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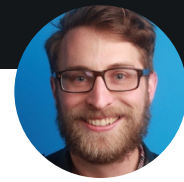Forrester Research, Guest

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navigating the ups & downs of digital product creation and maturity

Key product milestones, best practices, and actionable advice to advance your company's digital product maturity

A RECAP OF BOTTLE ROCKET'S LATEST WEBINAR FEATURING FORRESTER RESEARCH

What are the key phases and milestones of good digital product creation?

Once you've identified a broad user need and decided to address it by creating a digital product, you begin a series of many rapid iterations that advance through four major phases:

Inception → Incubation → Evolution → Extinction

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Each iteration involves 1) prioritizing what problem to try to solve first, 2) making a tangible solution candidate, 3) testing it with users, and then 4) adapting or course-correcting it based on your test findings. Let's walk through the four major phases.

Inception is when the idea is still rudimentary and the aim is to verify feasibility . It's not yet mature enough to show to members of the target audience to try. It's merely mature enough for internal stakeholders, who stand in as proxies for the target audience. These iterations are sometimes called alphas, and numbered alpha 1, alpha 2, etc.. The internal stakeholders who try them are sometimes called alpha testers. Inception ends when the alpha testers believe the experience can deliver value to customers that's minimal but sufficiently complete in itself and is stable. To find out whether their belief is correct, they advance to the incubation phase.

Incubation is when you establish desirability by gauging how well the experience meets the needs of the target audience. The early iterations in this phase are often restricted to a subset of the target audience who opt in, knowing the experience is in its infancy. These iterations are also often less feature rich or could incorporate user testing with small audiences using low fidelity prototypes to avoid over-investing in optimizing — for example, in optimizing interaction flows, content, appearance, speed, and scalability — since that effort may be wasted if the experience turns out to be off the mark. In later incubation iterations, you expand to more users and add additional functionality

This is a recap of the Bottle Rocket webinar featuring Forrester Research that occurred on June 13. You may also watch a recap of the webinar here:

Experiences in this phase are sometimes called betas and are numbered beta 1, beta 2, etc. And the external users who try them are sometimes called beta testers. Incubation ends when beta testers believe the experience is complete enough to deliver value and is stable. This is the stage when the experience is often called an MVP or MLP.

Evolution begins after you've launched the product and it's time to begin formulating the next hypothesis about how to make major improvements to the experience. At this stage, the experience is often called a general release, in contrast with the alphas and the betas. This first general release is a risky transition: Some companies make the mistake at this point of shifting most of their resources to a new effort but that disrupts users who loyally tolerated an immature experience, so it hurts the business because it undermines their loyalty.

Extinction is the phase when significant changes in users' needs, evolutions in technology, or major market disruptions make the product no longer relevant and therefore lose its viability. That means it's time to withdraw it from the market so that you can focus on the products in your portfolio that are in the any of the first three phases.


What factors are so crucial that they apply across the board, whatever phase you're in?

The three most important factors are desirability, feasibility, and viability. Their relative importance varies from one phase to the next but all three of them are crucial throughout. The goal, for digital product success, is to hit the "sweet spot" intersection between the three:

Desirability naturally comes to mind first because the whole reason you are creating the product in the first place is because, at the start, you identified a need your target audience has and you have an idea for a product you think they will find desirable enough to spend money on it. Otherwise, there's no business justification for even attempting it.

Feasibility is crucial, too, though — it's about whether it's technically possible for you to make the product work. For example, you may be convinced that your target audience wants flying carpets — but if it's not technically possible to make them, then the idea is a miss in terms of feasibility and you need to generate other ideas for how to address that audience's need for transportation!

Viability is critical because it's about profitability. So it's partly dependent on desirability: how much people will be willing to pay for the product. And it's partly dependent on feasibility: how much it will cost your organization to deliver the product at scale over time. The right mix of the two can vary over time depending on your company strategy and growth stage but viability is fundamental.
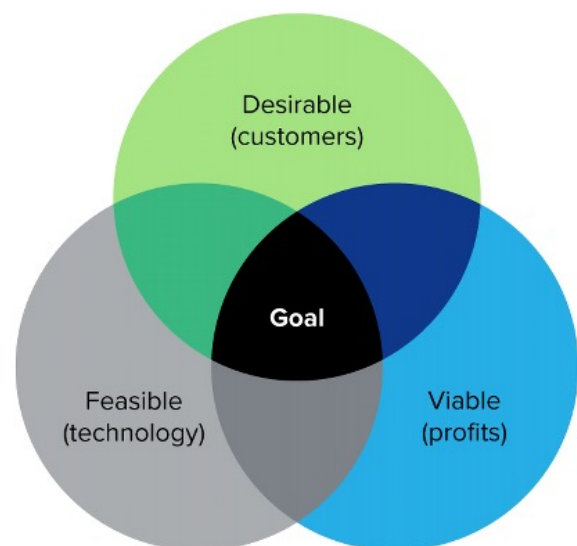
Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

What if your predecessor got one of these stages wrong? What do you do?

It can be tempting to go back to square one — to start over so you can get it right and show how much better it can be done. But that can require such a big investment that it's not realistic.

So it's better to start by identifying what aspects of the existing product are low-hanging fruit in terms of potential for improvement so you can start with those. And to do that, you need to be clear what you mean by "improvement" — in other words, define which metrics are going to matter when the time comes to justify further investment.

Once you're clear about that, you need to gather evidence, ranging from analytics data to user experience (UX) testing data, and compare your findings to your target metrics. That establishes a baseline against which to compare the product after you've made those changes that you intend to be quick wins.

Next, you need to apply that iterative approach (prioritize, make, test, and adapt) to the small improvements you decided on, so that you can then gather a new batch of evidence and compare it to the first one. That comparison is what you then can use as justification for more significant investment and therefore more major advances and innovations in the product.

What does all this all mean in terms of impact, for companies that do embrace and adopt these practices for creating digital products?

Forrester's large-scale studies of customer experience (CX) have demonstrated year after year, for decades, that improving the quality of experiences has a concrete positive impact on revenue and growth in terms of retention, enrichment, and advocacy. So adopting these practices will not only result in better experiences for users — whether customers or employees or partners — but will also supercharge your business as a result.

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Bottle Rocket is a Dallas-based company that was founded in 2008, the day that Steve Jobs announced that the App Store would be open to third-party developers. What began as a mobile design and development shop has since grown into a leading digital experience consultancy that has created digital products for some of the world's most loved brands.

Bottle Rocket's current service offerings span business strategy and consulting, experience design, engineering, quality assurance, product development, project management, and everything in between. We are experts in the world of experience and have launched over 500 digital products to market since our inception.

If you have ever ordered a chicken sandwich on the Chick-fil-A mobile app, booked a flight on the Southwest Airlines app, or participated in the loyalty program while visiting a Caesars' property, you've seen our work in action. Bottle Rocket is part of the Ogilvy Experience worldwide network and a proud partner to many Fortune 500 and Global 100 brands.