- Question asked by Marta Jurasik
- Methodologies
- 8 replies
- about a year ago

Can you describe your approach to solving a customer's problem?

My training in product management is going to an end and recently I have been interviewing for a junior product manager position. In the course of a recruitment process I was asked to prepare a case study about a potential solution to a customer's problem. One of the questions in the task is: **"What is your approach to solve the issue?"**

I am having a hard time understanding what the hiring managers are looking for. How should I understand the question? What do you think is meant by "approach?" What would be an example answer?

While I have pretty solid product idea, I am afraid I can fail the interview just because I don't understand the question.

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7 Replies

Justin Williams
Mischief & Mayhem
about a year ago

I like the framework of:

- Define a desired outcome
- Generate ideas on how to make the outcome a reality
- Choose some of those ideas to validate as solutions
- If we see evidence that a solution will work, build it! If not, iterate or shelve it and move onto the next idea.

Define a desired outcome. The first thing you need to do is get everyone on the same page about what you are trying to do. Most problems are presented in the form of solutions: e.g., "Customers want more customizable of feature X." You need to bring it back to the problem space and get everyone aligned on what you are actually trying to do. Are we trying to improve UX? Increase revenue? Improve conversion rate? Create an expansion product to serve a new subset of customers? Until we have an agreed upon desirable future state, we can't make any progress.

Generate ideas. Some common ways to do this are by observing the user as they use the current product, doing customer interviews, reviewing product data looking for insights, user testing your existing product or competitor products, doing a Concierge MVP, and looking at work-arounds existing customers are using to achieve the desired outcome (i.e., Customer Misbehavior).

Choose Ideas. This requires professional judgement / product sense. You might also use the RICE framework.

Validate chosen ideas as solutions. Here, most commonly you can use prototypes to simulate the intended experience and run user tests to see how customers respond. There are several variations of prototypes and several validation techniques you can use. The idea is to simulate the experience and get real customer reactions. Specifically we are looking for - would they choose to use it (value), can they use it (usability), and can we actually build it (feasibility). Note that it is critical to involve both your designers and your engineers in this process.

Build, Iterate, Shelve. If we see reasonable evidence that the solution will work, put that sucker into the backlog. Since you hopefully validated using a prototype and involved the engineering team, they should have a really good idea of exactly what they have to build. More commonly, we will want to iterate on our solution and re-test prior to having enough confidence to build it. And finally, many of our ideas simply won't work and so we shelve or kill them.

Hopefully this helps - feel free to email me jwillia53@gmail.com if you'd like to discuss further.

- Comment
- Like 1

Marta Jurasik
about a year ago

Hi Justin, it helps me a lot! Thanks!

I have one question though. How would you validate an idea that is more back-end and doesn't translate easily into user interface? I mean it's hard to make a prototype of a new search algorithm or recommendations logic. How can I prove that improving e.g. our sorting algorithm will improve conversion rate without writing a line of code?

- Comment
- Like

Justin Williams
Mischief & Mayhem
about a year ago

Hi Marta :)

That is a tough one... you might have to validate using a technique called the Live Data Prototype which does involve using Dev time but should be much less work than creating a "real" feature.

The gist is:

- Build a minimal version of the feature that will only be exposed to a small number of customers so that you can run an A/B test.
- The minimal feature needs to be able handle customer usage, have analytics in place so that you can understand performance vs. the existing feature, and must work well enough that it doesn't hurt your brand.

- You try to write just enough code to validate/invalidate the idea; the goal would be to only spend 20% or 30% of the time that would be required to write a production quality feature.

A good story/example is the Amazon recommendations when you add something to your cart. A team there noticed customers who bought laptops spent an additional 40 minutes finding chargers, cases, etc. The team presented the idea and one of the Marketing VPs was resistant - he thought it made the company look greedy. So they did a Live Data Prototype in production.

They picked three laptop models, hard-coded the recommendations, and exposed to 1% or 2% of customers. The results were fantastic and that gave them the validation they needed to build the feature for real. You can see that by only doing this for a few laptop models and hard-coding the recommendations instead of building an entire recommendations engine, they were quickly able to see if the idea worked.

Further reading can be found here and here.

Hope this helps!

- Comment
- Like 3

Marta Jurasik
about a year ago

Hi Justin, thank you for helping me with this. I love the Amazon example!

- Comment
- Like 1

Chris Carruth
CPO, Product Development, Product Manager, Program Manager, Strategy, FP&A – Tech | Video | CPG | Apps | Media
about a year ago

What is a customer? Is it the end user/consumer? Is it the Enterprise who has consumers? Is it the retail site/brick and mortar? A "customer's" problem and how you solve it hinges on defining this.

- Comment
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Jim Begley
Technical PM, fluent in lean startups and ITSM business
about a year ago

I sense the question is asking more about your methodology for dealing with customers then how you would solve a specific problem. If I were to choose the most simplistic and universal process for me it would be to:

- Ask questions, listen actively and repeat back to the customer until I understand the problem
- insure the customer with empathy
- determine if solving the problem is within my power, or finding someone who is
- if enabled, suggest known ways to solve the customers problem, (consult docs and peers.) and propose the best, simplest way.
- if no known ways to solve the problem inform the customer that I will need to research and give them a time and method that I will contact them with an update, (verify best contact info)
- Contact the customer within window with an update.

But I may have totally lost the plot on this one.

- Comment
- Like 1

Chris Carruth
CPO, Product Development, Product Manager, Program Manager, Strategy, FP&A – Tech | Video | CPG | Apps | Media
about a year ago

At a generic level Justin's framework is reasonable.

- Comment
- Like

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