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3 Ways You Can Finally Stop Feature Creep

by Ellen Chisa

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A universal law of product management: There are always more feature requests than available development time.

These requests come fast and furious from everyone: customers, clients, coworkers, executives. This leads to the impression that the product manager's only job is to massage the product backlog and figure out which of these infinite requests will be built. You might think that each day is simply an exercise in discerning tradeoffs between feature requests.

> ***It is easy to assume that you are a better product manager when you get more features built. That is when everyone seems happy — right?***

But every product manager knows the weight that feature requests can bear. Eventually, you get tired — and idea fatigue leads you to use "Yes" as a reflex. It becomes too tempting to keep someone happy, or ask your team to put in "a little extra work" if it won't hurt the product.

This pressure can make product managers stray into focusing on tradeoffs — instead of strong rationale for each feature. That means they start to fall back on a huge array of mental justifications for each feature. These include:

- I would use this feature.
- I can imagine someone else (my mom, friend, dog) using this feature.
- My boss wants this feature, and life is easier when my boss is happy with me.
- The developer is just going to build this feature no matter what I say. I should get on their good side by agreeing that we should have the feature.
- If I build this feature for my coworker now, she will owe me and have to return this favor in the future.
- A potential client wants this feature.
- This feature might be helpful in a few years.

But this endless list of weak justifications leads to feature creep.

As the name suggests, feature creep happens slowly. And if you are not careful it will sneak up on you and weigh you down. It is not our intent as product managers to justify everything. We would much rather start with strategy, clarify our product vision, and use these as tools to guide our product teams to success. But too often, we lose our conviction. The constant stream of requests beats us down.

Ultimately, building a great product is not about managing a list of requests. As Josh Elman succinctly said, the product manager's job is to "help your team (and company) ship the right product to your users." That is hard to argue with. From that definition, the only feature justification is, "It's part of the right product."

Building features is not about comparison and justification of what's "more important" — it's about asking, "Is this part of the right product?"

So, here is the great news — you are not resigned to feature creep. If you lead product with a goal-first strategy, you can help your whole team ship the right product to your users. When feature request fatigue threatens to creep in, you should:

Set an overarching product goal
When you're working on a new product, or on a new release, there should be a vision for the release. It could be, "Try out X and Y to see if that helps us get to product market fit." It could also be, "Make this product applicable for a new type of customer."

It could even be, "Improve quality and stability." It is also helpful to tie the theme to some numerical goals. While some items won't fit with the theme, the majority should. Each new feature request should be evaluated for whether it fits the theme.

Consider each request in isolation
Instead of getting a big list of everything you "could" build and prioritize, consider each item individually. Does the item fit your theme? Do you need it to build the right product to meet that goal? If the answer is no, then it isn't worth considering. Once you have a set of features that matches the goal for your release, then you can rank them.

Help contextualize the goals for everyone making requests
When your boss asks for something unrelated to your release's goal, remind them what that goal is — "Remember, we wanted to make sure we improved performance by 15% in this release. You have a great idea that I'm going to keep around. But I think implementing it now will distract us from that goal."

This helps prevent tensions from colleagues whose feature requests you didn't take. It also gives them some direction so they can bring you more relevant suggestions.

> ***It is easy to slide into feature creep. There are so many good ideas, and no one likes to hear, "No." But product management is so much more than managing what everyone else wants.***

Instead, keep your high-level goal at the forefront, and make sure each feature supports that goal. Working with vision helps you avoid feeling overwhelmed — and puts you on track to building lovable products.

This is a guest post by Ellen Chisa. If you are looking to be a great product manager or owner, create brilliant strategy, and build visual product roadmaps — start a free trial of Aha!

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