# Relevant Product Design Requires Keeping Up with Perpetual Change

By identifying the primary influencers of target customers – and capturing their insights – businesses can increase their chance of product success.

### Product Planning in the Digital Age

It's a business truism that the majority of product launches fail – 50% to 80% by many estimates – whether during product design/development or upon entering the marketplace. While reasons abound, the most common is a failure to move quickly enough to stay in step with customers' changing needs.

To improve their success with launching new products in today's fast-changing digital age, businesses need to take a fresh look at how to anticipate, keep up with and respond to continuously changing customer preferences.

### "I Thought We Understood What the Customer Wanted!"

Since the 1980s, the traditional approach to product development and design has been based on customer personas. Companies study the types of customers who buy their products – using interviews, focus groups and other techniques – and use these insights to define product features that specifically solve their needs.

This approach, however, no longer works in an era when customers, markets and competitors change quickly and without notice. Let's say you're the product manager of the clearance section of a large e-commerce portal. Your customers fit the "cost-conscious customer" persona, whose main priorities are price, selection and quality. These customers do not mind spending time finding the best price, exhibit little brand loyalty and enjoy nothing more than the perception of scoring a good deal before anyone else gets it.

As you embark on a journey from design through delivery, do you need to be concerned about these customer requirements changing? Before answering, consider some statistics from the mobile apps space. In January 2016, more than 19,000 games were added to the iTunes App Store. That means in the time it takes to develop and launch an iPhone app (about 10 months in our experience), 190,000 games could potentially be added to iTunes. Even if the target "game enthusiast customer" *only* installs one game per week of the top 100 breakout games for that month, he or she would still engage in a

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total of 40 new and different experiences while the app is launched.

What are the chances that the customer would still be looking for the same things in a game as he or she did in January 2016?

Similarly, the cost-conscious e-commerce customer is also exposed to many influences in a short span of time, as well, including high-visibility, high-traffic sites such as Groupon (ranked 60 by Alexa, a Web traffic data and analytics company), Coupons.com (ranked 272) and thekrazycoupon-lady.com (ranked 1,673). For an idea of these sites' popularity, Forbes.com is ranked 76 by Alexa, *The Wall Street Journal* is ranked 127, and Eonline is 274.

In this dynamic and geographically extensive landscape, customer preferences are more likely than ever to change during the product development period, even when business-defined personas remain static. Therein lies one of the largest problems with the traditional model of building a persona: It is static in time and fails to keep track of emerging preferences.

## While Everyone Has a Voice, Not Everyone Has Influence

So, how do you go about addressing not only current customer preferences but also the continuously emerging ones? The most effective approach is to find the main influences on your customers and reflect those opinions in your product features. In the digital age – and with the Internet-influenced democratization of media – these opinion makers are best found on social media. With a substantial amount of media being created by peers closely connected to the community they serve, a new generation of influencers has arisen who are profoundly shaping customers' buying decisions.

While everyone has a voice on social media, not everyone has an equal degree of influence. An example of a powerful opinion maker is Marques K. Brownlee, best known for his technology review YouTube channel, MKBHD. With over three million subscribers and 700-plus videos with average view counts of more than 600,000, Brownlee wields a great degree of influence over electronics buyers. He cross-posts some of his reviews on Amazon, where his channel has received about 10,000 likes and considerable engagement with potential buyers (over 110 comments for his 2011 review of Audio-Technica headphones).

Other influencers are Gael Greene (who specializes in food) and Doug Walker (movies). Blogs such as Ars Technica (Alexa ranking 378), Engadget (248), Gizmodo (105) and The Verge (223) have seen a high number of shares on online media and often shape buyers' opinions through in-depth product reviews, editorials, comparative analysis and standardized tests.

While general customers often express opinions, their circle of influence is limited, so they have a lower probability of catching on. Only a select few influencers for each industry publish posts that are read, discussed and dissected by thousands.

The following two statistics demonstrate this phenomenon:

- The top 100 Twitter accounts attracted 13.9 million to 90.9 million followers at last count, while the average number of followers for a Twitter account is 208.

- The percent of Twitter users who don't tweet themselves but follow other people's tweets is 40%.

An example of this social media hierarchy is a very popular review by MKBHD of the new Samsung Galaxy S7.

- **Number of influencers:** 1

- **Number of active fans/commenters:** 6,163

- **Number of passive bystanders/listeners:** 1,159,889 , or the total of all viewers (166,052) minus the 6,163 active commenters

There is, therefore, a certain hierarchy to online discourse, with some users taking the role of agenda setters and opinion makers, and others discussing and/or sharing further downstream. Within this hierarchy, information travels from the opinion makers to the mass market of interested bystanders. Over time, this results in the opinions of the masses being built, influenced or otherwise reflective of the few opinion makers.

Given that the opinion makers will, over the time it takes to get a product out the door, be the primary driving force for the changes in how customers perceive their requirements, capturing these insights can help time-proof products, themselves.

## Identifying Desired Influencers

Let's say you are the product manager for an e-commerce portal focused on mid-priced and high-end products targeted at a predominantly

# Framework for Identifying Influencers

|  | **PRACTICALLY TWINS** Very similar to ideal persons | **CLOSE SIMILARITY** Somewhat similar to ideal persons | **SHARED FEATURES** Limited commonality |
|---|---|---|---|
| **OPINION MAKERS** Product and industry evangelists | BUSINESS END OF SHORT-TAIL | SIFT THROUGH OPINIONS WISELY | WATCH FOR PITFALLS! |
| **ACTIVE FANS** Commenters and retweeters | HIGH END OF SHORT-TAIL | PART OF SHORT-TAIL | LONG LONG-TAIL |
| **BYSTANDERS** Audience, quiet listeners | PART OF SHORT-TAIL | LONG LONG-TAIL | EVEN LONGER LONG-TAIL |

TOP PRIORITY  MEDIUM PRIORITY
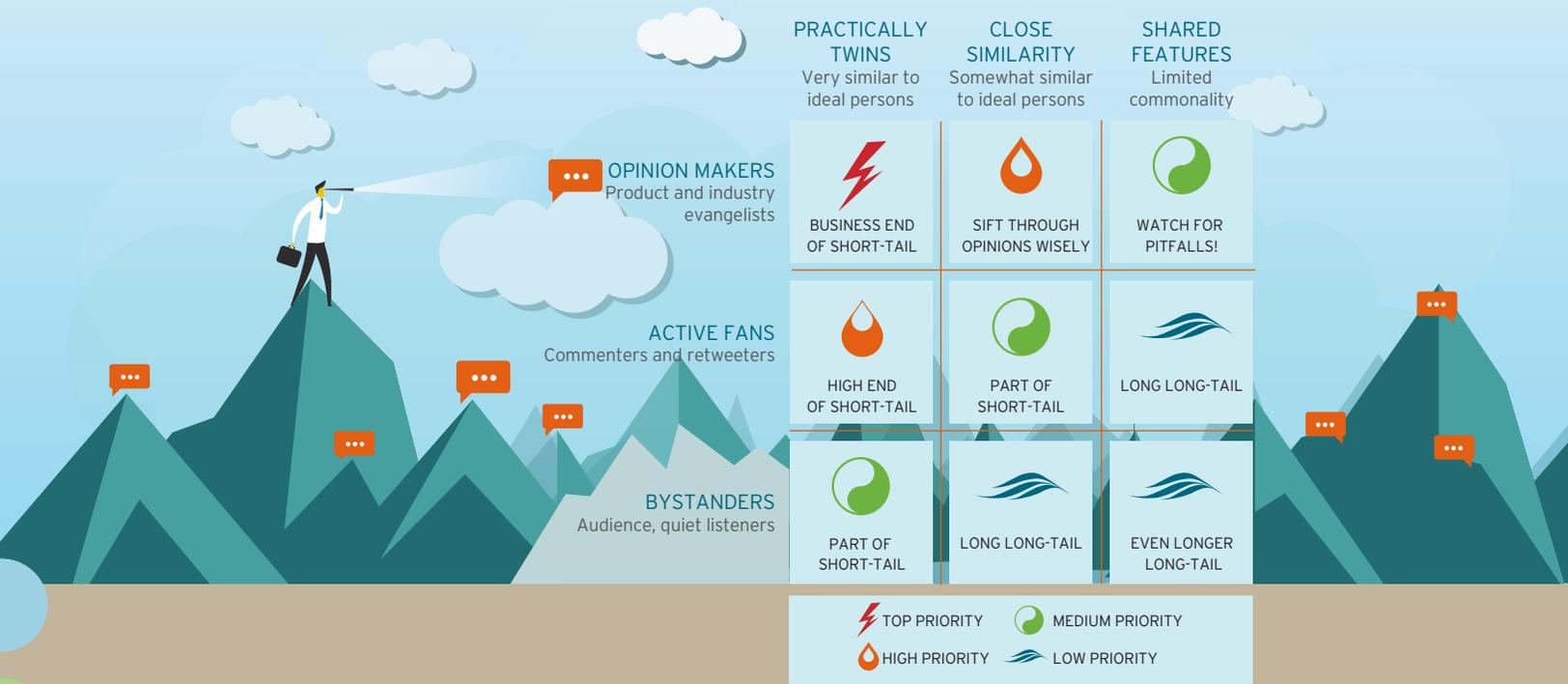HIGH PRIORITY  LOW PRIORITY

Figure 1

female millennial demographic. You are looking to build a loyalty corner that sends out regular coupons and member-only sale invites. With this general capability in mind, it would not make sense to focus on an influencer who generally discusses, say, Nordstrom or Neiman Marcus, as these retailers are relatively high-cost, service-focused companies, serving a demographic with limited interest in sales or coupons.

Ultimately, while finding influencers is key, it is essential to identify influencers who are similar to the desired persona for your product features and capture their opinions. These "desired influencers" not only best embody the feature mindset, but they will also influence the masses.

We have developed a two-dimensional framework for choosing and prioritizing contrasting opinions. Dimension 1 is the person's ability to influence, and Dimension 2 is the validity of his or her opinions for the feature set (see Figure 1).

Within the framework, the influencers are categorized as opinion makers, active fans and bystanders. The desired voices are ranked as very similar, somewhat similar and limited commonality with the customer persona.

## First Column: Target Users

The first column represents the core of the customer base: target users. The opinion makers/influencers within this subset are our most precious commodity. They are our best potential evangelists and weathervane for change. Not only do they point in the direction of change but they also often influence and shape the future potential direction of the industry. Their feature requests are certainly the most relevant and influential.

One level down in this column are the active fans, whose discussions and opinions certainly provide extremely valuable input. However, these participants do not have the same outsized influence as the former category. Even so, they are still critical users whose opinions remain a priority.

The bystanders are often our most common buyers/users. While their involvement in online discourse may remain passive with little to no contribution, they are often active followers and readers of the ongoing discussions. Their opinions can generally be gauged by non-verbal cues, such as view counts, number of "favorites," likes, etc.

## Second Column: Potential Buyers

At the top of the second column is an important group that requires extreme care from product

managers, owners and designers, as these users share some common preferences with the main customer base but vary in other ways. This means that despite their influence in shaping opinion, they may not be as relevant to the primary customer base. Their key value lies in the secondary or auxiliary feature sets.

The opinion makers in this group can provide excellent opinions and critiques; however these must be carefully evaluated before prioritizing them since they can often lead us away from our unique selling proposition for the core group. The importance of the active followers and bystanders within this second column lies in the fact that they are potential buyers of our products for their secondary features. Owing to their shared characteristics with our primary group, our products are often a compelling idea for them. Therefore, their opinions must be considered during product design.

### Third Column: Non-Buyers

The last column represents users dissimilar to our ideal user persona. As a result, their comments on features could possible detract from the business's unique selling proposition and be a liability. When listening to their opinion, particularly the influen-

tial users, it is important to remember that the feature is not being designed for them. Therefore, their critiques and comments must be taken with a grain of salt. Additionally, they will probably not accurately depict the future direction of preferences. The importance of this group lies in estimating general industry trends.

### Moving Forward

A wise man once said, "The best predictor of the future is getting there." However, until we invent a time machine, our best predictor remains our ability to understand where, and from whom, the change is coming, catching the trend early and capitalizing on it before our competitors do. To understand if change affects you, ask yourself:

- Do your customers change their mind?
- Do you often revisit your requirements during development?
- Is your industry competing with technology-based disruption?

The answers to these questions will signal whether it's time for you to make a change – and begin developing and launching more successful products.

### About the Author

*Abhinav Arora is a Product Manager in Cognizant's Communications and Technology business unit. He has spent the last decade building and managing digital products for some of the largest Fortune 500 firms across North America, Europe and Asia. With products utilized by more than a million users across the globe and across platforms, Abhinav credits a disciplined data-driven approach as his not-so-secret sauce. He is a Certified Product Manager, Certified SCRUM Product Owner, Certified Supply Chain Professional and DMC. He has an MBA in business technology from Asian Institute of Management. Abhinav can be reached at Abhinav.Arora@cognizant.com.*

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