

Products for Customers

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We were both computer science people focused on products. We learned the hard way to always keep the business focused on the customer.

We started working on trying to find a product to launch a business in 1996. After our first product failed, we thought it was because we had chosen the wrong technology platform and looked for ways to solve the product's technical problems. We met with venture capitalists who consistently pointed out holes in our business plan. Two years later, we had 3 product failures and \$100,000 of debt. It was a good thing we applied for credit cards at the beginning, because we would have never had access to credit later with such a big debt.

It was a low point for us. It was also the key to our future. With no product and no customers we asked ourselves if we should just go back and get 8-to-5 jobs again and forget our dream. Many of our friends told it was a good idea but that we'd be crazy to keep going. But for us, stopping seemed to be a really bad idea. We would forever have regrets. Dreaming of being in control of your own destiny for so long, it was not an option. So, we changed our thinking: "Having our own company is the only way to live. Let's get it everything we have to make it work." It was really a moment to "Believe in yourself". Of course, now we are glad we made this decision.

So we set out to figure out what we were doing wrong. We had our product available for sale through our website. Looking at the web traffic, we saw that people came to look at the product and read the website. But, they just weren't buying it. We couldn't

understand why. So we decided to visit some local potential customers in Calgary. After a while we started to hear what they were trying to tell us: the product was too technical. What they wanted was a solution to their problem, not a product. It needs to be easy-to-use and easy-to-implement. We realized customers don't care what's under the hood. They want the product to make their job easier. They also had business concerns, such as, will the information we put in it be secure? Will this company be around long enough to support the product? We went home and redesigned our product and our website with the customer's perspective in mind.

Then people started buying it! We started getting orders over the Internet. We have always had the idea to sell the product globally. Selling the product locally is great for a beta test, but not if you want to build a big company.

We asked our customers "How did you find out about us?" After we found out where our customers were coming from, we went back to places like Google and tried to create awareness to help us get more sales. We still use a trial and error approach to everything we do. Try it; if it works keep it, otherwise "now we know."

Customer feedback is a very important part of our corporate culture. Every time any employees talks to a customer, they make notes of the customer's needs, their pain, and their circumstances in our database. If you can't use the notes to talk to the customer intelligently when he calls back in a few months, you haven't made enough good notes.

We have built our company to over 100 people on one product and apply our customer feedback to help us improve it. We hear customers asking for lots of new features but, each feature costs time and money. We prioritize our improvements by talking to customers and asking them about the goal they wish to achieve with the new feature, and how many people in the company it would affect. We need to figure out if the feature is part of a deeper problem, or just a "bell and whistle".

It is our experience that too many new features are confusing to customers. Our approach is to create a product update every 3 to 4 months that only has 1 to 3 new features. We find it easier to test for bugs and it is easier to educate everyone if there are not so many new features. Our customers also like getting new features every 3 to 4 months. (In most software companies, this is unheard of. They are used to rolling out an update every 9 to 12 months.)

Even though it is enterprise software, our product only takes a customer a couple of days to setup. That's very unusual because normally enterprise software takes a team of consultants weeks and there are tons of bugs to fix.

We tried to use a scientific approach to finding out what price we should charge for our product. In the end we have learnt that our current price is our sweet spot.