



Why Product Management Should be the Steward of Quality for Your Organization

By Jonathan Hotz

Is there a role where quality is not essential? Whether for personal satisfaction, or as a requirement of your job description, we should strive to deliver quality in our work. In my first role as a graphic designer, I needed to send some business card designs to the printer, and I overlooked the quality check and sent the design off. When we received the cards back, one person's card did not have the correct title, and so we had to correct the mistake and send it back to the printer, all of which cost us extra time and money. As I transitioned over the years to product manager and then to product director roles, that experience has stuck with me as a reminder to take a little extra time to make that quality check.

Not every organization or team has someone responsible for the quality of a larger body of work, acts as the steward of quality, or even advocates for quality. As a product manager, I needed to ensure the stories I delivered to the development team were high quality. And now as a product director, I need to ensure the roadmap and product strategy are of high quality. **But we need to lift the focus of quality to the whole product**, and not just on the individual parts. Given that the product management team is in touch with all the departments of a company – Marketing, Engineering, Sales, Customer Success, Support – it is the ideal team for this responsibility.



Product Management's Goal

The goal of product management is to define the product vision, create a strategy to support that vision, and to deliver a product that aligns to the strategy. The product strategy is informed by understanding the users' needs, the market's potential opportunities, and the organization's business direction.

- User research, achieved through interviews, analysis of site usage, and the development of personas, helps product managers to identify pain points and ways to delight the users, which ultimately coalesce into a set of needs that can be met
- Market analysis, incorporating input from sales, marketing, and competitive research, shows a product manager general trends or opportunities that exist in the market
- The organization will have specific financial and growth targets, and the product will need to support that direction

All of these come together in a strategic plan for the product, which is then communicated to all parts of the organization, so everyone can align to that plan.

How do we know if we're successful? At a basic level, a product is successful if people want to use it, and it provides revenue to the organization. But does that then make product management successful? There are many areas that build up to a successful product and are directly responsible for the success: understanding the user, ideating product solutions, determining feasible solutions, communicating outcomes to development teams, creating product launch plans, and ensuring teams are aligned with the launch plans. And at its core, if the needs are being met, then we have a quality product.

Coordinating Across the Organization

Product management leads and coordinates all these areas, and we need to deliver quality in our work, so it makes sense then the product management team should be the steward of quality for the product and for the organization. This could take on a very formal manifestation – at a prior company, I signed off on each release stating that it was ready for deployment, or I made the call to delay the release – or it could be more informal by ensuring that each team has a way to measure the quality of their work and is coordinating with each other. In an Agile environment, the latter is more prevalent and beneficial, but you still need someone to bring it all together.

In most organizations, and especially in an Agile environment, Product management is the last gate before a feature or release goes into production. This does not mean you have to implement a formal sign-off by the product manager, but it does suggest that product management should be involved throughout the release. We have the best understanding of the user's needs and whether the release will deliver value to the user.

And it's not just about whether the feature is ready, but it's also whether the organization is ready. A release is more than simply putting code into production, because all the parts of the organization need to be ready for the release. For example, Marketing has the information for their materials, Sales is briefed on the advantages and benefits of the new feature, Customer Support is ready for questions about the feature, and Operations is ready for any potential spikes in traffic. Product management is involved with communicating to each of these groups, and the decision to release includes both the product and the organization.

Product Management as Steward

Each of us wants to deliver quality in our work and wants our product and organization to succeed. Establishing product management as the steward of quality for the organization does not lift the burden of quality from everyone else, rather it helps elevate quality across the entire organization.

As a product manager, take some time to step back from your day-to-day, and ensure you have these in place to deliver a quality strategic plan:

1. User research – do you understand the needs of the users?
2. Market analysis – what opportunities are out there?
3. Product ideation – don't stop with the first solution you find
4. Business alignment – what are the financial or growth targets?
5. Product launch – which groups have a stake in the release?

Once you have these in place, you can then focus on improving the quality, and in the next article I'll describe some ways to measure and improve the quality of your product.