tracking. Standard Time is a web-based timesheet that also runs on Windows, Palm OS, and Pocket PC. It can be used for client billing and task management. Standard Issue is used for bug tracking and general issue tracking.

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