



Communication breakdown

Max Middleton provides some pointers as to why, when and how early use requirements can help turn commercial goals into development results

We usually tend to build stereotypes in our heads of various people. For instance, developers are often seen as mad inventors who lock themselves away in their lairs whiling away at contraptions only they could love. Whilst marketeers can be seen as bossy, petulantly demanding the impossible from these developers. So, it should come as no surprise then that the output of a development project often fails to meet the intended market need.

Why should this be so? Are developers so removed from the real world that they will inevitably lose focus on the commercial goal and create a monstrosity? Are marketeers really so technically challenged their suggestions are better ignored? It's for reasons such as these that communication is the cornerstone of any successful development programme.

Within a development project it is common to use requirements (also sometimes known as a specification) as a key form of communication and to track what a product is intended to be. There are many different books and training programmes dedicated to how to write and use them. Indeed, requirements can be a very

powerful tool in development. They act as an objective measure of success and a reference for anyone working in the wider development team.

So, how can a set of requirements help prevent the kind of tragic stereotypes above? In essence, they are a record of both the 'how' and the 'why' of the development. They tell the team 'why' the product is designed the way it is and 'how' it will meet user's needs. This is particularly useful during a design review but also proves invaluable when any member of the team asks "Why was it that we needed this bit?" or "How did we decide to make it do that?"

However, the requirements are only as strong as their weakest point and this is often at the end when it should link to the marketing department. Without a clear and objective documentation of market or commercial requirements the development lacks its final (and critical) 'why'. With no solid anchor to the commercial goal, a development is almost guaranteed to fail when it reaches market.

You would be wrong to think that this is the fault of the marketing department as there

are a series of reasons why this step is often missed out. For one, marketing and commercial managers often speak a very different language to designers and engineers. Marketing may not understand why such documentation is important and similarly any documentation that is created by the marketing team may not be recognised by the development team. The obvious result is that information is lost.

It is almost impossible to create a set of marketing requirements that have certainties. Although developers generally like things to be exact, the early period of identifying a commercial opportunity is far more nebulous. This can result in the team believing that it is not useful to record these 'soft' requirements.

There will only be a very limited understanding at this stage of what will be acceptable as success criteria. If the product is intended to penetrate a new market, how much will be considered satisfactory? Not knowing an exact way to gauge success can lead the team to avoid the issue, abandoning what understanding they have achieved.

So, given these inherent difficulties in creat-

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Practical tools when building early requirements

Despite the challenges involved in the early creation of marketing requirements, creating the document and getting senior management agreement is highly advantageous. Here are some tools that can help:

Use benchmarking

It is a useful exercise to seek out competitors to the proposed product area. This exercise can build knowledge of the commercial landscape and will help to understand what currently makes a successful product. The benchmark could be another product, another company in the market or even a study of what potential customers are currently using (which might be nothing). Doing this could throw up requirements that might otherwise have been forgotten and can also be used to compare your requirements with an actual example. But try not to fall into the trap of stating that the new product has to be 50 per cent better in every way.

Use target requirements

Although it may not be possible to set absolute values for requirements such as sales figures or time to market, you should discuss the realistic targets. Is the product 'too expensive' to make? Is there an

upper limit on the development cost? Be pragmatic and avoid the temptation to set 'challenging' targets, at this stage these are more likely to kill off exciting ideas than motivate the development team.

However, if you use this technique, you must accept that the early documentation will contain lots of requirements that cannot fulfil the typical engineering test of being objective and testable. This is not inherently wrong, as long as the development team understand the importance of gathering the information and conducting the research to 'harden' these requirements. Part of the benefit of a complete requirements chain is that the first marketing requirements document does *not* need to act as the final engineering specification. It also makes it very obvious where your team lacks information and can focus effort on these important areas.

Make it a team document

You should definitely include members of the development team in the process to create the marketing requirements, possibly even allowing them to manage the process. This will create a requirements 'champion' who should then be able to carry the commercial and market understanding into the latter development stages.

ing marketing level requirements, its not surprising that they are largely ignored. But there are several key reasons why effort at this stage is valuable. Early in the identification of the market opportunity it is likely that senior managers will be close to the project, helping to determine whether the opportunity merits the significant investment that a full development can imply. Therefore, this is the best chance to gain their direct input on what 'success' would mean. It also helps to get a greater sense of ownership from these senior managers, which typically has long lasting benefits throughout the development.

If there are risks involved in the marketing requirements, such as if the technical leap is particularly large or the market is less known, these can and should be highlighted at this early stage. It can enable additional market or technology research to be carried out while there is still the opportunity to provide feedback before the commercial plan is finalised.

Documenting the market requirements while the senior managers are involved forces potential conflict between stakeholders out in the open. All companies can suffer from politics, disagreements and non aligned goals but embodying these problems in a development programme spells almost certain doom for the project. Even if the company is a paragon of team work, the different departments will be driven by different priorities. These differences should be confronted early in a development, before they get 'built in'.

Additionally, having a documented state-

designmanagement

Development success can still lead to market failure



ment of the development aims makes it *more* difficult to change. This might not sound like a benefit but for a development team, a fixed target is far easier to hit than a moving one. Forcing people to help create a document that they then put their name on can focus the mind. Without such focus it can be too easy to put off decisions at this early stage of the development, which can allow the early development to wander and become fuzzy, often disappearing under a tide of shifting priorities.

Consequently, the marketing requirements allow the early product requirements to take shape with the solid support of documented business needs. Thus the requirements for the concept can focus on 'how' the market needs will be realised as a service or product without the need to justify the position. Each document is self contained and properly related to those around it, rather than attempting to be all things to all men.

Additionally, by using documented require-

ments very early in a commercial development, and by understanding that it is ok to document your uncertainty, you can solidify the link between the development and the commercial elements of new product design. It can't guarantee that your products will be successful but they stand a much better chance of being what you first thought you needed. ■

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