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- Question asked by [Ruby Menon](#)
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- 10 replies
- 2 years ago

What should a product manager focus on in an early stage startup?

I am asking specifically about an early stage startup that hasn't figured out their product-market fit or customer base yet?

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[Todd Gibson](#)

Head of Product

2 years ago

I agree with John, but IMO you could skip the personas. Focus on the 1-1 relationships and solving just one key problem for your customers. Personas were created by Angus Jenkinson in 1994 for marketers and adopted by agencies as a way to create shared customer language between stakeholders (and get around the reality that they couldn't afford to do deep user research given client project constraints). Alan Cooper introduced Interaction Design-centric personas in 1998, but derived the concept under very atypical circumstances vs what startups today face. Point being, their use in product design & communications, especially at an early stage, is often more problematic than helpful. Not to say that they have no value, rather it's that to have personas that accurately portray the motivations and values of customer segments requires far more data than most startups or agencies expect or sometimes even have access to.

I'd recommend reading these two articles:

<http://alanklement.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/focus-on-relationships-skip-personas.html>

<https://hbr.org/2005/12/marketing-malpractice-the-cause-and-the-cure>

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[John Eaton](#)

Client Strategist at Macomb-OU Incubator

2 years ago

Good points Keith & Todd. I've found counseling start-ups (especially tech companies) that with developers at the lead their efforts are often so product-heavy that end-user value is not as clear as it could be. Hence, going back to "basics" using personas as one tool to clarify who the product is for and what problem its meant to solve. The old "get out of the office" approach has worked with a couple of our incubator clients in that respect, with surprising (and valuable) results.

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[Ruby Menon](#)

Product Mgr & Co-Designer - LifeStiles® Profile | Recruiter

2 years ago

Thanks, Todd. I did write user personas for 3 types of users we think would be interested in the product. My challenge is that our CEO who is also the visionary and product owner identified 3 users from anecdotal vs. actual customer interviews in developing the product. So the product has been launched and now we have to discover who are real users will be. Once we get a better feel of our customer base, I will revisit personas.

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[Grant Novey](#)

Customer ally with a focus on product strategy and UX

2 years ago

I'd focus on understanding the customer base. Products **should** provide value and solve one or more customer needs. If you know what need(s) you are trying to satisfy and problems you are trying to solve, that should give you some guidance on what customers to start talking to.

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[John Eaton](#)

Client Strategist at Macomb-OU Incubator

2 years ago

As a long time PM now in a consulting role for start-ups & entrepreneurs, I'd say the focus ought to be on end-user/customer discovery and persona development. It's critical for you to have the "voice of your customer" in your head at all times. The relationships you build with early adopters and implementers will pay off when you go to test features and validate your product is meeting their expectations. Typically startups are led by developers/engineers anyway...and (love engineers BTW) their single-mindedness can create blinders. What a good PM can offer is a broader view and context.

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[Keith Brown](#)
VP Marketing, Aha!
2 years ago

I would agree with John above, particularly, if you have not figured out your customer base yet. You might not need the persona development though, if you are not even sure who your market or customers are.

- Comment
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[Ruby Menon](#)
Product Mgr & Co-Designer - LifeStiles® Profile | Recruiter
2 years ago

Thanks, John. This has been my approach and your comment validated I'm on the right track. Thanks for your input.

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[Bruce Fryer](#)

Lean Product Management, Marketing, Strategy, with a flair for Innovation

2 years ago

Having lived through five startups and mentoring sixteen companies for an accelerator, I have found that using leanstack.com tends to get you on the right track (I killed two startup ideas using it myself). Here's a starter article that may help: <https://blog.leanstack.com/love-the-problem-not-your-solution-65cfbfb1916b>

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[Ruby Menon](#)

Product Mgr & Co-Designer - LifeStiles® Profile | Recruiter

2 years ago

Thanks, Bruce! I'm a big fan of Ash Maurya! Thanks for reminding me of his work. This is a great article with sound advice.

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[Rishabh Saxena](#)

2 years ago

MVP, for sure. An early stage startup cannot afford to go down long development cycles without knowing if what they're building is viable. Validating your product is a must.

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