



BRANDING:

# THE OTHER HALF OF YOUR GO-



# TO-MARKET JOURNEY

BY JUSTIN TOPLIFF

**T**HE OLD ADAGE THAT GOOD MARKETING CAN'T SELL A BAD PRODUCT is true. I've seen brands throw millions of marketing dollars at products that ultimately flopped.

As product professionals, we internalize this lesson and combat its occurrence by taking an outside-in approach when it comes to product development. But what about the inverse of that adage? Have you ever considered that good products can't sell themselves? And that bad marketing or branding could sabotage the success of your products?

Product/market fit defines the degree to which your product *could* be successful. Marc Andreessen famously claimed, "The only thing that matters is getting to product/market fit." Those of us who have read *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries or gone through Pragmatic Marketing certifications know that fully understanding your customers and solving their needs is paramount to product success.

But after you've done that and reached product/market fit, what do you do next? Getting to product/market fit is only half the battle. Breakdowns occur when little thought is given to customer/message fit and how to talk about that product and its brand.

Here's the deal: Almost everyone has no idea they want your product. Aside from the customers you interviewed to discover market problems and develop product requirements, the rest of the world has never heard about your product. It could be code complete, launched and available, but it needs a soul to come to life. It needs a distinguishing brand of its own and alignment with your company's brand.

This branding dictates perception and crafts a buyer's emotional experience with your product. Branding is what claims real estate in the buyer's mind. Without branding to evoke that emotion, the buyer would have no desire to actually try your product, let alone purchase it. Ultimately, buying decisions boil down to emotion, and branding is one of the few tools that can influence the emotions of a buyer on first contact with your company and its products.

## BRAND AND PRODUCT ARE DIFFERENT BUT MUST ALIGN

While products fulfill a customer's *needs*, brands fulfill a customer's *wants*. A product's ingredients are functionalities and features that satisfy needs. A brand's ingredients are promises and emotions that satisfy wants. Your customers may need a product or a solution, but they want and are drawn to the brand providing that product.

For example, I may need an airplane ticket to visit family, but I want a no-hassle experience. For this reason, I may be drawn to purchase from Southwest Airlines, a brand known for charging no fees for checked bags, itinerary changes, etc. The product is similar to that of other airlines: a plane, seats,

overhead bins. But the no-hassle brand enveloping the product is what differentiates it from other similar products and attracts buyers based on their emotional response (in this case, perhaps their hatred for being nickel-and-dimed by other airlines).

Customers initially buy into a brand and its promise, not a product. No customer looks at lines of code and says, "Yes, this is what I need." They interact with a brand that humanizes and personifies that code through value-based messaging that resonates.

Bridging the gap or playing translator between brand and product is the specialty of product marketing. While it's important to build useful products that satisfy customers' needs, equally critical is to understand what customers want and translate the value of our products into their language. If the product team ignores the brand promises while building the product, or marketing ignores the product's abilities while

making brand promises, you are destined to fail. Brand and product are sisters, not enemies.

Companies with strong brands and products that deliver on that brand enjoy better sales-funnel metrics, higher revenues and a deeper connection

with customers yielding stronger engagement and advocacy. So, the million-dollar question is, "How do I succeed in achieving customer/message fit and uniting my product with my brand?"

## THE BRAND EXPERIENCE IS THE SUM OF ALL PARTS

Branding isn't about slapping logos all over everything anymore. It's about considering all customer touchpoints. At every point of interaction with your company and its product, customers must receive a congruent brand experience. Many companies fail to realize that details matter here.

For instance, Starbucks' brand is about community and bringing people together in a neighborhood café, not coffee. If you're trying to deliver on the Starbucks brand promise, coffee is only one piece of the puzzle, and focusing only on it would be shortsighted. What about the customers' experience when they visit the physical location to get their coffee? Does the space feel like home, with artwork and comfy furniture, or like the department of motor vehicles? Are the baristas friendly? Did they write a favorite drink on the chalkboard to foster a sense of connection?

As a product organization, are you paying attention to all parts? Do all areas of your product experience, beyond the code, support your company's brand? Customer experience must be

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congruent with brand promise; any breaks in these areas will erode the perception of your brand. And when that happens, customers leave.

### BE CUSTOMER-DRIVEN WHEN CRAFTING YOUR BRAND IDENTITY

The best brands are based on values, benefits or the innovation you're producing. But it's a complicated, noisy world. To brand products properly, brand builders, technologists and designers need to partner in innovation.

An example of success is the brand Apple created for their mid-2000s Macs through the "I'm a Mac/I'm a PC" campaign. From a branding standpoint, what did they do differently than their competitors? They didn't center their brand on the product,



## Customers stick with brands and products that deliver on their promises.

they centered it on the customer experience. Their brand wasn't "here's our awesome computer with this long list of technical specs that you don't understand," it was "here's the delightful experience you will enjoy if you own a Mac, compared to the one you will hate if you own a PC."

They brought to life their product's brand promise of delight and simplicity with humorous videos. Actors played the parts of a Mac and PC and acted out the contrasting experiences. The actual product only appeared in the video for a few seconds at the end. Apple realized they weren't selling a computer, they were selling a user experience—a way of life that came with owning a Mac. Not only was this a better and easier thing to sell, it was a brand that people could immediately relate to.

Apple took the time to understand their buyers and the problems they encountered. By taking this outside-in approach, the brand they created for their product achieved customer/message fit. The brand was integral to the experience of the product, and vice-versa. To this day, few product brands remain as memorable or as successful in minting lifetime evangelists and contributing to company/market fit.

### EXAMINE THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCT AND MARKETING

Being customer- and market-driven shouldn't be a mantra limited to product development. I'm always surprised at how many marketing departments have not done customer research or leveraged the research already done as part of product development. Most marketing departments hedge their

bets through A/B testing, but this step could be even more successful with some up-front research.

Does your marketing team know as much about your customers as you do? When is the last time your marketing department got out of the building and spent time with customers? Or the last time you passed along your customer research to them? Knowing the pains of your customers can halve the amount of time they spend A/B testing their way to customer/message fit.

Persona documents are useful here, as are interview notes or any qualitative responses around customer problems you have from larger research projects. Product marketing can champion this information between product and marketing. If you don't have a product marketing team, encourage your marketing department to get out of the office and spend time with customers directly.

### DELIVER ON YOUR COMPANY'S BRAND PROMISE

Your brand, and every piece of messaging attached to it, helps you control perception in the marketplace. It's everyone's responsibility to ensure that the message and brand your company uses is consistent across all channels, assets and communications. This doesn't stop with sales and marketing materials. Messaging lives everywhere: tooltips in your products, verbal call scripts, billing reminders, etc. It all must be consistent. Your brand is the sum of all parts of the experience spanning the customer lifecycle.

As a product leader, take ownership of your portion of this responsibility. Consider the macro and micro touchpoints your customers have with your product.

Do your product's sign-up experience, onboarding sequence, product emails and in-app alerts match your company's brand?

If any customer touchpoint is incongruent with your brand, it will show. Sweat the small stuff here because it matters. Nobody goes to Ruth's Chris Steak House to eat on paper plates. If something is wrong, fix it quickly and educate that team or area of the company on the importance of delivering on brand promises over the entire customer lifecycle. Be a brand champion by fighting for brand integrity across everything you own.

At the end of the day, customers stick with brands and products that deliver on their promises. Branding is what initially brings awareness to your product and convinces buyers to purchase. Your product delivering on its brand promise is what makes customers stay.

Don't underestimate how important the relationship between brand and product is to your company's success. The good news is that being successful here is easy. So long as branding—and everything else—is developed from an outside-in approach, congruity is almost certain. **PM**



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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