Guest Post: What can Tacos Teach Product Managers about Social Product Development?

Warning: The following article contains many puns

Product management and the social web

The social web is quickly becoming a popular method for customers to express product and service related ideas, issues, questions and problems. Social conversations within customer communities are happening much more frequently and in real-time and are starting to receive a lot of attention in the product management world.

The question is: How can product managers use social media monitoring to build the right product requirements and make more informed product-related decisions?

Lessons from the taco industry

Let's take a recent product innovation – the flat-bottom taco - to illustrate how the social web can provide product managers with valuable insights that can be integrated into the product development process.

What a concept. A taco designed with a flat bottom that sits firmly upright when placed on a flat surface. Finally, taco lovers can easily stuff in all their favourite toppings without worrying about them falling out. Truly a revolutionary product innovation that changes the taco eating experience forever! Any good product manager knows that products are never flawless. And the flat bottom taco is no exception. Using social media monitoring I got to the er- "bottom" of things and discovered some very interesting information…

When products fall "flat" in the marketplace

Despite all the hype surrounding this innovation, social media search revealed that customers who had tried the flat bottom taco had a lot of feedback regarding its design. Although the new taco structure was sturdy and allowed for easy stuffing, its flattened, wider design made it awkward and difficult to bite. Other individuals complained that the new flat tortilla base cracked easily when bitten. Many customers even expressed that the flattened

sides caused the stuffing to fall out easily (defeating the whole purpose of why it was invented in the first place). Seems like maybe the flat bottom taco wasn't all that is was "cracked up" to be (I warned you about the puns).

Joking aside, tuning in to these conversations and collecting this feedback provides valuable insight that product managers can leverage to improve product features or product functionality.

Here are a few ways product managers can use social media monitoring:

1. Monitor social media for customer feedback on a continuous basis
With customer needs and preferences constantly changing and evolving, one of the biggest challenges in product management is to create profitable products that exceed customer expectations. Traditional methods of collecting feedback, such as surveys and focus groups, are often too time-consuming and expensive. Worse, once the results have been collected, they need to be integrated into the development flow. By tuning in to the social web, product managers can obtain feedback about products in real-time, and directly incorporate it into the product lifecycle.

2. Actually respond to customer feedback
Customers need to know that product managers are listening and taking action on their feedback. Innovative tools like social media monitoring allow you to respond to conversations directly on the same social media channels they came through. For instance, if someone expressed on Twitter that the flat bottom taco should come in different flavours, product development teams can engage in a conversation that further elaborates on the details. Responding to your customers is a win-win strategy for both you and your company, as customers see that you care and you get valuable information to help build better products.

3. Don't let your competitors get a piece of the taco-uh, I mean pie
The social web also provides many opportunities to know what customers are saying about your competitor's products and services. Naturally a revolutionary innovation like the flat bottom taco is sure to spark the attention of other players in the taco industry. A sharp product manager chasing that big promotion won't hesitate to listen to customers' conversations and try to get a piece of the action by introducing a new product that is an improvement from the competitor's offering. Social media monitoring tools can be used to find out what customers are saying about competitors' products.

4. The use of social media tools must be strategic.
Social media efforts cannot be used as a stand-alone strategy. Insight gained from these efforts must be integrated with other business processes such as customer service and help desk, idea management, requirements management, and project management. They must also be visible, and traceable across the development process. Finally, in the true nature of social collaboration, this information should be shared with both internal and external stakeholders such as business partners, employees and especially customers. It should also be accessible across departments like sales, customer support, marketing, product development and engineering.

One final note before I leave you to go make some tacos. I used the example of the flat-bottom taco to illustrate the critical role that the social web plays in the product innovation process. However, social media monitoring can be a useful tool that can be used by many different verticals such as IT, finance, manufacturing, retail, hospitals, transportation, and government.

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Catherine Constantinides works at OneDesk, a developer of social business applications that connect the customer to the product development process. She is also a regular contributor on OneDesk's blog. Oh…and she loves tacos.

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