



Job Description

The Product Manager

- Table Of Contents
- Job Description
- The Product Manager
 - Location and Definition
 - Planning
 - The Product Road Map
 - The Comparative Grid
 - The Launch Plan
 - The MRD
 - The Marketing Plan
 - Action Plans
 - Other Requirements
 - Market Visibility
 - Launch Collateral
 - Production and Fulfillment Launch Requirements
 - Triage
 - User Base Communication
 - Beta Management
 - Proactive Promotion
 - Summary

Note: this writeup is based on my successful experience as Product Manager for CleanSweep 95 at Quarterdeck, which brought a product that was in last place to first in its category, with a 10x expansion in sales.

Location and Definition

In a centralized marketing structure, the Product Manager (PM) is situated in Marketing, typically under the Director of Product Marketing.

The Product Manager is in charge of one product or product area, and is the single person in the organization responsible for the product.

The PM, in effect, is the advocate and champion of the product across all areas in the organization. If a product's name is "Top Hat", then the PM is "Mr. (or Ms.) Top Hat". The PM lives and breathes the product.

It is important to note that the PM is not in development, but in marketing or in a business unit. Product Development Managers residing in development units are often called Program Managers and are well described in the book [Microsoft Secrets](#).



Companies with Program Managers often do not have PMs in marketing, but instead "Product Planners" or "Brand Managers", well described in Kotler's book [Marketing Management](#). The PM function combines the Program Manager and Brand Manager functions.

Please note that Microsoft, which previously used the Program Manager/Product Planner system, has Product Managers today.

Planning

The PM "owns" planning for that product, and these are the planning docs which are expected of the PM, and which are his or her main tools for obtaining product success (i.e. getting his or her way.) Not being senior to anybody, the PM needs these planning documents; they are both stick and carrot.

The Product Road Map

This is how the technology behind the product or product line will translate over time into upgrades of existing products, and releases of new products.

It delineates the product's life cycle. It includes all releases into the various channels, and the various countries targeted by the company.

Typically, the road map is extremely top-line, showing only the release dates. It is usually written three years into the future.

The creation of the roadmap is the PM's first opportunity to get a strong, feasible product release strategy in place.

The Comparative Grid

Regardless of the PM's involvement in the marketing plan (see below), the PM must research and maintain a comprehensive comparative grid.

The first step in creating a comparative grid is to establish the State Of The Art, or the ideal product, with all the present and near-future bells and whistles. This is done by documenting the scope and features of all competitive products, and estimating trends.

This, then, gives us the ideal feature set.

Then, the PM's product and all other competitors are measured against this set, in a grid that measures not only whether the feature is met, but how well.

This is the basis for the SWOT (Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats) analysis done in the Marketing Plan.

In actual marketing communications, a different grid is created which is a subset of the main one. This grid spins the strengths of the product against the competition, for use in marketing materials.



The Launch Plan

This is a grid or Gantt chart that lays out every single action by every person in the organization to launch a product or an upgrade.

The PM is empowered to enforce every deadline on this Gantt chart, once it is approved by top management.

One development along the lines of program management has been Microsoft Team Manager, which, in theory, allows targets to be communicated back and forth between the PM and the team members via their scheduling programs. At this writing, however, this is untested.

The MRD

The MRD, or Marketing Requirements Document, defines the product's scope, features, and all other elements which must be defined to enable product success in the marketplace.

The MRD is the guide for the Functional Specification, which is the development blueprint. Any problem with the Functional Spec or the product itself is resolved with the question "What does the MRD say?" The absence of an MRD is a major omission.

The MRD is originated by the PM, and approved by top management. Development cannot change product design or direction or features without getting the MRD changed.

Templates for MRD and FS are available.

The Marketing Plan

The Marketing Plan is a forerunner of the MRD. While it is a function of Product Marketing, frequently the PM ends up writing it.

A Marketing Plan Summary is useful and is available.

Action Plans

Weekly Planning

The PM will hold a weekly product meeting with the Product Team (all developers and representatives of marketing, sales, QA, tech support, manufacturing/fulfillment/customer service, release coordination, international, etc.), bringing in other players (such as localization resources and outside vendors) as needed. The meeting is compulsory for the central list. This meeting is structured around the Launch Plan, which is modified or enhanced based on the outcome of this meeting, then republished as needed to all concerned. The PM will also originate short-term planning memos for the Product Team from meeting to meeting.

Weekly Product Meetings must be totally factual as to status, issues and problem resolution. Major decisions and planning issues must be taken offline to be resolved by specific persons as soon as they are identified. Major discussions of issues are not appropriate to this meeting.



Monthly Planning

Monthly, some companies hold a Product Policy Board, which is an assembly of top management, and lead persons involved with product marketing, sales, development and release, led by the CEO.

Each PM makes a presentation that recaps product planning and status, and any deltas. Proposals are made if appropriate.

While this is often viewed as an opportunity to trash the PM, nonetheless this is a good forum for getting buy-off on changes in strategic direction, new product directions, etc.

There is a typical Powerpoint presentation for such meetings, which is available.

Daily Operation

Daily, the PM addresses the priorities of the moment, pushes hard for compliance on the Launch Plan, and keeps the company and its vendors briefed on the status of the product. This is usually done through a regular group e-mail newsletter format. The PM must ensure that this newsletter is short and interesting, so that it is read.

Daily, the PM also consults with the lead developer and with the Director of Product Marketing, who may choose to assign daily or weekly deliverables.

Other Requirements

Market Visibility

The PM must ensure that the product launch will achieve major market visibility above all, and will therefore reach its release targets.

This is primarily done by assiduously following up on the launch plan.

Launch Collateral

This is noted in the launch plan, but it should be emphasized here that the PM is responsible for making sure that these collateral elements are delivered to the appropriate recipients on time, often writing them himself:

1. Reviewer's Guide
2. White Papers
3. Copy Blocks
4. Product Data Sheet
5. Sell Sheet
6. Box Copy
7. Website product page elements



These requirements are further detailed in the model launch plan.

Production and Fulfillment Launch Requirements

The PM is vitally concerned with requirements for fulfilling product deliveries. These include:

1. Retail package elements, both generic and product specific. The specific Bill of Materials varies by company, but a strict timetable applies to getting these done in time.
2. Package requirements for other channels, such as corporate reseller. (Includes volume packaging if applicable.)
3. "Disk and Docs" for service requests and direct marketing.
4. CD sets for promotional and OEM use.
5. Electronic versions of product for online delivery and other needs. Includes self-fulfilling electronic packaging.
6. All production and fulfillment resources in place and ready for delivery.

These requirements are further detailed in the launch plan.

Triage

Perhaps the most vital function of the PM is to ensure that the product is frozen within the time constraints of the product launch plan, that feature creep doesn't occur, and, finally, that triage occurs when necessary.

Triage, a battlefield term, is apt, because the PM will often be faced with the difficult term of what to lop off the product goals or feature set in order to make product release date, which is paramount.

So there is feature set triage. Related to it is platform triage. By focusing on one platform and putting off others, the PM can achieve major gains in the product schedule. This, however, involves top management.

The second kind of triage has to do with bugs. The PM is responsible, ultimately, for making calls as to what bug level will be permitted in the release product (certainly no showstoppers, but what below that?), and how this level of imperfection will be remedied in the release plan.

If, for competitive reasons, it is necessary to release a product with substantial flaws, then this will require an extremely proactive plan to put out slipstreams and service packs, while tech support is beefed up to cope with the temporary shortcoming. Also, support of electronic forums and email traffic must be beefed up.

There will always be a slipstream strategy, because the marketplace doesn't allow the release of perfect product. The extent of such a strategy, and related resource allocations in tech support, depends on the degree of "bug" permitted in the product.

It is always FAR preferable to reduce feature set or scope, than to have lots of bugs due to a wide feature set.



In looking at a triage situation, the PM might look at how the product definition can be cut down into a standard and then a pro or deluxe product, to hold the advanced or far-reaching features.

Then there is always platform or standards triage. For example: is JDBC enough, and is ODBC a total requirement Day One? The user base will accept platform deficiencies more readily than it will accept broken functionality.

When a major platform or standards deficiency is planned, PR must be advised to "spin" the change to the media well ahead of time.

User Base Communication

The PM is responsible for user communication regarding the product.

This extends into communicating and demonstrating the product to the media (eg. Editor Days at PC Magazine), speaking to user groups, responding to user email traffic, and, especially, posting useful and timely answers to users questions in forums and newsgroups, from private beta newsgroups to

The intervention of the PM in discussion arenas will have an effect far beyond what is apparent; because this interaction will be recorded and available to future users, and furthermore the beta and early adopter crowd that is addressed in these groups is pivotal.

Beta Management

The PM is responsible for the overall management of the Beta cycle as it impacts the user base, from beta one to public preview.

Due to the high importance of the beta audience to product word of mouth, the PM must ensure that the user base is responded to, that beta issues are addressed with a high priority, and that the vacuum is always filled about the product.

The PM's personal communication to the beta audience is of vital importance.

Proactive Promotion

In launching CleanSweep 95, I did many different promotional activities, many of which no doubt weren't "worth doing". However, they did add up to a successful launch.

It is vital that the PM push hard to get proactive promotion on as many fronts as possible, and not worry too much about the usefulness of any one measure, especially if it's free. They do add up.

Generally, no one else will pay attention to the product's promotion outside the PM. Sad but true.

Summary

In summary, the PM is a person with little hierarchical authority but lots of responsibility.

The ability of the PM to get compliance will completely derive from his proactiveness in taking hold of the planning vehicles and personally driving them.



The PM must be willing to handle vast amounts of communication, with the highest priority being on RESPONSE, then secondly, TIMELY ORIGINATION.

And when release is achieved, the PM must not forget to THANK EVERYONE, and to arrange for plaques and T-shirts. If he's lucky, they will be historical.

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