

Product Discovery and Execution

Mike Spotten

Product Discovery Advisor

Product Engineering Consultant

I am Mike Spotten

I've been building awesome products and leading product teams for over ten years.

Here's a breakdown of how I approach the question of what to build next.



Start with why

You **can not** build great products without a clear product vision.

This vision needs to be understood throughout your entire business and your team needs to understand the impact they are making towards reaching it, every day.

This is where you start. This is your why.

Keep your product vision and product strategy separate.

Vision is colonizing Mars. Strategy is the steps to launch the first shuttle. **Your vision informs your strategy.**

This allows for changes in strategy while keeping your team focused towards the vision.

Along with a clear product vision, you need **clearly defined goals**.

The best way to do this is to understand what success looks like for your customer and how you'll measure it.



Success is when your customer is successful

Before you can understand what success looks like for your customer you need to know who they are.

They could be internal, like Sales, or external, like people coming to your website.

The key is to **be specific about who they are** and what they want.

You need to know your customer better than anyone else.

Talk to them, observe them, study them.

Invite them to participate in the creation of your solutions.

You need to **understand the path that users are taking to achieve success**. This is their success funnel. Write it down.

Understand the journey that your other customers are taking and guide them back towards success. Follow the data.

This is not a one time thing and this is not one person's job.

What is your customer doing, thinking and feeling? This will evolve as your product evolves and must be a cyclical process.

Customer personas and empathy maps **allow for everyone on the team to solve from the customer's perspective.**



*A typical product roadmap intends to create clarity,
but often leads to disappointment*

The Old Way

The intention of a product roadmap is to create clarity as to everything that's coming and when to expect it.

The New Hotness

The intention of a product roadmap is to create clarity as to the product vision and what's coming **next**.

Let's be honest. **Engineering is unpredictable.**

By acting like it isn't you fall into a trap which creates stress and chaos throughout the organization predicated on missed dates.

Most roadmaps are feature based and come from internal stakeholders prioritizing their interests.

Instead, focus on your customer's needs, iteratively test your ideas by giving them something to experience, and talk to them about **benefits, not features.**

Hit your goals by following your vision, proclaiming the benefits your customers will receive and release when ready, not to hit a date.

In the long run this **saves time and improves culture.**

As a side note, Sales/Marketing may ask how they can plan anything in this new model.

Focus on customer success instead of code completion. It's a **better, more complete story** anyway.



*The way to get good ideas is to get lots of them,
then throw the bad ones away*

Your CEO had the next great idea. Sales heard from one customer that they really need feature x. The intern made a suggestion that seems like a good one.

Ideas should come from everywhere. But just like your goals, **idea generation needs to be targeted.**

Your product vision is your first filter for new ideas. Do the ideas align with your vision?

Then focus around your goals with details around what you are willing to do to get there. For example: budget, timing, resources.

Setting clear boundaries will generate better ideas.

Engage the whole company in idea generation. Great ideas can come from anywhere. **Everyone has a unique perspective.** Use that!

On top of that, more diverse ideas lead to better ideas and people build off one another.

Create a system to allow everyone to contribute and piggyback.

Individuals, on average, generate better ideas on their own, but a group is better at determining which ideas should be considered.

Whether you get in a room to discuss or hold a vote, involve everyone. **Define your criteria for idea selection** so no one feels slighted that their idea wasn't chosen.

And finally, **prioritize this list** based on your best guess at expected outcomes.

Which ideas will have the most impact upon your goal?



Move fast and learn things

This step is often skipped, because it doesn't feel like "work".
Only coding and designing are really work, right?

Most teams take the prioritized list and start building from top to bottom, but **there's a better way.**

Instead of building 5 features, 2 of which provide value, run a few simple experiments to determine **which features truly provide value.**

Oftentimes, product managers, like myself, want to skip this step because we've done it before and we "know" what works.

Things change and users adapt. You need to test.

Using your research and all those great ideas you've identified, **test the assumptions behind your ideas**, not the ideas themselves.

You can't test everything, so test the assumptions that have to be true to make your idea work.

Idea: Drive more users to a landing page to increase sign-ups.

Assumption: More traffic means more sign-ups.

Do the minimal amount of work needed to **test your hypothesis**.

Look at data you already have, observe your customers using similar products, split test designs, or run a survey.

Each has their own merits, depending on the hypothesis to be tested.



*\$1 in design saves \$6 in development
and \$100 after launch*

Your experimentation has provided you greater confidence in what to build, which is way better than building everything.

Create an MVP (Minimum Viable Product) first. This is not always the quickest, easiest product.

MVP is the smallest product that validates your biggest assumption.

Before writing a single line of code, run through at least two iterations of a design, getting feedback from your customers. Simple wires are a good starting point.

This has been **proven to increase usability** of products significantly. And more iterations on design add more value.

During all stages of discovery and design, **engineering needs to be intimately involved.**

This is so important.

The requirements of the MVP are the beginning of a conversation. That conversation should continue to occur **on a daily basis** tying UX, design and technical challenges together in order to adjust as needed and build rapidly and without major backtracking.



*A change that does not improve your metrics
adds complexity debt that must be paid
on all future projects*

Your goal was based on what success looks like to your customer. Now **you need to prove it.**

This might be confusing. You might be asking, didn't we prove that through our experiments and iterative design?

No, you simply gave yourself a better chance to be right. You stacked the deck in your favor to optimize your time.

And, I hate to say it, but **you're going to be wrong**, a lot. That's a good thing, celebrate it and then adjust based on your customer feedback. Then iterate to try to fix it or move on to the next idea.

You know how to do that by setting clear benchmarks and next steps before launch. We're very good at convincing ourselves that data is good after the fact, even when it didn't hit our threshold.

Build. Measure. Learn. Repeat.

When you've reached the goal you've laid out for this product or feature and it's **providing incredible value** like you thought it would, then it's time to move it into maintenance mode.

And start the process over with your next feature.

- » Clear Vision
- » Understanding Your Users
- » Goal Based Roadmap
- » Generate (More) Ideas
- » Experiment
- » Build
- » Measure Success

THANKS!

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Any questions?

You can find me at:

- » mspotten@gmail.com
- » 410.206.7800
- » [LinkedIn](#)



Appendix

These are some of my favorite resources that talk about this new way to treat building businesses and products.

Start With Why

Simon Sinek

Decisive

Chip & Dan Heath

Product Talk

Teresa Torres

Four Steps to the Epiphany

Steve Blank

The Lean Startup

Eric Ries

Lean Series (UX, Analytics, Running)

Various Authors

Hooked

Nir Eyal

uxmag.com

A lot of people think they are doing all of these things (or most of them).
Are you really?

The Traditional Way

- A long list of ideas, initiatives and projects that's updated yearly, quarterly or monthly
- Experts that can be the voice of the customer
- Ideas coming from a few sources
- Agile with limited feedback loops

- Engineering given a PRD and expected to build in a vacuum

The Modern Way

- A focused list around a clear goal that's updated continuously
- Across entire company have a rich, shared understanding of our customer's world
- Ideas coming from everywhere
- Agile/Lean with constant customer and product/engineering conversations
- Engineering as part of the discovery process and having a full grasp of WHY