



Stanford eCorner

Are You Building Products Customer Want?

Jessica Mah, *inDinero*

November 30, 2011

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2853/Are-You-Building-Products-Customer-Want>

"What customers want isn't necessarily what you or your engineering team wants to build," says Jessica Mah, co-founder of inDinero. Mah relates her company's early struggles in aligning the desires of the engineering team with customer feedback and requests for features.



Transcript

So, you got the \$1 million, you got some helpful investors. You start hiring people. What were those people supposed to be doing? They were supposed to be programming and building product. Okay. And, building product for who? Building product for the customer and huge issue here was engineers as I'm sure all of us know, just really, like, filling elegant code and refactoring a lot and making it really fast and this was a huge debate and problem within my own company. I always wanted to just build lots of features for the customers and a few of my engineers just wanted to make a really beautiful code base and that's just not what customers want. And so, what did you find out and how did you find out what customers want? We got out of the building as your book told us to do and.... If I was smart, I'd have the book here 'Four Steps to the Epiphany' available on Amazon.com, but no - but I won't say that, no. It was one of - it was one of the only books I read about that first summer when we started the company. I read through Eric Ries' blog.

He is another great entrepreneur and I.... The Lean Startup by Eric Ries, worth buying? And, I read through Four Steps to the Epiphany and that was actually our biggest concern because my co-founder and I, like, we had this great CS background, but we didn't really know how to build useful products that made money. So, we decided to set up a very strict schedule for ourselves. Every Friday, we would get out of the building and watch people use the product and - even if there were still more features we wanted to build before we saw people use it. We found out that each customer led to a completely different set of insights that we wouldn't have gotten from past customers and we couldn't just do it for 10 or 20 or 30 people. We had to survey dozens and dozens and dozens of customers to really figure out what we're going to build. Wow. And so, what did you learn? What was the - I mean, this sounds perfect, right? I mean, nothing could go wrong. Well, I mean we find out that a bunch of the features you build they are not using. You find out that you wasted your time on just thinking about a product roadmap that doesn't make sense, so like one thing we learned early on was not to plan three or six months in advance because by doing these customer surveys, we found out that they urgently needed XYZ feature that we just didn't have in our plan.

So, we had to be really flexible and now we only plan like two or weeks out. So, isn't that short-term vision in conflict of having a long-term vision for the company? I don't think they necessarily are. How so? Like we have a long-term, very high level broad vision; we want to help every business owner better manage and improve their finances and whether that means going down the path of building accounting software or replacing, looking for some accountants or whatever, that's just a high level vision. But, the low level of how to get there is the hard part. And, did that cause any conflict with engineering of who wanted to build this perfect code? Yeah, it's really tough because what customers want isn't necessarily what you or your engineering team wants to build, like some of these features are really, really, really unsexy like financial statements and stuff; I think they are awesome. But, like, they are not necessarily that exciting.