



Stanford eCorner

Designing Products Your Customers' Customers Will Love

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The Hiptop founders designed the product in the way that was the most appealing to them. They had strong convictions about what the product should look like and the things it should do, which were not necessarily the same ideas the carriers had. However, the innovative design won them over.



Transcript

I think we had an especially hard time because we had a lot of convictions about what the product should look like and what kinds of things it should do. And those convictions weren't necessarily the same ones that our direct customer, the carriers, had. They were still in love with WAP and MMS and SMS and wanted us to build another device just like all the other devices on the planet, whereas we felt like it was more important that it be more like a little tiny computer and that it have a really-- From an internet standpoint. From an internet point of view. And that it have a really cool industrial design. You see a lot of this in rap videos, too, now. And a lot of it is because of the functionality and a lot of it is just because it's a cool-looking product. People like having it. They're able to impress their friends with it. And so we were able to-- Can you do the flip thing again? Which one? This one? Yeah.

Yeah. You're good at that, you do it a lot. I taught a two-year-old how to do it, actually. Then there's also the one like that. You know, going with kind of what Matt was talking about, understanding what your customers are going to want. Sometimes it's understanding what your customers' customers are going to want. And it's being able to have a strong sort of passionate feeling about what it is that you actually need to build that's going to turn them on. Nobody told us, "Pull a flip screen on." Nobody told us to make the wheel light up different colors. Those were all things that we just felt like would make the product more appealing to us. And that's a dangerous line to walk, too, right? I mean, you don't want to build a product that's just appealing to you because you might be the only person like that.

And a lot of the experience from places like Apple and WebTV and General Magic, I think, helped temper those kinds of passions, so we would try to step back a little bit and think about things in a bigger way. But you have to act with conviction. I mean, it's not sort of the lowest common denominator. It's what you feel really strongly about, and that's really important because as hard as you're going to work, you better feel strongly about what you're going to undertake. So that's another thing which really delights me about the product is a reflection of the passion that people had who created it. And there are a lot of things which are maybe out, really visible in terms of, say, like the flip and the flashing wheel, but even just sort of the look and feel and some of the features that engineers just would decide, "OK, I want this in there. I'm going to make it happen. Stay the night, stay the weekend, just get it in there." And that's part of why the product, I think, is so great is because there's a lot of that in there. And being a contributor, being an entrepreneur, or an engineer, whatever it is that contributes to consumer

products, it's part of the fascination for me about consumer products because it touches people. And you can write a piece of software design or a piece of hardware that delights people, and that's magical when you see people actually latch on to it.

There's been some really bad ideas, but if you have 50 bad ideas and one idea delights somebody, it's pretty cool. I think it's also about continuing to delight. When we first launched this thing, before anybody else saw it, they would see it and they would say, "Hmm, you know, it looks kind of like a soap bar." And then you would do this, and the first time we did that was at the Demo Mobile conference in Twin Pines. And the whole room just erupted in applause because nobody have ever seen anything like that before. It was the very first time--any other device would have been a slab or would have had some kind of clam shell design. So you start out with that. That's the hook. And they're like, "Oh, what is that?" and then they start looking a little bit closer and then they realize, "Oh, the software looks pretty cool." You start to find out more and more what I call 'surprises within surprises' about the product that I think are very important for a consumer product. You know, if you're building something for enterprise, it's not so important. It's mainly a tool to-- It's like an R&I kind of equation.

They're like, "You have to make more money or we are going to buy it." Well, the Blackberry, for example. That's not a tool for fun. That's a tool to keep your boss from yelling at you. You want to make sure that you know what's going on back in the office. But Hiptop, it's more of an extension of what you enjoy doing on your computer for fun: communicating with friends and family and doing it in a graphical, entertaining way. And that goes back to the conviction of, what should this product be? Well, a lot of people wanted us to build another Blackberry because Blackberry at the time was very successful, and all the VCs carry Blackberrys so of course they would want us to start a company to build another version of that thing that they understood really well. And that's another example of how it could be a conviction that maybe your investors don't fully understand, either, that you have to keep explaining to them over and over again. Or you can keep looking for investors.