

## Parenting and the Art of Product Management

Over the years, I've told variations of this story many times: being a product champion is a lot like being a parent. We love our products, make multi-year commitments to their development, hide their shortcomings, and look out for their best long-term interests while other organizations live in the moment. We groom our products for good mergers later in life -- and may be heartbroken by market indifference or eventual end-of-life.

Not everyone wants to raise children or enterprise software. Consider the following observations before volunteering for high-tech parenthood...

## Book Learning is No Substitute for Experience



Parents-to-be are often deluged with "how to" books offering sage advice. These offer helpful vignettes about feeding, sleeping, discipline, and how to get strained peas out of your hair. The reality of children is impossible to distill into a book, though. Stated more colorfully, we're not really parents until we've gotten some poop on our hands and laughed about it.

Likewise there are lots of articles about pricing strategy, positioning, market segmentation, and how to prioritize an endless feature request list. (Present company included.) When the time comes, though, your situation is always unique. You'll eventually have to recommend a pricing model and defend it, so get started. Be humble, but don't apologize for a less-than-perfect first effort.

If you're lucky enough to find a mentor, ask for the war stories. "What didn't work and why? How is this product like yours? What templates can I borrow?" Except in the largest companies that maintain very strong processes, book learning is over-rated.

## Allowing Time to Crawl, then Walk

Most babies can't sing or pole vault or read Sanskrit. And we don't expect them to. We encourage their first steps, applaud "chopsticks," sign them up for fingerpainting or swimming lessons. We try to uncover their secret talents. We know that they will make lots of mistakes. In fact, we've signed up for decades of bruised knees, failed science projects, dreadful school plays and disastrous first dates.



Technical products also grow up. It's a rare for anything to be complete in its first release, and even rarer for you to anticipate the right audience for your new baby. The first year (or two) are spent bumping into markets, fixing bugs, talking with customers, and discovering unexpected niches for your brainchild.

(Microsoft has certainly taught us not to expect any product to be usable before version 3.1.)

Part of your responsibility as a PM is to protect and nurture your baby. Set appropriate expectations for beta customers. Have a developmental roadmap that shows when more features will arrive. Try to read product reviews calmly. Don't throw the software out with the bug report. If you're not proud of your wunderkind, then no one will be.

## In It for the Long Term

As parents, we're committed to deferred gratification and multi-year planning. We show our faith in the future by moving into good school districts, saving for college, and insisting that geometry is worth learning. Part of our job is to make some long-term plans and thoughtfully trade off the present for the future. Children want immediate gratification, so we have to make some choices for them.

As a product champion, you're in similar territory. Faced with an infinitely long list of feature requests, you must help developers stick to the important items and minimize "feature creep." Sketching out the next half-dozen releases can comfort pouting customers who want everything right away.

A good friend with a 7-year-old reminded me that preparing dinner once for your child can be fun, but making the 2,550<sup>th</sup> dinner is heroic.

It's also impossible to make every decision perfectly. In an uncertain world with limited time, we must pick a few issues worthy of serious thought. Should we skip her to the next grade? Does he feel feverish to you? Are the twins old enough for hockey? Raising kids is a real-time sport, so many choices have to be made with neither data nor analysis. Arguing carrots versus peas as the dinner vegetable rarely makes my list.

When you put on your product hat (or apron), you'll need to focus your thinking time on what's truly important. At the top of your menu is a business model built around customer requirements, pricing and competition. Even though this will never be completed to your satisfaction, you'll eventually have to serve it. Dithering won't get food on the table or software out the door. (Sometimes the potatoes may taste a little odd.)

## Setting Limits is Important (and Difficult)



Modeling the right kinds of behavior – at the right stages of development – is an art and a science. We want to set ground rules first, then build on them as our children grow. No hitting. Keep your clothes on in public. We'll read one story before bedtime. Don't touch the stick shift. Life is complicated, though, and every rule has its exception. Lots of parents wrestle with one-time exceptions that instantly reset boundaries. [Remember "you can stay up a half hour later tonight, but tomorrow night you have to be in bed by 8:30PM" and "if you really don't feel well enough to go to school today..."?] Creating clear policies and deciding when to break them is nerve-wracking.

Product champions face this daily dilemma with sales teams (who bring in the revenue that pays our salaries). Moments after we've carefully defined precisely what we sell and how it's priced, we're approached with requests for special discounts or unique packaging or custom features. No exception ever stays a secret, however: other customers and resellers always find out about one-time deals, so exceptions are really new policies. Yet life demands flexibility. Our role is to set reasonable thresholds and stay open-minded. ("For deals over \$100,000 or in these two new markets...")

Waffling on your policies has longer-term costs. Sales teams and customers learn to "game" your system, describing their special situations to fit your new rules. You're also encouraging them to bring you other kinds of exceptions on the hopes that you'll relax other limits. ("Here's why this deal is strategic...") Every parent knows: never let your teenager realize that everything is negotiable.

### *Sound Bytes*

Great product managers develop an emotional relationship with their products. Like first-time parents, they learn to nurture their products, plan for the future, and make decisions every day with limited experience. Don't be afraid to commit. Once you're cleaned up a few dirty MRDs and sent your firstborn off to revenue, there are many more products at your company hoping to be adopted.

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