Plan 02: Discover needs and feature ideas

Successful products and features address market needs, so the process of discovering ideas for new features starts with just that.

Checklist

☑ Start with market needs.

☑ Capture product and feature ideas from many sources.

☑ Maintain a backlog of ideas.

1. Start with market needs.

New features are exciting to their inventors, but before you go too far down the path of building them, you should validate that there's a market for them — and that the market is big enough to be worth the investment.

You do this through in-depth interviews with your market (customers and non-customers), and with focused market research surveys to validate your findings, at scale.

2. Capture product and feature ideas from many sources.

Need feature ideas? They can come from countless sources:

- **Your market.** Conduct interviews, task analysis, and observational studies with target users who are not customers.
- **Your customers.** Perform field research, such as in-depth interviews, task analysis, and observational studies. Consult with your Customer Advisory Board (if you have one, or consider establishing one). Consider a customer portal for suggestions if you don't already have one.
- **Customer-facing and other teams.** Review customer support tickets and interview customer-facing teams such as Customer Success and Customer Services and/or Support. In the course of doing their jobs, your colleagues may be inspired with ideas that can improve your products. Encourage them to enter their ideas into your idea-base.
- **Your competition.** Do competitive research to identify untapped opportunities.

- **Thought leaders.** Review industry blogs, research from internal market research teams, third-party research providers. Attend conferences and learn what keynote speakers predict for your market, your industry, your customers.
- **Social media and online reviews.** Social media and online reviews can surface opportunities to address issues and market needs that your competitors aren't meeting.
- **Industry trade groups and publication**s for your target market(s) may provide insight, particularly for B2B products.

Some great ideas occur to you at random times. Capture ideas when they occur, and keep them in a centralized, accessible location (not your personal notebook or notes tool). Encourage others on the extended product team and throughout your company to share their ideas in the same place.

Optionally, you can allow participants to vote on or "promote" ideas they like, or set business driver values for ideas and use them to surface the best ones.

3. Build and maintain a backlog of ideas.

You probably have a healthy backlog of feature ideas – not all brilliant, many that are duplicates or variants of each other, and some gems. You don't want to miss the gems, but it takes time to review and curate the list, identify trends, and organize related ideas into what could be strong feature contenders.

Best practices for building and maintaining your backlog of ideas:

- Keep ideas in one central, accessible place where anyone on the extended product team – and even outside that team – can contribute.
- Do quick reviews on a regular basis so the task of maintaining them is less arduous.
- Tag Ideas by functionality, target user type, target buyer type, technology, etc. And tag ideas by source (your own market research, specific customer suggestion, customer support log, your CEO, etc.). Remove or combine duplicates.
- Bucket ideas into one of these sample categories (or similar, whatever works best for your team and product):
  - **On the plate** — for the most promising ideas that you're promoting to features
  - **Front burner** — working actively on these but not ready to promote to features
  - **Back burner** — good ideas worthy of consideration later, not now
  - **On ice** — ignore for now and near future, maybe forever

Ideas can get stale over time because market needs change, competitors provide solutions, and trends are displaced by other trends. Or your own product or company priorities have shifted.

So it's helpful to use an aging system for your idea backlog. Review ideas that have been in any state for more than a year (or whatever time frame makes sense for your product and market). Consider archiving them.

Next Best Practice: 03 - Define and validate features

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