



BUILDING OUTCOME BASED PRODUCT ROADMAPS

AVOIDING THE PRODUCT FEATURE FACTORY



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Introduction

Increasingly in the Product space I am hearing about how Product Teams and product-led businesses are rethinking the way they structure their roadmaps. The truth is, these documents that are often labelled as roadmaps, are in fact more comparable to a release plan because they are so focused on when features are going to be released rather than why. This misplaced focus on churning out new features often fails to take into account what users really need, therefore adding little to no real value.

So how can you structure a roadmap that can showcase value to senior business leaders and your stakeholders without becoming a feature factory and whilst still adding real value to your users?

Find out in the following whitepaper.

Stuck in the Feature Factory

Software and Product teams can often get stuck in a feature factory where they constantly build new things and churn out features, without really knowing if those features are adding value to the customer or helping to achieve their product or business goals.

Businesses often fail to differentiate between roadmaps and release plans. Release plans list all planned features and the dates that they will be built and released. The features are typically shown on a timeline, named as a roadmap, and shared with customers. The problem here is that customers and clients often take these timelines as concrete commitments and promises, which means there is then external pressure to deliver on that list, even if the features turn out to be unimportant. Essentially, they can force teams to deliver feature after feature even if the strategy, user needs, or behaviour has changed.

Release plans fail to explain why things are being built, why things have been prioritised, and what the end result or outcome should be. A roadmap should communicate the strategic direction of the product, including goals, outcomes, and how to add value to the user. You need to stop thinking features and start thinking problems.

Many companies only really have a release plan, not a roadmap. So, whilst there is a plan for when to release features that teams can aim for, the true impact of those features is rarely measured.

So, what is the way forward?

Product Strategy: From Output to Outcome

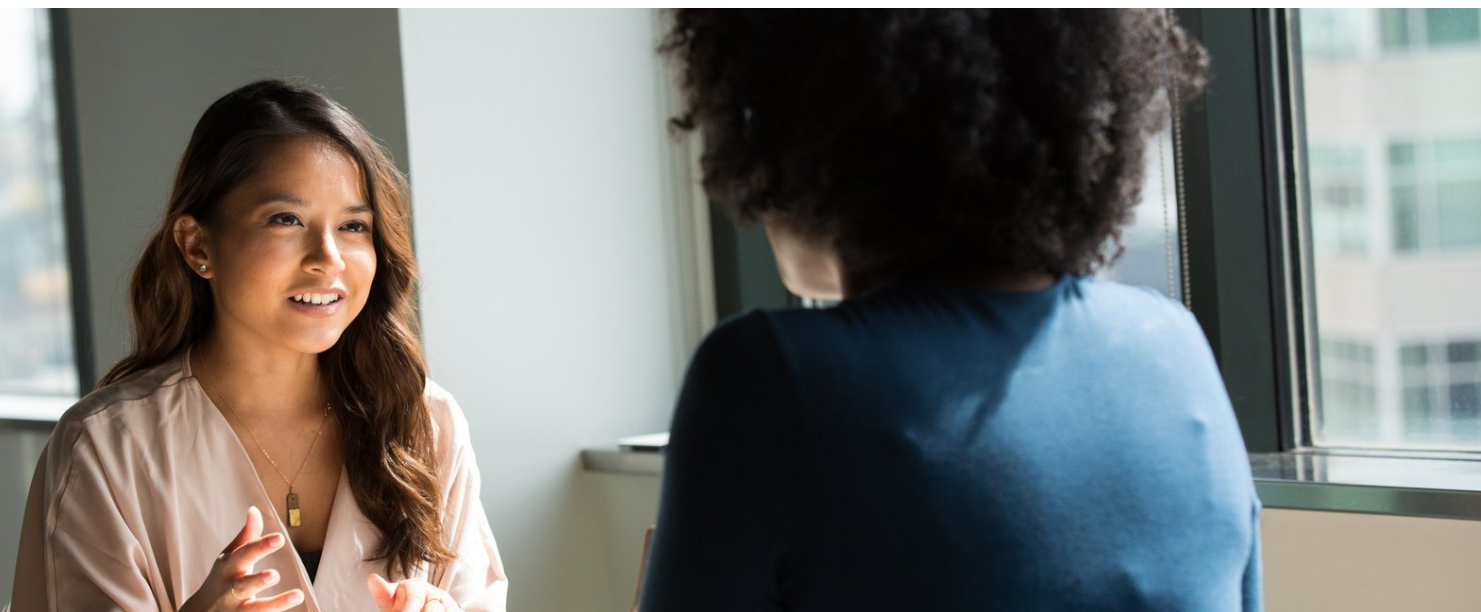
Ask yourself what success looks like to your business. Consider how you want your users to feel and what you want them to be able to do. Over a given time period, the team should commit to one particular outcome. This outcome must be measurable and should be something that is valuable to the customer and the business. It needs to be specific and relevant. An example could be “users should be able to register on our website in half the current time.”

All goals require a number of steps and milestones to achieve them, but those individual steps aren’t objectives in themselves. This outcome may be reliant on a number of features and will encourage the whole team to take ownership over the outcome and the steps needed to get there. The team will know the outcome has been accomplished when the registration time is halved, not just when something specific is released.

Additionally, this approach prevents products from becoming heavy with features that users don’t want. Instead, the goal is to add value to the user, and this can sometimes even be accomplished by improving and building upon existing features or addressing problems in a non-technical way. Not every problem needs a new feature as a solution.

"A good roadmap is a strategic communications tool, a statement of intent and direction, and, done well, a way of rallying the whole organization around the key problems that must be solved to achieve your product vision."

Bruce McCarthy, Founder of Product Culture



The Importance of Data in Outcome Based Product Teams

It's the Product Team's responsibility to prioritise features that will add the most value to its users and therefore meet overarching business goals and the company vision. However, views on how to achieve those business targets may differ between different departments and seniorities. Often stakeholders and C suite executives can focus on the wrong metrics and become overly-reliant on churning out features, when the real value add sits somewhere else.

"All feedback is good feedback. But not all feedback needs to go on the roadmap."



Mohammed Sidat, Head of Product at ResponseTap

Getting all teams and decision makers in the business to work in alignment with each other is fundamental, and a lot of this comes down to communication. Whilst a roadmap might be produced for a 12-month period, it's important to sit down regularly, at least once a quarter with everyone involved in the Product, to revisit the desired positive business outcomes, map progress to date, and plan what needs to happen next to drive the product forwards again.

Product Leaders need to be prepared to showcase what features, tasks, and updates will happen (and in what order) and why this will help the business reach its targets and vision. To make this as tangible as possible, backing this up with real user data, statistics, and realistic numerical forecasts can really help match the thought processes of those senior business members.

"Data can be a really good weapon to challenge feature focused thinking. It can help justify what you have prioritised, why, and how."



Carla Jarrett, Head of Product at EcoOnline

How much data is too much data?

Whilst data can be a really great tool to justify past decisions, and advise future ones, presenting too much data can give off the impression that you are acting as a blocker to progress. That's why it's fundamental that you only choose and monitor KPIs and metrics that are relevant to your business goals and vision. You shouldn't be measuring everything. Every single KPI must link back to and impact a specific business objective.

If you're gathering open feedback from colleagues or users, it's important to stay on top of this regularly and where possible collate ideas into themes or trends so that the data doesn't become overwhelming.

Setting Effective OKR's

As alluded to above, data is a powerful tool in Product Development. It can help justify and direct decision making, help the prioritisation process, gain buy-in from key stakeholders, and ensure that the product is moving in the right development direction. However, this data is only useful if it is measuring the right things.

Many Product Leaders use the OKR framework (Objective: Key Result), but how can leaders make sure they are setting effective OKR's in the first place?

There are three straight forward questions you can ask yourself to draft out clear, structured OKRs:

1. Where do you need to go? The answer is your objective and should set out a clear destination.
2. How will you know you are making progress? The answers are your Key Results and should be measurable and easy to trace.
3. What will you do to get there? The answers are your initiatives and outline tasks and projects you will complete to achieve your Key Results.

Keeping your OKRs Relevant

If COVID has taught us anything, it's that things can change...fast.

As the socio-political, economic, and environmental landscapes change, this drives further change in consumer behaviour and expectations, digital and technological requirements, and business goals. With this in mind, it's clear that OKRs are also liable to change. They shouldn't be set and then just left as they are, because what was relevant 6 months ago, might not be relevant anymore. Business pain points, goals, and targets will also change so it's important to keep up.

"Before you start to look at which features are relevant and validating whether that's right, you need to take a step back and ask if your OKRs are still relevant."



Craig Mackay, Head of Product Management at dnata

Revisiting your OKRs on a frequent basis is so important to ensure everyone in the business is working towards the same common goal, and are constantly delivering value to users and the business in any given time frame.

Building your Outcome Driven Product Roadmap

1 ALIGN PRODUCT VISION, STRATEGY, AND OBJECTIVES

Your vision is the overarching goal. The strategy is the plan to bring that vision into reality. The objectives are clear, measurable goals that align with outcomes you are striving to achieve.

When creating these you must consider things like market and technological trends, competitive intelligence, the company's business model, unique differentiators, data insights, and what you want to achieve at different stages. Once all of this has been considered and crafted into the vision and strategy you need to set your objectives. The objectives should be specific, but also high level.

2 PRIORITISING YOUR ROADMAP

Use insights from users, prospective users, and colleagues, as well as capacity planning, and date-based milestones, to prioritise the products and features you will include on your roadmap. You'll be managing huge amounts of data and ideas from different parts of the business, but sitting down and prioritising the urgent and important tasks is fundamental to a clear, well-structured plan.

Finding a product prioritisation framework that works for your business can be really helpful in organising all of your insights and tasks

3 BUILD AND SUMMARISE THE ROADMAP

Create a working draft of your roadmap which includes a timeline, solutions, and strategic context, which when combined deliver an informative and easy-to-understand plan of what you are releasing, when they are being released, and why they are being released at that time.

4 COMMUNICATE YOUR ROADMAP

Internally you need to communicate the roadmap clearly in order to empower and excite everyone so that they rally around the projects and to keep up the momentum. You should be touching base regularly, either with email updates or catch-up calls. Everyone involved in the product lifecycle should be provided with a copy of the up-to-date roadmap and should always be notified when changes are made.

Stakeholders should also have access to the product roadmap, but what is different here is that it can be really useful to tailor product roadmaps to each stakeholder so that they really illustrate relevant values.

Stop Building, Start Problem Solving

Moving towards an outcome-based approach to roadmapping allows teams to focus on end results instead of specific deliverables. It also encourages a shift in mindset, so that team members stop believing that feature delivery is more important than outcome delivery. It allows Product teams to deliver based on user or customer data, and remain flexible and agile throughout delivery to ensure all features or updates that are shipped are relevant at that time. Your roadmap shouldn't be set in stone for 12 months at a time.

"When drafting a roadmap, the first couple of months should be relatively locked in in terms of what you will be delivering. After those initial two months, targets are liable to change depending on the environment at that time.



Mohammed Sidat, Head of Product at ResponseTap

If you lock in to a 1 or 2 year roadmap you are likely to end up turning into that feature factory where you are just churning out features and products based on what can quickly become an outdated plan. A roadmap that is tied to dates with little consideration for changes in the market is simply just a release plan, not a useful roadmap.

Whilst you definitely need a long-term view of where the product is heading, it's important to accept that it may change several times before you get there.

Essentially by shifting towards an outcome-based product roadmap, you usually end up delivering a more valuable product to the user, rather than a product that is laden with too many features which aren't needed.

Thank you to our Product Specialist collaborators Mohammed Sidat, Carla Jarrett, and Craig Mackay. If you have anything to add to this topic or are interested in featuring as one of our Product Specialists in future editions of our Product Top Tips, or attending future roundtables, events, and panel discussions, please contact riana.butler@maxwellbond.co.uk.



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