

## Chapter 13:

# PRODUCT PRINCIPLES

### Deciding What's Important

Another tool that can be a big aid in determining the right trade-offs and priorities is a good set of product principles. The product principles are a public declaration of your beliefs and intentions. I like them because if they're done well, they can serve as a useful complement to a product strategy and significantly speed the product discovery process.

When I start working with a product team, once I understand the business strategy, often one of the first activities we do together is to define a set of product principles.

Coming up with product principles means deciding what is important to you—and what is incidental—and deciding what is strategic and fundamental, and what is simply tactical and temporary.

There are other benefits to developing product principles. The process serves as a way for me to understand the DNA of a company, and what the founders hope to achieve. Most importantly, it serves as a framework for evaluating the many alternatives in front of every product and company.

Product principles are not a list of features and, in fact, are not tied to any one product incarnation. In this sense, they are most aligned with a product strategy for an entire product line, or with a company

mission statement for a startup. A good set of principles serves as the basis or foundation for inspiring product features.

An example of a product principle for a movie site may be that the team believes that the user community's opinions on movies are more valuable than those of professional reviewers. Later, if a studio wants to place reviews on your site, you can then decide if this is consistent with your principles or not.

Whether you choose to go public with your product principles depends on your purpose. Often the principles are simply a tool for the product team, much like a product strategy document. But, in other cases, the principles serve as a clear statement of what you believe, intended for your users, customers, partners, suppliers, investors, and employees.

Another benefit I have found is that more than any other document, a set of product principles can bring together the product team—especially product management, user experience design, engineering, and marketing—and get the team on the same page.

While there's value in identifying your guiding product principles, you also need to prioritize them. Countless products are trying to be easy to use and also safe and secure. But what matters is the priority. Is ease of use paramount? Or is safety and security the primary concern?

Finally, many teams make a couple of mistakes when they first try creating a set of product principles. The first is that they state principles that are so generic that they aren't really useful ("must be reliable"). The second is that they confuse their product principles with design principles. For example, a common design principle is to provide a well-lit path (so the user always knows where to go next). That's not a product principle.

So, if you don't yet have a clear statement of the beliefs and principles that guide your product team, consider getting the team together for

a couple hours to discuss, identify, and prioritize what you think is important.



## Resolving Conflicts

Quite a few product managers tell me that they're constantly struggling with endless meetings without structure or decisions, second guessing of earlier decisions, vetoes, politics and what I call "drive-bys" (when a manager drops in every so often, shoots down your progress, and then is gone again without providing the feedback or guidance that could help you address her concerns).

While this type of situation can occur with virtually any decision a company must make, I think this is an especially common problem with product decisions. As I see it, there are several reasons for this. First, everyone has an opinion about the company's products—they're probably what attracted them to join the company in the first place. Second, everyone feels strongly about the product since—at some level—we all realize that companies need money to survive, money comes from customers, and customers come for the products. Third, many of your colleagues view themselves as much more like your target customer than they really are (or think they understand the target customer much more than they really do).

Combine this with the fact that—in most organizations—the product team doesn't actually report into the product manager and so has little organizational power to coerce; the product manager must persuade the team and not dictate to it. The result is what makes product management so difficult and at times extremely frustrating.

In some teams, the product decision process can become so contentious and deadlocked that the decision must be escalated to a senior manager in order to move forward. If this happens (and sometimes it is unavoidable), I consider this to be a very bad result. You want the debate and the arguments, but you want everyone on board at the end. In most cases, a much better product will result. A senior manager can always make the call for you but, besides the resentment this creates, the product is the biggest loser.

I suppose it's little surprise that so many struggle to find an effective process for making product decisions.

I will not pretend that there's a way to make the product discovery process painless—there isn't. Constructive debate and argument is an essential ingredient to coming up with a great product. While I know those arguments are necessary, it doesn't mean I always enjoy them.

That said, as product manager you can make a very significant impact on this process—minimizing churn and maximizing creativity and quality of the result by doing the following:

For virtually all product decisions, the key is to properly frame the decision to be made, and to first get everyone on the same page in terms of:

- What problem exactly are you trying to solve?
- Who exactly are you trying to solve this problem for—which persona?
- What are the goals you are trying to satisfy with this product?
- What is the relative priority of each goal?

In my experience, most of the time when there's strong disagreement within the product team, it's not really over the facts of the situation—it's instead because each person has a different interpretation or weighting of the goals and the priorities.

For example, you should be arguing about what's most important to your target user: ease of use, speed, functionality, cost, security, privacy—this is the right argument. Once you've agreed on what the goals are and who exactly you want to satisfy—and, just as important, the relative priority—then you all have a common basis for evaluating and assessing the options.

It is extremely important to take prioritization seriously—you should get the team to agree on the specific ordering, most to least important. Don't just wave your hands and group the goals into something like "critical" and "very important." Be sure your team can identify what is most critical, then second most critical, and so on.

When I am called in on controversial product decisions, all too often the group has skipped this step, and is deep in the weeds of each option—everyone passionately arguing his or her case but without a common basis for evaluation. Everyone assumes the objectives and the priority. Even if you have done a great job developing these objectives, you should remind the team prior to the decision process. Put it up on the white board so that the team can see the exact framework for evaluating the options and making the decision.

Moreover, I think it is very important for product managers to

be completely transparent in their decision making process and reasoning. You don't want the team thinking that you're just following your intuition. Every member of the team should be able to see the goals and objectives you are using, their priority, and how you assess each option. The decision—and the reasoning behind how you got there—should be clear to all.

So the next time you find your product team battling it out and getting into an unproductive and demoralizing state, bring the team back from the edge, and revisit the goals and priorities. Make sure you're all on the same page before returning to evaluating the different options.



## Examples

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You can see example product principles at:  
[www.svpg.com/examples](http://www.svpg.com/examples).