

Diverse Voices in Product

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COUNT



At Products That Count, we believe that everyone can build great products. I am proud that our programming is 100% produced by C/VP-level product leaders from diverse industries, geographies, genders, and ethnicities, because their collective wisdom helps all of us stay sharp on product.

SC Moatti
Products That Count, Founder

This e-book is produced by Products That Count, the most influential Product Acceleration Platform. It's based on the Diverse Voices series, hosted by LinkedIn Product Lead and Product Talk host Don Woods. Product Talk is a weekly podcast that interviews C/VP-level product executives—such as Netflix Product VP, Coinbase CPO, and Box CPO—to share their best practices on what it takes to build great products. You will find value in every episode, regardless of your industry, product type or stage in the product life cycle. Product Talk is on Apple's Top 500 Tech Podcasts list and is enjoyed by over 100,000 listeners.

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Forward

Don Woods
LinkedIn, Product Leader

How did you get involved with Products That Count?

Since I first started as a product manager, this network has always been a resource that I've counted on for great content and engagement. Ever since attending my first local event, it's become a go-to channel for all things product management.

Fast-forward to present day I found out about an opportunity to expand the network's podcast program. Outside of my day-to-day at LinkedIn, I'm a podcaster, and I thought this would be a great opportunity to give back to a network that I believe in.

In your opinion, what is the definition of a great product?

To me, great products meet the needs of a specific set of users in a satisfying way. Furthermore, it can be fun or just simply works very well.

I'm sure that you've heard other product managers talk about "bringing delight" to users. However, I think this term is a bit cliché and is overused in our world. Instead, I think it's most important for products to be satisfying for users in a meaningful way.

From your perspective, what makes a great product manager?

For me, there are four key areas that every product manager should master:

Customer Empathy – connect with customers and internal stakeholders to understand their needs.

Prioritize Features/Ideas/Bugs – what's best for your product and business priorities.

Communicate Clearly – effectively share thoughts and action items with your team.

Manage & Motivate People That Don't Report To You – great product leaders get everyone involved, even when it's not in their job description.

What are some of your favorite resources — blogs/ podcasts/ books, etc.?

Outside of our podcast (which is the best one going), I enjoy listening to Exponent, hosted by Ben Thompson and James Allsworth. In addition, I recommend checking out Ken Norton's website — he's a Google Ventures partner and former Google product manager who has a ton of great content to use for ongoing reference. On the non-product side, I like the Basecamp blog, which provides a unique perspective on working in the tech industry.

It was important to bring the Diverse Voices theme to the Product Talk podcast, because there aren't many platforms like this elevating the perspective of product executives from groups that are underrepresented in tech.

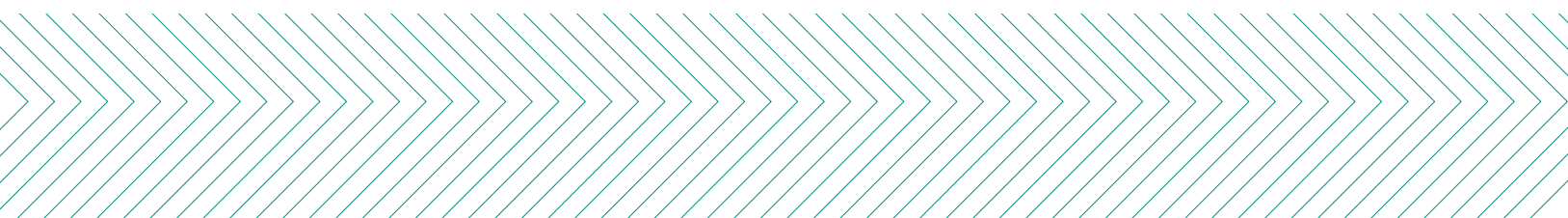
There are many Product Manager (PM) resources out in the world — articles, books, courses, podcasts, etc. — but not many shining a spotlight on and exploring the careers of people from those groups. I wanted to bring that fresh take into the crowded space of product management content.

A great example was when one of my guests, Michael Fisher, shared his thoughts on the need for diversity and inclusion in tech.

Another reason for pursuing this theme was that throughout my career, mentorship has been very important to me, and providing these sorts of examples of product execs for current and aspiring PMs is sort of an indirect mentorship. But as with all forms of mentoring, I took a lot away from the experience as well. While I knew this before hosting, my experience reinforced the notion that there are so many great stories and perspectives across the discipline. It was awesome to hear the different career paths into product and to learn about the unique challenges each PM faced. Also, I walked away with an incredible reading list, some of which I've followed up on and read, and others that are still in my queue!



I think D&I (Diversity and Inclusion) really impacts who you are at work. There's a lot of research about how successful teams and successful employees need to feel like they can be themselves at work, and I think it's hard to do that when you're the sole representative for an entire group of people. Not every person wants to try to overturn centuries of biases, oppression, racism, and sexism and try to do their day job at the same time."



Diverse Voices in Product – Perspective 01

Acorns product director on affecting change at work

From the early days of Twitter going public to revolutionizing wealth management, Paige Conrad has experience working at innovative product companies dedicated to making a difference. Every product manager thinks about leadership opportunities - and the first question is, “how do I get there?” As Paige explains, product leaders must first learn how to sell themselves — and ultimately become the best listener in the building.

Going from individual contributor to product leader

Everyone reaches a point in their career when they want to take the next step. After four amazing years at Twitter, I was ready for a new challenge and started to look at opportunities to become a product leader. I came across Acorns reading an article about financial tech. The company’s mission caught my attention and I started looking through LinkedIn for shared connections. Unfortunately, this turned into a dead end and I had to apply the old-fashioned way, through the company’s website.

To say the least, this was a bit of a “Hail Mary” on my part. However, once I started the interview process, I felt even more empowered to share my story and sell my value to the organization. Furthermore, everyone that I talked to at Acorns was incredibly passionate about the organization’s mission. As a result, it was very easy to relate to my future colleagues and also illustrate my personal interest in supporting the mission.

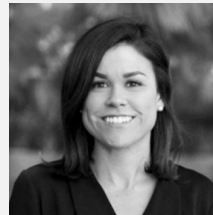
“In many ways, this represents the first step I took in becoming a product leader.”

You should always craft your personal story and be ready to advocate for yourself. Simply put, **we all need to learn how to sell ourselves** – and of course, sell our products and advocate for their value.

On a related note, **self-reflection is key for becoming a product leader**. This begins with getting continuous feedback from your team and making a commitment to learning by example. In addition, I think a lot about the mentors who gave me guidance and direction. For example, it’s helpful to emulate the approach of successful leaders. At the same time, you can also learn plenty from people that you don’t want to emulate.

SPEAKER

Paige Conrad is the Director of Product Management at Acorns, a rapidly-growing startup that is empowering more people to become personal wealth managers through micro-investing. Prior, Paige worked at Twitter for over four years, starting out as a project manager before transitioning to a product management role shortly after the company’s IPO in 2014. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley and currently lives in Southern California.



Paige Conrad
Acorns,
Product Director

In the end, **prioritization becomes your most important task** as a product leader. Most importantly, you have to dedicate as much time as possible to your team. Simply put, the best minute that I can invest every day is with people.

Diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Throughout my career, I've been very passionate about promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Most importantly, I have been very fortunate to work at organizations who make it a priority. Depending on your company, there are different ways of promoting and managing workplace best practices. At Twitter, they had a department focused entirely on diversity and inclusion. I'll talk about how we worked with this team to open new opportunities for women at the company.

First, **we created a “women in product community.”** This provided an open space for community among female employees at Twitter. We talked through the ways in which we could get more women involved in the decisionmaking process across the workplace. As a result, we built a collaborative relationship with the diversity and inclusion department. From there, our recommendations went straight to the executive team for immediate action.

In addition, **we built our own version of “the Rooney Rule”** at Twitter. This refers to an NFL policy that requires teams to interview at least one minority candidate for open head coaching positions. At Twitter, we set out to break through the common excuse about not being able to hire “non-white / male” candidates. In other words, we don't want to hear “there aren't enough blank product managers out there.

As a result, we hosted a **women-only happy hour** and attracted over 300 product manager leads for Twitter.

This event serves as a great example of proving that female product managers aren't “unicorns.” Ultimately, it's all about providing an open door for diversity and inclusion in your workplace.

Since joining Acorns, the process for affecting change has been much less formal – but in a good way! Instead of bringing concerns to a department, I can go straight to the CEO. For example, **I requested updates to our maternity policy** – and the change was made on the spot.

As you can imagine, it's easier to share these recommendations in smaller companies that are scrappier and faster paced. That said, the way you can affect change in the workplace in any company starts with building trust with like-minded people. Ultimately, **if you're bringing solutions to the table instead of problems, you'll always have a voice.**

Defining greatness as a product manager

Every product manager has an opinion on what makes a great product. To me, it starts with your brand being instantly recognizable. In other words, you can see the brand oozing out of the product – combined with a sense of heart and desire. For example, when you look at Nike or Adidas, every single product “looks the part” and makes a very strong connection with its customers.

Along these lines, great products are grounded in a strong mission. Getting back to diversity and inclusion, your workplace culture and overall goals have a direct impact on your product focus. As a result, people feel good about using the product – and as a product manager, you feel good about what you're building.

Most importantly, great products are those that go from something new and exciting to an essential commodity. In other words, they turn into solutions that make you say “I can't live without using this.” For example, Google Maps has become an essential tool that I use multiple times every day. Now that I live in Southern California, I

have to stay on top of traffic and find the best route to get from point to point. Furthermore, it makes an impact when I'm on foot as well!

When it comes to being a great product manager, you have to start with building your own vision. In other words, you need to figure out what is most valuable to customers in order to build meaningful solutions. Furthermore, you need to be a great storyteller. This not only helps in selling your product, but also inspires others to join your team.

Finally, you have to build strong relationships with peers. As a product manager, you're going to face challenges along the way. With this, having people in your corner will help you come through in the end. Most importantly, these relationships continue to make the grind more enjoyable and satisfying.

Diverse Voices in Product – Perspective 02

Pivotal Labs FMR product lead on increasing diversity in product

When I think about diversity, it's important to recognize that it goes beyond having equal representation along racial or cultural lines. In other words, you need to have exposure to a diverse collection of ideologies and methodologies to become a more complete person. Furthermore, this ties perfectly into becoming an effective product manager. For example, we have to be experts at balancing a wide range of responsibilities and constituents.

In my case, this learning began at Morehouse College, where I earned my bachelor's degree. For those who aren't aware, Morehouse is an historically black college. Specifically, this means the majority of the students are non-white. Furthermore, [at Morehouse] the student body is all male.

“On the surface, you might think this is the last place for diversity to flourish.”

Conversely, the opposite is true. For instance, a common stereotype for any one group is that they homogeneously think and operate the same way. However, I discovered that my peers were far more diverse than I would have ever expected.

For example, our Young Republicans student group was featured on CNN. You'd never think that Morehouse would have a Republican group on campus! Plus, we had kids from different economic backgrounds (working class, affluent) – combined with international students from Africa and the Caribbean.

SPEAKER

Michael Fisher is an experienced product management professional with a technical background and a passion for delivering amazing products that absolutely delight customers. He's a proven leader with a depth of experience in a variety of company sizes, ranging from early-stage startups to Fortune 500 companies, and across a variety of industries, including high-tech, health care and financial services. Also part of Michael's repertoire: versatile product, strategy and analytics skill set, which includes marketing analytics, business model development, go-to-market strategy, and user experience.



Michael Fisher
Community.com
Product Lead

Most importantly, it was the first time that I'd interacted with people of color achieving great things. Growing up in St. Louis, I didn't have many Black role models to look up to in my neighborhood. Furthermore, being at Morehouse represented the first time that many of us weren't singled out as the "token Black kid."

Ultimately, my experience at Morehouse serves as an example of what happens when you empower kids to achieve. Most importantly, it shows how diversity can manifest itself in beautiful ways that aren't expected.

When I think about diversity and inclusion in product management, I think it's helpful to break each term down on its own. To me, **creating a diverse team is all about representation**. Specifically, this doesn't just mean having multiple races or ethnicities involved. For example, diverse teams cover a wide range of demographics — including age, gender, sexual orientation and more. Ultimately, you want to cast a wide net with the people who are on your team to drive a great conversation.

Along these lines, inclusivity is all about making sure that everyone on your team has a voice. Even if you have a diverse team, **you have to make sure that everyone is contributing**. Ultimately, everyone should feel welcome and never feel like as though they need to keep to themselves.

“As a Black man in product, I know how difficult it can be when diversity isn't present.”

Simply put, it's hard to be comfortable when no one on your team looks like you. Most importantly, this issue extends beyond people of color. One of the biggest challenges for making product teams more diverse is making sure that you're not "the only one" on a team. For example, women face this issue a lot — as product management is a very male-dominated function.

In my own experience, I've met women who refused to take product roles because they would be the only woman in the building. I can completely empathize with these concerns, as it's difficult to be the lone champion for your people. Not everyone wants to be Jackie Robinson, Ruth Bader Ginsburg or a pioneer who breaks a barrier.

Product leaders need to take responsibility for solving the problem and finding the solution to increase diversity. Too often, you'll hear the excuse of "we don't have enough minority candidates" to reach in order to build a more diverse team. Or, product leaders will claim that it's "up to human resources" to bring about real change.

We have a responsibility as leaders to increase opportunities to fill our talent pipeline with more minority candidates. In addition, we must promote inclusive work environments for everyone in our organization.

In the end, every company needs to make diversity a shared responsibility for everyone in the building. For example, during my time at Pivotal Labs, **we instituted our own "Rooney Rule" for open positions**. In other words, positions would remain open until at least two candidates from underrepresented groups had applied. Today, we have to stop paying lip service to the issue and take it head-on to make product management truly representative of who we are.

It's one thing to talk about diversity in product — it's quite another to actually do something about making it a reality. Beyond my day-to-day business responsibilities, I make sure to prioritize engaging with underrepresented communities to open new opportunities in product for more people.

As I mentioned previously, one of the diversity challenges that many companies cite is the talent pipeline. Specifically, they reference the fact that the profile of most candidates is mostly white men. However, there are many ways for people like me to change this.

“For example, I work with many groups that expose underrepresented youth to opportunities in the tech world.”

Often times, kids from these social backgrounds have no idea about what it means to work in tech. Most importantly, they’ve never been approached by someone like me who’s working as a product leader. Even before I got to the West Coast, I worked with the “Emerging 100” in Atlanta during my college days. Specifically, this initiative targets high school kids and gets them thinking about tech opportunities at a young age.

Since moving to the West Coast, I stay very close to my community at UCLA, where I received my MBA. I’m still very active with on-campus activities that promote diversity on campus. Just recently, **we hosted an Embracing Diversity Conference** that brought together students from under-represented communities around the world. Specifically, we focus on how to get more young people into tech and also how to leverage their talents to get into business school.

Finally, it’s important to give people in underrepresented communities as much time to be hand-on with product opportunities as possible. For example, Pivotal Labs would participate in open boot camps that would enable high school entrepreneurs to get VC funding. In addition, **I work with an organization called the Last Mile, which provides coaching for prisoners.** Specifically, this initiative provides a roadmap for getting jobs once their sentences conclude.

Ultimately, making diversity work in the tech world goes further than pronouncements and lip service. In the end, it’s up to us to make an impact by taking action and bringing more people into the fold.

Diverse Voices in Product – Perspective 03

Venmo product lead on building your product career

From writing about tech to pioneering e-commerce innovation at Venmo, it’s no surprise that Ashley Phillips has quite the story to tell. It’s common for product managers to enter the field from different professions or industries. That said, what does it take for a “product outsider” to find start their product career Ashley talks about learning tech as a journalist and how she ultimately found her way in becoming a product manager.

From tech journalist to tech PM

If you’ve worked as a product manager for many years, it’s safe to say that you didn’t start out with “PM” in your title. That said, I’m sure that you haven’t heard about many journalists becoming product managers. Well, my product career actually did begin well outside of the product world! After finishing my master’s at Northwestern, I worked for ABC News as part of their media team.

However, this didn’t prevent me from being exposed to the tech world (which I would eventually find several years later). Early on in my career, I was able to cover science and technology in Silicon Valley. My timing could not have been better – as there were plenty of major moves taking place in 2006. For example, Twitter was just starting to take off and there were all kinds of amazing stories to cover in the Valley. Furthermore, **my first big story was about the first-ever iPhone** being released in 2007.

By getting exposed to these incredible stories, it's not a surprise that moving into a product career became a necessity. As a result, I learned about what would become my first product role at Nickelodeon. That said, my early scope at Nickelodeon did not represent a linear path into a full-on product role. In other words, I joined a large-scale organization with a well-defined structure that allowed me to learn the function from a number of different angles. Fast-forward to a few years later, I found a new challenge at Viewpoints — representing a much different opportunity with a completely different culture.

Being at a startup requires much more self-discipline and personal ownership of finishing projects. In other words, you have to figure things out on your own and essentially relearn how to do your job.

Then I joined Groupon during a period of crazy-fast growth. For example, they hired eight engineers per month, which at the time actually seemed like a slow day at the office. Things were moving so fast that we didn't know where everyone would fit in. However, we knew that the business needed this influx of talent, and I'm lucky to have been there during a period of such incredible growth.

Following a year-long hiatus in China, I found a new challenge at a startup called Modest. The company's mission focused on a unique and fulfilling solution for small businesses to expand their e-commerce footprint. I was the only product person on the team, allowing me to set the direction for the product organization moving forward.

The company's product decisions had been driven entirely by engineering. Thankfully, the engineers were quick to say, we've needed someone like you for a long time. As a result, the company's product culture really began to take shape. While living the startup life is inherently hectic and crazy, the opportunity to build product-forward processes and a product-forward culture serves me to this day.

“After building significant momentum, it was only a matter of time before Modest got on the radar for acquisition.”

With this, I got to experience the acquisition process from the front lines. Following many months of negotiations, we became part of the PayPal/Braintree family. Given that I'd seen the founders go through funding conversations in the early days, you can imagine how interesting it was to see them work through acquisition bids. I can honestly say that this process is equal parts exciting and scary. That said, it's one of the most defining moments of enhancing my product career experience.

For example, our little company of 19 employees needed to adjust the culture of an 18,000+ employee corporation. In the end, this transition became very easy to manage because of the strong culture of our new partners. Simply put, it's easy to get along with new co-workers when they are equally pleasant and competent.

SPEAKER

Ashley Phillips is the Director of Product at Venmo, one of the world's largest payment services. Prior, Ashley led the product team at a startup called Modest, which was eventually acquired by Paypal. In addition, Ashley worked on the product team at Groupon along with media production positions at ABC and Nickelodeon. She holds a master's degree from Northwestern University and currently lives in Chicago.



Ashley Phillips
Venmo, Director of Product

When thinking about building my product career, **I've always been drawn to new challenges** that provide room to put your stamp on how things get done. Following Modest's acquisition by PayPal/Braintree, we received opportunities to take advantage of new opportunities within the company's portfolio. In looking at these opportunities, I realized that Venmo represented a lot of what drew me to Groupon and Modest in the first place.

For example, Venmo has one of the most diverse and wide-ranging user bases in the world. From a product perspective, I feel that getting the ability to build for a large user base enables creativity and maximizes your impact. In addition, Venmo began to focus on e-commerce in addition to payment fulfillment. Given my experience in this space, it seemed like the perfect fit. Most importantly, many aspects of Venmo's product structure presented opportunities to take charge and define its future direction.

In my product career, I've found that **the best work I produce comes from not being in a settled environment**. Said differently, there's always room to be creative in these environments. Furthermore, you don't need to be in a startup to take advantage of these opportunities. Instead, it's about seeking out new positions and projects that give you the freedom to try things out and take on new challenges.

“Using Venmo as an example, one of the products that I'm most excited about is the Venmo card.”

Great products start with ease of use and immediate user relevance in daily lives. In other words, the product's core features and usability don't need to be explained. There's no craft or fluff to prop up why a product is useful. Ultimately, great products just stand on their own and their value is never in doubt.

As a product manager, the best way to bring these products to life is to have an appetite for problem-solving. Throughout your product career, **it's important to never say “that's not my job”** or run away from new challenges. Instead, you need to embrace the unknown in order to build credibility and trust within your team. Furthermore, you can enhance your credibility by developing communication skills. From holding a great conversation to being a great writer, I think that every product career can benefit by perfecting the art of connecting with others.

Diverse Voices in Product – Perspective 04

Authentic Design Founder on building with design swarms

Most people assume that designers and “creatives” represent a small portion of the population. However, the opposite is true when you enable creativity through interactive processes. What happens when product design becomes democratized and everyone gets involved? As part of our Diverse Voices series, Authentic Design Founder Surya Vanka talks about the impact of design swarms, from breaking down traditional product barriers to solving problems at scale.

The foundation for design swarms focuses on the human spirit. This approach assumes that all lives are equal and every human being can make an impact. Most importantly, we also assume that everyone is capable of being creative.

Why does this matter? We tend to think that “creatives” are a small minority. Furthermore, people who identify

as “not creative” tend to think that they can’t contribute to the design process. Conversely, the design swarms process turns these assumptions completely upside-down and approaches design from a whole new angle. At its core, swarm creativity uses the power of design thinking to build the overall approach. In other words, the outcome of design swarms is always solution-oriented. However, the engagement model is completely different and democratizes the design process to engage with a wider audience.

“Swarm creativity takes the design thinking model and turns it into an interactive platform.”

Specifically, each step utilizes gamification to enhance participants’ ability to contribute. As a result, **this process empowers people of all backgrounds** and skill sets to participate in a process that is normally kept behind the scenes.

You can think about this design platform as a universal “Lego Kit” that anyone can use. Unlike typical design processes, every interaction is rapid-fire and fun. People don’t have time to think or question what they’re doing. Instead, this process enables creativity to flow freely without constraint.

Ultimately, people make all the difference in the design process. Most importantly, a broad cross-section of people from many backgrounds will give design teams the necessary creative power to produce great products. **Too often, design teams are insular and keep to themselves.** However, these teams end up “alking to themselves and do not come up with meaningful solutions.

Using my own career as an example, practicing design takes years to master and understand. In other words, no one learns the process overnight or becomes an expert right away. As a result, it’s no surprise that design swarms have only come about in recent years through many years of practice and observation.

It takes a long time to develop fluency with design. So, the question becomes – how do you get people involved in the process when they aren’t rooted in design? The answer lies in the power of crowds or large groups of people.

When operating with design swarms, the basic assumption is that **large groups of people can generate solutions more effectively** than smaller groups in isolation. Most importantly, people are inherently more creative when working with one another. To maximize creativity and leverage the power of crowds, the key is to move people through an experience that is interactive.

My epiphany for how to tackle these types of issues began to take shape during the first hackathon that we hosted at Microsoft. By turning a large group of people loose and allowing them to problem-solve in an open way, it’s amazing to see what people can create. Most importantly, people operate with confidence and without constraint. Simply put, creativity flourishes in its purest form.

SPEAKER

Surya Vanka is the founder of Authentic Design, a firm that utilizes the “design swarms” theory to create unique product solutions for customers. Prior, he worked for more than 15 years at Microsoft in many UX leadership roles, where he introduced the design thinking process to the company and pioneered the company’s first-ever hackathon event. Before joining Microsoft, Surya was a design professor at the University of Illinois. He holds a degree from the Ohio State University and currently lives in Seattle.



Surya Vanka
Authentic Design,
Founder

While the design swarms process represents a new way of thinking about building products, its foundation lies in proven methods for getting results.

However, the biggest difference lies in the path that ultimately drives the result.

For example, most design chains are linear in regards to the number of steps or inputs that inform the final result. In addition, the teams responsible for these projects do not represent the needs of the entire organization. Conversely, it's a small subset of product people who don't have empathy for all users.

As a result, you end up shutting off opportunities for surprising breakthroughs or improvisation. This is where design swarms bring a new level of creativity and increase the capacity for unexpected solutions. Most importantly, large crowds can tackle problems from a much broader perspective.

In my experience, design swarms make a difference in a number of verticals in solving unique problems. For example, large-scale businesses use the process to determine new ways of solving ambiguous problems.

One powerful example involves combating the opioid epidemic. Specifically, one of the biggest challenges is the amount of time that it takes for addiction to set in. As a result, one person dies every 11 minutes from an opioid overdose. To attempt solving this issue, I worked with a group at Ohio State University that focused on figuring out ways to prevent addiction.

Through our analysis, we made an unexpected discovery about accidental overdoses. Specifically, children with parents who were prescribed fentanyl for medical reasons were finding excess pills in their parents' medicine cabinet. By going through design swarms, this example represents the kinds of breakthroughs that can happen when you think differently about solving problems.

Diverse Voices in Product – Perspective 05

SpotHero product lead on simplifying products

It's easy to look at a simple product and think that it can't be hard to make. However, the simplest interfaces often require the most demanding development. What does it take to bring simplicity to life when facing complexities? As part of our Diverse Voices series, SpotHero Product Lead Jenny Wanger talks about lessons learned as a line cook, optimizing simple interfaces and what it takes to get ahead as a product manager.

I'm sure that you've heard a lot of interesting stories about getting started in product management. We all get into the profession from a variety of angles. However, I'm pretty confident that my entry point into becoming a product manager will seem especially unique. I majored in East Asian Studies at Harvard, which as you can imagine doesn't focus on product management skills. After graduating, I took my personal passion for cooking and became a line cook at top restaurants in Washington, D.C.

As you can imagine, **my parents were a bit skeptical about me using my hard-earned Harvard degree to work in a restaurant.** However, it represented the best outlet for me to pursue a passion that I've had for a long time. For one, there's something very physically satisfying about chopping vegetables and prepping meals. However, there are plenty of parallels between product management and how a kitchen operates at maximum capacity.

“If you can survive in a restaurant, you can pretty much make it anywhere.”

Most importantly, there's a deep commitment to hospitality and creating a well-orchestrated experience. When I think about product management, these are essential elements to running an effective team and making products that provide a memorable experience for users. For example, you need to be 100 percent ready to go before customers come in. From your garnishes and sauces to the placement of silverware, everything needs to be in place to deliver a great experience.

At its core, **product management is all about optimizing processes for your team and customers** to build value. During my time in restaurants, I developed a framework for how to put these skills to good use. In my current role at SpotHero, I'm applying these competencies every day to improve our product. For example, I always look for ways to collaborate with my team to figure out ways in which we can improve or focus on areas that have been going well.

Ultimately, the lessons I learned in restaurants were all about process improvement. Just like I did when I was in the kitchen, I've continued to utilize these skills in my product management career.

It's easy to think that simple interfaces do not carry a ton of complexity on the back-end of development. In reality, the opposite is true. In order to build intuitive products that customers love, **product management teams must work tirelessly to simplify complex processes.** Furthermore, this forces us to think a bit like product designers. In other words, you're trying to create an experience that is so straightforward that the design work fades into the background.

Ever since joining SpotHero, I have a deeper appreciation for working on an app that simplifies unexpectedly complex transactions. For example, the interaction that customers have with our app is very straightforward. You simply open it, press a button and you magically have a parking spot. In reality, the parking systems that we're managing to simplify these customer interactions are incredibly challenging.

SPEAKER

Jenny Wanger is the Senior Product Manager at SpotHero, where she managed a complete app/website redesign and continues to optimize the parking experience for drivers around the world. Prior, she worked on digital products at Arity as well as managed events for the National Charter Alliance for Public Schools. Jenny also was employed by several restaurants as a line cook, which she credits for instilling valuable skills that have served her well in becoming a product manager. She holds an MBA from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and currently lives in Chicago.



Jenny Wanger
SpotHero,
Product Lead

“The key to creating these solutions is to always have the end user in mind.”

In other words, user-centered design is at the heart of every successful product management team. At SpotHero, one of our mantras is to “give drivers the right of way”, which is one of many “parking puns” that we have!

Every day, I'll hear members of our team saying “we need to solve this problem because of customer issues” at a specific parking lot. It may seem daunting to solve every customer issue – but that's a major piece of what makes any product culture special.

Throughout your product management career, **one of the biggest challenges you'll face is managing expectations**. In other words, we're all expected to say yes to every request that comes from any number of people. For example, you're going to get requests from people who need something yesterday. Usually, you'll hear “because it's high priority” any time a new request comes through.

In any given workday, someone will probably ask about a promo code for an upcoming launch. Usually, these requests come out of nowhere and the timeline requirements are super tight. On the other hand, you'll get an email from an investor who reports a bug and says that it needs to be solved as soon as possible. And in the midst of all these timely requests, your manager will ask for a three-year development plan.

Your co-workers and key partners can't do their jobs unless product management is delivering. As a result, **you're on the frontlines for keeping a lot of people happy**. I like to refer to this conundrum as the “squeaky wheel” syndrome. In other words, it's the perpetual need for product managers to always say yes. In reality, we have to manage expectations and get into the habit of saying no.

“There are limitations to the ways in which you can say no.”

For example, if your top investor brings something to your attention, you may have to drop everything. However, it's critical for product management teams to set expectations for your team's primary goals. As a result, your constituents will have a clear understanding of your team's priorities. Ultimately, they will understand why every problem can't be solved right away.

Your organization needs to have empathy for your product management strategy and overall goals. However, this is not to suggest that you come up with ways for people to feel sorry for your expected responsibilities. Instead, it's a matter of delivering a clear roadmap for your priorities so they understand why you have to stay on target.

This will ensure that your most reliant groups are aware of trade-offs that would come with dropping everything for one bug fix. Getting back to the investor example, you need to illustrate how certain bugs that may affect them are, in fact, isolated instances that have nothing to do with overall product performance.

Ultimately, **people expect product managers to say “yes” to everything**. In the end, your constituents need to start saying yes to your product management team's overall strategy to ensure that you never lose sight of the bigger picture.



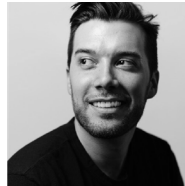
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