Stanford eCorner

Product Development: Importance of Customers and Testing

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October 23, 2002

Video URL: http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/59/Product-Development-Importance-of-Customers-and-Testing

I never had a technology company, says Hawkins. He believes that products come out of product marketing people who really love and understand products. He asks his employees to use competitor products to learn something from them. The focus should be on what people want and what they need, rather than only on technology.To build a successful product one has to innovate continuously, focusing on what people do and not what they say. And if you build a product, use the thing yourself.

Transcript

Don't come out of engineering. I never had a technology company. I never considered Palm or Handspring technology companies. The product definition or product feature sets do not come out of engineering. If there someone in engineering who's really good at this, fine. But really they come out of product marketing. And our product marketing people are more than just the classic marketing. Their people really love products and they understand products. And they take apart products. So for example, we buy all of our competitors' products.

And we use them. We force ourselves to use them even if they're bad. They're really terrible. My associate, Rob Hitani, use to say, "There's no product that sucks so bad, you can't learn something from it." So, we would use everything. And try it out and see what works. There's noting like actually using the product. In terms of like the Palm Pilot, when we did that, the engineers thought it was the stupidest thing they ever heard of. They said, "Who wants to use this thing? Why would we even build this thing?" I said, "Look, you don't have enough friends to need this thing, right?" I didn't say that. But it's in the back of my mind. I was thinking it.

So, I ignored that, right? But then I'm listening to the lady who says, "Oh, I can't keep my schedules organized." Like, "Yeah, that's the first one I want to solve." These are not technology driven products. We never focus on technology. A lot of our competitors do. As long as you're really innovating, I don't believe that's a successful way of doing it. When products stagnate then there's feature-creep thing. At first, when someone goes to the store they say, "Oh, I guess I'll buy this one because this has got three heads and this one only has two heads." Or something like that. But if you can really make differentiated products then don't do the feature-creep. Don't let the people tell you what to put into them. Be very honest to what you're trying to accomplish. Look at what people do, not what they say.

And use the things yourself. And then you'll know what stupid things to get in there.