



*Lessons from
Brand Managers to
Product Leaders.*

What Can **Brand** Teach **Product**?

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Multiple factors impact how well a product organization understands its primary stakeholder, the consumer. The structure, team origins, positioning, decision rights, and level of empowerment of product leaders can limit or strengthen their team's ability to know the consumer, set a product vision, and bring the right products to market.

Product leaders who want to empower their teams to better understand the consumer and make product decisions to positively impact their experience can look to successful brand managers inside brand-centric companies for guidance.

The idea of a brand manager started with the concept of "Brand Men" advocated by Neil H. McElroy at Proctor & Gamble. The brand team had total responsibility for a brand, taking marketing and advertising, field observations, and packaging

responsibilities from other functions. This shift to brand management consolidated decision-making power into one team with close connections to the consumer.

Later, Hewlett Packard brought this customer-focused approach to technology. Just as brand assumed responsibility for other functions, HP product managers took responsibility from engineering. Product managers began gathering requirements and communicating the customer's voice, which created space for engineering to focus on the technical side of product development.

With the rapid growth of technology, software developers frequently transitioned to product management roles. As engineering talent at technology companies continued to move into new product management roles, this transition sometimes resulted in a more inward, technology-centric

focus rather than the consumer-first approach intended from the role's roots. Product teams that formed in organizations with mature sales and operations functions may have experienced similar challenges.

In consumer-centric organizations, the leader of the brand equates to the leader of the business, and therefore still has authority, autonomy, and accountability for brand success. In contrast, product managers are often accountable for success without the same authority and empowered decision-making. Product leaders must lead by influencing other decision-makers, which becomes increasingly more challenging and complex in larger organizations with more specialized functions.

In this article, we will discuss how the positioning of brand management in consumer-centric organizations contributes to the success of the business and what product leaders can learn from brand managers and apply it to their own teams.

BRAND IS THE CONSUMER EXPERT

Brand managers act as the voice of the consumer in their organizations and as the stewards of the brand. They conduct research, develop a detailed learning plan, and solicit feedback from sales, retailers, and R&D teams. This information empowers brand managers to empathize with consumers and deeply understand their expectations, wants, and needs of the brand. Additionally, they

stay abreast of competitive category trends and broader macroeconomic impacts, which allows brand managers to make adjustments that drive short-term successes like gaining value share, sales, and profitability.

As consumer desires and tastes quickly evolve, brand managers consistently evaluate and predict how consumer buying patterns will change and determine how the brand

For brand managers, the consumer is king, and staying ahead of needs and understanding the forces that impact buying patterns is always a critical input in shaping products that support long-term brand viability. The brand's proximity to the consumer supports both short-term successes for the brand and sets the stage for the brand's longer-term evolution.



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must evolve to meet consumers where they are. For example, consider the dinner staple for many families: macaroni and cheese. What was just mac and cheese has evolved into countless options and varieties to attract multiple buying personas. Brand managers created versions of macaroni and cheese for the family seeking organic ingredients, the family on the go that wants the microwave version, a version with cauliflower for the family looking for balance, and dinosaur shapes for the kid selector. These options were launched ahead of the consumer recognizing the need, and brand managers generated demand for the variety of options available.

In contrast, companies' structure may inadvertently insulate product teams from direct consumer interaction, which forces them to rely on secondhand consumer insights to drive product strategy. This insulation can happen for a variety of reasons. In organizations where product is a newer function, more mature business functions like sales and operations may own and protect the relationship with the consumer. They may function as gatekeepers for ideas, consumer insights, and feedback that they deem relevant. Companies that assign consumer-centric responsibilities to other functions like business development, sales, CX, or research, limit the product team's ability to form a

comprehensive view of consumer wants and the jobs to be done by the product.

Another cause for product teams to lose connection to the consumer is that other organizational functions may pigeonhole product as technology delivery or technology support, relegating product to translate business requirements to technology, manage “keep the lights on” work,

collaborate with potential gatekeepers and interact with and observe the consumer firsthand. Product will be able to draw insights from their direct consumer interactions, encouraging the business to include them in broader ideation and discovery activities. This joint approach will result in stronger insights, vision, and position.

brand position changes. Maintaining a clear vision is paramount, and brand managers provide direction to cross-functional partners (e.g., R&D, finance, supply chain, sales) so that their decisions continue to align to the brand positioning while meeting the evolving consumer desires and interests.

While the scope of a product manager would include product vision and position, the actual responsibility may lie within other functional areas or only at higher levels of product leadership. As mentioned above, larger product organizations may divide responsibilities across multiple product teams or other functions. For example, leaders may participate in strategy and product portfolio discussions, while product managers define features and manage backlogs of enhancements and fixes, product owners write user stories and manage development activities, customer experience creates consumer personas and communications, and user experience focuses on research and user interfaces.

This dispersion of responsibilities may dilute the product vision or leave it open for interpretation to fill gaps in understanding as it moves through teams. Without the appropriate context of the vision and positioning, communications, sales toolkits, pricing, performance management, account management training, and other launch readiness tools may not accurately reflect the brand, causing misalignment around customer needs and product design.

IN CONTRAST, PRODUCT MANAGERS ARE OFTEN ACCOUNTABLE FOR SUCCESS WITHOUT THE SAME AUTHORITY AND EMPOWERED DECISION-MAKING.

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or fix bugs. As a result of this distance from direct consumer interaction, product may rely on quantitative metrics supplemented with secondhand consumer insights to shape solutions. This approach can result in deference to the loudest voice in the room, the most opinionated stakeholder, or the highest-paying or most vocal customer, to the detriment of the product roadmap and overall product vision and strategy.

Product organizations can work toward becoming the voice of the consumer like effective brand managers by looking for strategic ways to increase their consumer interaction. Product leaders can focus on influencing the business to

BRAND SETS THE VISION AND POSITION

Brand managers are also responsible for setting a vision and reinforcing brand positioning, which requires constant research and strategy. Every brand needs to maintain consumer value and hold a unique spot in the competitive market. For example, for products in a premium position, companies set a price higher than more easily available brands, use best-in-class ingredients, and provide an unmatched, positive user experience. If part of the brand components (e.g., retail placement, packaging) do not reinforce its position, the

Newer product organizations spun up as part of digital or agile transformations, for example, may suffer from a similar lack of ownership and involvement in the vision and position of a product. Legacy groups like business development, account management, business operations, or even IT leadership tend to own those responsibilities.

Additionally, staffing new product organizations with existing resources with former titles such as business analyst, technical analyst, or project manager without true product experience or reskilling can leave a perception of product teams as an order taker who translates business requirements to technology requirements and manages development.

Instead, product organizations can replicate successful brand managers by advocating to lead early ideation and discovery activities to establish brand vision and position. Company leaders can establish their operating models and ways of working to empower product leaders to have a strong voice in setting the direction and then serve as strategic advisors on vision, position, and what the product should deliver to meet the customer's needs to downstream technology and engineering teams.

BRAND OWNS THE DECISION-MAKING

The deep knowledge a brand manager holds as a steward of the brand allows organizations to give ultimate decision rights to the brand team around both marketing and historically nonmarketing verticals such as packaging, pricing, research, and finance. Leveraging expert cross-functional opinions, the role of brand is to take differing opinions

and recommendations, oftentimes caused by inconsistent incentives, into consideration and make the final decision on what is best for the brand.

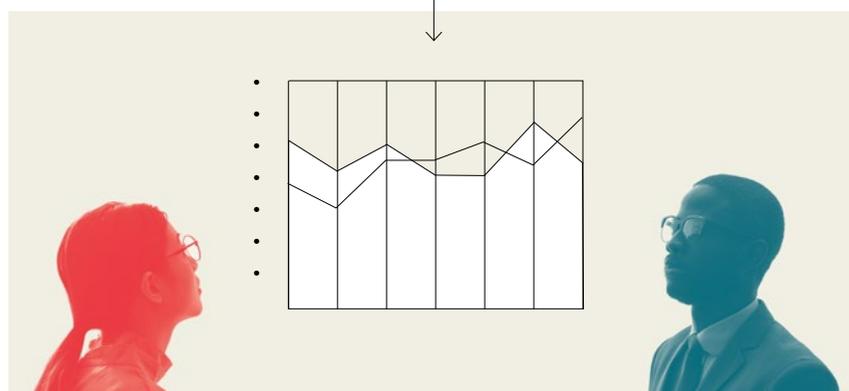
As an example, the finance team may strive to increase profitability by using cheaper ingredients, while the R&D team may select high-end ingredients to generate a higher product rating. Both teams will do their job and provide a recommendation that best fits their goals, but the brand team must balance the recommendations and determine how to move forward to best fit the consumer expectations and the brand.

While brand managers lead decision-making on everything related to the brand, product teams typically have a different orientation within a company's operating model. Sitting at the intersection of business operations, technology, and the consumer, product often has a smaller purview of decision rights and becomes more of a messenger

If a company's operating model unintentionally (or by design) omits product from critical strategic activities early in the ideation and discovery phases, limits access to consumer insights, and fails to clarify the vision and positioning, the product team is greatly restricted in its ability to lead and influence effective discussions on desirability, feasibility, and viability with their cross-functional partners. This inability to influence decision-making can result in a slower time to market and lower product adoption.

Product leaders can take a page from the brand management playbook by analyzing how the operating model facilitates or limits collaboration points with critical partners.

Leaders could consider establishing shared KPIs that encourage handoffs and sharing of critical information and deliverables to formalize collaboration across product, sales, operations, and customer service. While it is not likely a realistic



of information between the groups and less of a decision owner. Without the power granted by the organization to make final decisions, product must lead by influence. They must steer decision makers in the direction aligned to overall business goals, portfolio strategy, and product roadmap.

solution from product to take over all the brand-like decisions, product leaders can advocate for their shift from passive observer to leader and strategic advisor for moments that matter, such as customer journey definition, roadmap prioritization, and experience and interface design.

CONCLUSION:

Both the origins of the product teams and a company's operating model can impact product's success in serving as strategic partners that connect insights to ideas to products that delight consumers. By being at the intersection of cross-functional groups, Product is uniquely positioned to synthesize information and inputs from these internal and external groups to influence and drive decisions to successfully launch products with high adoption in the marketplace.

Consider these steps that we learned from effective brand managers to unlock product teams:

- Dedicate time for free strategic thought and discovery activities. Strategic thinking rarely happens in the time between meetings. Leave the firefighting and KTLO work to other teams, like support or product operations teams, to free up time for thought, discovery, and consumer interaction.
- Build trusted relationships with cross-functional partners, and develop a shared roadmap and vision centered around the broader brand vision and position.
- Take an honest look at the maturity of the product team. Evaluate whether the right people are in the right roles. Identify deficiencies and a plan to upskill people on the more strategic aspects of product. With a seat at the table as a strategic partner, the product group must deliver and establish that trust to keep its seat and avoid partners relegating them to order takers.

- Remove decision gatekeepers within the product organization. If all levels of the product organization understand consumer needs, product vision, and position, empower and trust those resources to make decisions within their scope of accountability. A product manager or leader does not need to run every user story or enhancement or fix.
- Reevaluate work categorization and assignment that focuses part of the Product team on transformational and growth efforts that require strategic, longer-term thinking.

Learning from brand managers who orchestrate cross-functional teams to drive short-term business outcomes and long-term brand viability, product leaders can work to elevate their position in the operating model and shift ways of working that will help organizations launch products faster, increase adoption, and delight consumers with products aligned to their needs. • •

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