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4 Steps to Creating Great Products for Each of Your Customers

For years, companies have been challenged to develop products with broad yet highly personalized appeal. Mini Coopers, Android phones and Nike ID sneakers are just some examples of customers being able to customize what they want. And there's a good reason why companies are embracing personalization. According to Forrester, "The level and quality of personalized experiences will be a key determinant in who wins mindshare and share of wallet."

For many companies in engineer-to-order or build-to-order industries – including high-tech manufacturing, automotive equipment and specialty foods – mass-customized products are irrelevant. In facts, their products are made for just a single customer. When it comes to developing a single product for a single customer, how companies build products varies widely from the development of mass produced products. Holding focus groups, collecting ideas from thousands of customers, and balancing priorities across multiple customers is unnecessary when there's just a single customer with defined requirements.
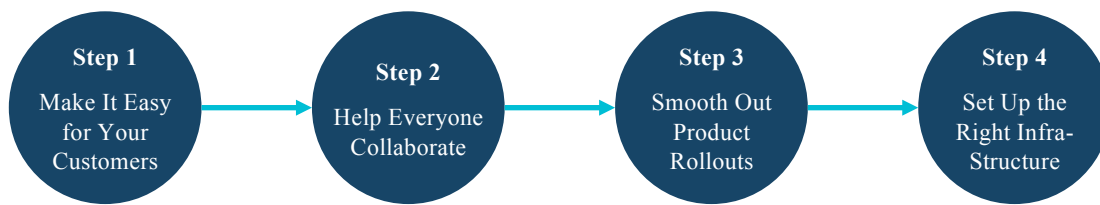
For example, suppose Peak Products is a high-tech manufacturer that develops custom touchscreen devices for retailers, airlines and banks. Each of Peak's customers will likely have their own set of requirements for the type of touchscreen they need Peak Products to create. What's critical for Peak is to figure out which requirements and features they can realistically deliver within the customer's time and cost objectives. In order to do this, Peak Products and other companies that do custom development need to:

- Reduce product costs by helping customers, engineers and others find, reuse and edit similar products

- Streamline development and rollouts by collaborating externally and internally

- Eliminate errors by managing changes to products, requirements, files, etc.

- Reduce project delays by tracking tasks and timelines

Step 1: Make It Easy for Customers

The first step in delivering custom products is making the entire customer experience as seamless and easy as possible. One of the most important yet overlooked things that companies should do is making it as easy as possible to find a potential product fit. When customers are first interested in having you provide a new product, how easy is it for them to find out if you make something that's close to meeting their requirements?

For potential customers, it should be easy for them to browse your product portfolio and see if your company makes similar products to what they're looking for. How easy is it for prospects to search for products on your website? Can they see customers who have worked on similar products as them? For existing customers, they typically know what your company can do, so it's more important to keep them up to date on your evolving capabilities or new products.

Step 1	**Step 2**	**Step 3**	**Step 4**
Make It Easy for Your Customers	Help Everyone Collaborate	Smooth Out Product Rollouts	Set Up the Right Infra-Structure

To develop and deliver great products specifically designed for a specific customer, companies should follow four key steps.

Once customers find a potential product match, you need to make it easy for them to submit a custom development request or contact a company representative. How is that information captured? Is it something that can be easily shared across internal teams, or does it get worked on through emails? You should make sure you have an easy way for them to submit their request – whether it be a phone call, web inquiry or access to a customer portal.

Step 2: Help Everyone Collaborate on Product Development

There have countless books, software apps and companies that have been created to help improve product development. However, while most companies have done a good job in improving how hardware engineers, software developers, quality and manufacturing should work together, there has been much less focus on how companies should work with their customers to develop custom products. Once a customer has submitted their product requirements, how do you work with them to refine their requirements, coordinate updates and get their approvals? Many companies will do weekly status calls and email correspondence with their customers, but those methods are cumbersome and ad hoc at best.

All those best practices, software apps and processes that apply to internal product development should be extended whenever possible to customers as well. As you develop products, it's important to keep customers in the loop, as real-time as possible, so development can be faster, products can be more on target, and customers can be happier. Some considerations for customer involvement include:

- Product updates: systems like Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) have been used to keep engineering groups in sync, but those same capabilities should extend to customers, so they can participate in the development process. After all, the product is being made for them in the first place. You should allow customers to be able to do product redlines, create revisions, update files, etc.

- Tasks and timelines: Project Portfolio Management (PPM) systems have been used to a greater degree with customers than PLM to keep everyone on the same page with respect to timelines and tasks. However, the separation of PPM from PLM has typically caused lower productivity, potential errors and communication issues. For successful custom development, you need to make sure that project tasks, timelines, product updates, and deliverables are all tied together.

- Collaboration, approvals and notifications: of course, it's critical to ensure customers and every other stakeholder gets prompt notifications when things change or when they need to approve changes. Threaded discussions are also a great way to discuss things with customers in a much more rapid and informal fashion as well.

Step 3: Smooth Out Your Product Rollouts

No matter how great your development team, it doesn't matter if you can't properly roll out products in the field. Most companies focus on supply chain and distribution, but it's also critical to focus on all the other stakeholders that make products a success. If products require some set-up, you need to get installers trained on the appropriate procedures. The same goes for field service partners. They need to be trained and ready to deal with potential product issues during beta testing, pilot and production. Keeping all partners up to date on the latest product specs, timelines and procedures is critical for success.

> " The level and quality of personalized experiences will be a key determinant in who wins mindshare and share of wallet. "
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> – Forrester Research, *Top 10 Critical Success Factors To Determine Who Wins And Who Fails In The Age Of The Customer,* 2016

Success Plan for Custom Development Firms

- **Reduce product costs** by helping customers, engineers and others find, reuse and edit similar products
- **Streamline development and rollouts** by collaborating externally and internally
- **Eliminate errors** by managing changes to products, requirements, files, etc.
- **Reduce project delays** by tracking tasks and timelines

Step 4: Set Up the Right Infrastructure

Making custom product development as smooth as possible for customers is sometimes easier said than done. Technology limitations have hindered both legacy on-premises tools and some cloud technologies. In order to really involve customers throughout your custom development process, you should have the following technical infrastructure in place:

- Easy external access: whatever technologies you embrace, you need to make sure that it's super easy for customers and partners to access the system. Having easy to configure roles and privileges is essential, so you can facilitate collaboration while ensuring the right information stays secure and private. For casual users (like some partners), you may need to use a portal versus a dedicated website login.

- Single platform with easy integration: if you're trying to manage customer, product and partner information in one place, make sure your technologies either share a common platform or can easily integrate with disparate platforms.

- Flexibility: you need to make sure your technologies can keep up with you as your customers, products and business change. Make sure that your infrastructure won't lock you in.

- Scalability and reliability: one of the last things you want is to have a customer-accessible system go down, so you need to make sure that your technologies are highly reliable.

- Mobile: everyone is always on the go, so make sure customers can access the information they need, no matter what device they're using, no matter where they are.

Summary

Developing custom products requires a laser focus on your customer. By ensuring they're involved throughout the development process, you'll have a much happier customer with more targeted products delivered faster. Bring your customer into the fold, make it easy for them to provide a voice, and you'll both be rewarded with market success.

Further Reading

Visit the Propel website at www.propelplm.com for more information and guidelines on customer-centric innovation and collaborative solutions for product development and product launch built on a cloud platform.