

# Managing Feature Requests

## And New Opportunities Using Social Media

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One of the main drivers of post-V1 Development activities are Feature Requests, both external and internal to the company. The process of managing these requests is far from standardized, resulting in many products with a weak pipeline of ideas or a roadmap comprised of less-than-compelling functionality. This article discusses ways to optimize the process to acquire and select the best options for your customers and your company. In addition, we also look at a few leading companies using social networks to improve their results.

### Connecting with Customers for Ideas

A typical organization usually has some pipeline of feature requests originating from key customers or some proactive customer research. There are potentially also many internal requests for improved performance, reduction of manual processes, reduced costs, and more types of reporting data. Very often the only management of these requests is through a spreadsheet belonging to the product manager. A few companies are beginning to try Requirements Management tools to help them as part of an overall requirements process, but they are still in the minority.

One might assume that this situation exists primarily in small companies with less resources and processes, but it's actually quite prevalent in large service organizations with millions of customers and huge IT systems. Some examples are ISPs, Telcos and Mobile Operators. Some have started using online forums for communicating with customers, but many of these are for the purpose of reducing call volumes into Support rather than for soliciting feedback and ideas. While these can provide some information about problems the customers are experiencing, it's a long way from getting fresh ideas that could lead to innovative and valuable offerings.

Some innovative companies have expanded the concept of the online community forum to social media sites specifically for requesting ideas on features and capabilities. They are transforming the typical ad-hoc collection process into one that is highly evolved and a strategic initiative. One example is Dell computer with their IdeaStorm site ([www.ideastorm.com](http://www.ideastorm.com)). Here customers can input ideas for new products or configurations and others can vote on them and/or add comments. This forum is even open to non-customers to view and contains at least 10,000 submissions with some having over 100,000 votes.

Another example is salesforce.com's IdeaExchange (<http://ideas.salesforce.com>). Besides requesting new ideas, there is feedback on those ideas that are under consideration, which are coming in the next release, and which have been implemented. The product managers (60 of them) are actively engaged directly with customers on the site in understanding the needs and even flushing out potential solutions. Salesforce has even segmented the idea forum between end users and Large Enterprise customers to better accommodate the needs from different viewpoints. They openly discuss that these are used in consideration of their 3 releases per year, but that the company also has other strategic activities ongoing that compete with these feature requests. Similar to Dell, there are about 10,000 submissions on the site.

## Performing Feature Triage

The next step to take once you've collected ideas is to triage them. The word "triage" comes from the medical community during emergencies to quickly assess and route those in need of more urgent care. In a less critical application, it means a process where things are ranked on importance or priority. This process is common in software testing, where newly found defects can be triaged on a regular basis in a Bug Triage Meeting, and quickly prioritized and routed to developers for research and repair.

Similarly, a triage process for new feature requests has the same intent – to use a quick and lightweight process for identifying what to do next with new feature requests. This should be done on some measure of Value. This can be accomplished with a simple checklist of 5-6 value measurement questions *that are relevant business and market drivers for your company*. Some example objectives could be:

1. Can this feature increase adoption or penetration in my current market? (such as a usability enhancement)
2. Can this feature enable a new value proposition to my current market? (such as new functionality to a subset of higher value users)
3. Can this feature enable entry into an adjacent market? (such as targeting a new buyer/user segment or new geographic location with current capabilities)
4. Can this feature improve retention, customer loyalty, or satisfaction? (such as a necessary competitive response or a necessary improvement in quality/performance)
5. Can this feature provide meaningful differentiation or a competitive advantage? (such as first use of a new technology or first of kind functionality)
6. Can this feature improve company profitability? (such as operating cost reductions or elimination of intensive manual processes)

Other potential objectives can be associated to Image/Brand, Regulatory, Environmental, Legal, Partners, Distribution, etc., depending on the specific industries and company needs at any point.

The rating scale could be as simple as answering affirmatively to one of the questions, or a more complicated scoring method using 1-5 or 1-10 scales for each question and providing a minimum total score cut line. You can also weight some objectives more than others and can arrive at specific values in each of the objective categories by assessing HOW MUCH impact the feature can have, for example:

- How many of our current customers would use the feature and how often?
- How big is the potential market it would open up?
- How much cost savings would it provide?
- How many customers would we lose by not doing it?
- How aligned is this to our strategic goals and direction?

Note that the goal at this point is to focus on relative initial Value and highlighting the most promising candidates. Then you can engage your Development team on further discussions of cost and risk that will form the final prioritization measure. By focusing on the Value piece before the Effort rating, you can filter out discussions on features that are easy to do (low effort) but also provide little or no value, especially to your company. If you've been collecting feature requests for a while, it's likely that at least 50% of your list, and very possibly 70-80% of them, will not contribute any significant benefit to your company in the long run.

In looking at both Dell and salesforce, it's obvious that they will not be trying to implement 10,000 submissions, but only a fraction of them. Therefore, the customer voting mechanism helps them to quickly see which ones have high value to the broader market as a first cut triage.

Product managers (and companies) can make a mistake if they don't do a good job in assessing the real value of a feature before diving into the effort and time to implement it. This can lead to releases that contain dozens of low value features that do little to truly improve company revenue or differentiation in the marketplace. Even worse, working on these features, even for estimating effort, is robbing Development resources from better opportunities.

This means we actually have to say "NO" to requests more often than we say "YES". This may be difficult to do for many companies and needs to be handled correctly with both the customer and sales teams. Use of a collection process that allows all customers to vote enables them to see how the feature stacks up with other customers and the cumulative desire to get it implemented.

Since customer feature requests are only one input to our planning and roadmapping processes, we need to also be allocating resources toward features that are leading our customers and extending our products to attract non-customers. So even though a feature may get a high ranking from several customers, that does not necessarily mean it is the best option for us if it doesn't line up well with our current strategic objectives.

### Using Social Media

The world is quickly changing on how customer interactions are occurring in the marketplace. Through the use of community and idea forums, Twitter and more, companies are finding new ways to get ideas from their customers. If your goal as a product manager is to find the most valuable ideas to your customers and your company, then you need to be able to generate and manage lots of ideas to maximize your odds. Leveraging social networks opens up significant channels not previously available.

My hat is off to salesforce.com for showing us better ways to interact with our customers and providing a whole new view of what transparency means. I highly recommend watching the presentation "How to Influence our Product Roadmap" on the salesforce site that provides an overview of the IdeaExchange site, and also a panel discussion of what happens to the ideas from the site internally in their product planning. It is truly impressive. Here's the link:

[Salesforce.com IdeaExchange Presentation](#)

In addition, a fine book on the general topic of social technologies is available that discusses the entire social media movement and contains case studies of companies who have implemented it, including Dell and salesforce. The book is from two Forrester analysts, entitled [Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies](#).

The opportunities to leverage social media for connecting to the marketplace and improving our understanding of our customers are just beginning. If we're willing to invest in them, they could provide significant advancement in discovering valuable opportunities we likely never would have uncovered.