



Stanford eCorner

Customer Requests and Engineering Trade-offs

Drew Houston, *Dropbox*

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Dropbox Co-Founder Drew Houston articulates why one of the biggest challenges his company faces is deciding the order in which to build features or fix problems. Houston shares insights from his company's experiences interacting with customer requests for changes, and the considerations that come into play when making decisions on these requests.



Transcript

So the question is, are the things that seemed like a promising path that we decided not to do, there are all kinds of things. I mean that is almost the essence of what makes the job difficult. There is these thousands of things that we could go do, and all these shiny objects and usually most of the things, we look back on and like that was a dead end, a lot of them, we tried to get Dropbox sort of preinstalled on PCs, and all these different things and do deals very early on, and the problem was just sort of classic negotiation, we had no leverage. So they're going to just push us around, they made all these ridiculous demands, and we kind of, it's like harpooning this whale, it is like taking you all over the place. And now it's a completely different story, we have a big audience and a brand and all these different things, but, yeah I will give you an example. The number one thing our users are, more power users ask for, which is the ability to watch multiple folders with your Dropbox. And they're like why, you guys can see it on Votebox, which is our - our sort of way of, that we let our users vote on different features that they want and make requests, like why the hell haven't you guys let me - why don't you let me watch multiple folders because I want to watch my documents, I want to watch, map all these different things, and the reason is, well the initial reason was like, we built something simple because we didn't have time to build something complicated. So, it was more technically complicated, there was a lot of UI code, there was all this different stuff, that I would have had to go - I would have gone and had, have built and we just didn't have time to build it because we wanted to get something out the door. But then we realized this is this great benefit to the simplicity of the model where your Dropbox will look the same on your phone as it does it on your computer and it's pretty easy to explain to people that you have this magic folder and anything you save in here saves everywhere and all these different benefits and conventionally, playing with the other products is sort of like, well welcome into this and please configure your folder mapping and some people love that and that's great. But most people are very, very confused and if you're already skeptical enough that here's this like new thing that you've never seen before and now they're asking you about folder mappings and you know you don't spend your time worrying about folders and files and things like that, and you're going to be pretty turned off.

And we would find, when we did the usability test, people couldn't even figure out how to install Dropbox to begin with, like they would - we brought five people in literally off the street and keep zero of five, we kept a tally of all these things, zero out of five people even discovered that there is a tray icon or a little menu bar icon. And if you don't know that then you're going to have a lot of trouble getting back to your Dropbox folder and all kinds of other things, you'll not going to have a good experience and we were like wow zero percent. All right, because they get these emails, we get these emails to feedback to our feedback alias and one would be like, oh my god, Dropbox is amazing, I love it; and the next one would be like, I don't understand how you MIT nerds have - I got a PhD in physics, so I can't even understand this thing and there is like this diatribe like one right after the other. And we were like that's interesting and so we brought people in off the street and then we started seeing all these things, like okay the people are clicking, the screenshots in the tour because they think it's their computer. Well, you know you laugh but it's actually our problem right, these are people that, that would be paying us if they actually have

a got experience. And all kind of it, they would click on Internet Explorer and it would obscure the download window, so they couldn't figure out where the download actually went. I mean it's just a list of dozens and dozens and dozens of things and we just sanded them down, we were just like, okay, well we're going to get to thing number 71 today and that, now if you actually install Dropbox you see this big bouncing green arrow whenever you - hey, this is the icon you have to click on to get to your Dropbox and so kind of a long answer to, it's amazing even just like 10% more friction might cut your audience in half and it's exponential. So we decided that it just was not worth the complexity to build that and just wasn't worth the engineering tradeoff.