



The Case for Generalist PMs

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Forward

Christina Lucey

Credit Karma, Director of Product Management

Since I first earned the title *product manager*, I've been given the same advice about my career: Christina, you need to specialize as you progress. There are PMs who excel at growth; PMs who excel at scaled products; PMs who are great at enterprise, platforms and data products; and PMs who have immense expertise in a particular domain. The thought of picking one thing always sounded terrifying to me. (For the record, in university I studied a combined computer science and biology program with six internships that let me explore a range of things that piqued my interest, including but not limited to, schizophrenia genetic research, software engineering, phylogenetic trees and the diversity of life, hardware design, organizational design, science fiction, and marketing.) I understand the importance of specialization and developing your personal brand, but the thought of it plagued me. What if I get bored? What if I paint myself into a corner? What if I choose wrong?

The workforce today puts a premium on specialization. It's my argument¹ that the role of the product leader is best served by generalists with breadth of experience. Product management is an evolving role with an evolving toolkit. In my conversation with Anish Acharya, we talked about how product managers have always had the highest leverage where the most ambiguity exists. As product people, we collectively learn quite rapidly, thanks in part to communities like Products That Count, which means that as our collective knowledge grows, the ambiguity is constantly shifting and changing. As a result, where product leaders find leverage and provide value is constantly shifting. It's like the old saying: what got you here won't get you there.

That's why I was so excited to talk to product leaders who had great successes under their belts. I asked what features and approaches to building and scaling products were once novel and conferred advantages but now have become table stakes? Where are the next frontiers of major innovation going to take place? And, ultimately, I began to uncover what is the **Latest Thinking** from product leaders on what makes products win?

¹And also a highly researched topic with lots of evidence to back it up.

See *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World* by David Epstein.

The Case for Generalist PMs — Perspective 01

Amir Hermelin, VP Products and Data at SoFi on building winning products

Christina Lucey recently sat down with SoFi's VP Products and Data Amir Hermelin, to discuss his experience building winning products and whether the best products, in fact, always win.

You can listen to the full episode of Product Talk, but the highlights are detailed below.

On the superpower that helps him win

Christina asked Amir what his product superpower was. His outside the box answer should have been an indicator of the answers on building winning products that would follow.

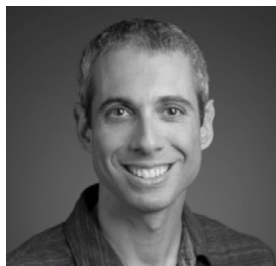
"Platform thinking [as a product superpower is] not thinking of one-off solutions but taking a platform mindset where you can take a solution and re-use it and make it scalable and resilient and transferable to other problems – looking at problems holistically and taking an API-driven approach."

On the challenges of winning in a market with an established leader

To be an industry disruptor, you need to have a plan on how to dethrone the current leader.

"[As a new entrant in a market where the competitor had a head start] it took us a long time to figure out what we wanted to do... The first challenge was figuring out what are we trying to accomplish and how do we want to measure the success, then how do we construct the team, the products, the efforts."

Amir Hermelin is the VP Products and Data at SoFi, and is working on next-gen ML-driven personal finance and investing apps. He has built successful products from MVP to mass adoption for companies of all sizes, scaling teams and products with razor-sharp focus to achieve winning market positions. Amir joined Google Cloud when there was <\$20M revenue and helped scale the business to over \$1B/quarter through innovative and differentiated products and services. Prior to Google, he headed Riverbed's Granite product line which more than doubled Riverbed's annual revenue from ~\$300m to over \$800M. Amir is also an angel investor and an advisor to startups.



Amir Hermelin
SoFi, VP Products and Data

On what defines a win

When focused on building winning products, it's important to understand that winning has different KPIs. It also has different meanings to different people and companies.

"Experiences told me that not necessarily the best solution to the problem, or the best UX, or the best price is always what wins. When we talk about how a win is measured, a win can be measured in user satisfaction. Your win can be measured in adoption rate or in revenue. You could have products that win with fewer audiences but gain more revenue. Or you can have products that are amazingly delightful and get very high NPS scores but are free or you can't charge for it. It's hard to monetize them."

Building the best product doesn't always mean you win

You may be focused on building winning products, but great PMs understand there are factors outside of the product itself that can determine if you win or not.

"There are other key dependencies on the win, even if you've defined what winning is. In addition to adoption and monetization, there's also the distribution channels. Also, marketing plays a very key role in successful products."

The Case for Generalist PMs — Perspective 02

Sandi MacPherson, Founder of Quibb, on the vectors behind winning products

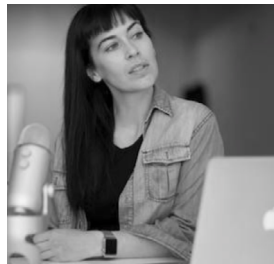
From environmental science to product management

I'm originally from Canada and I've been in the Bay Area for about eight years. Currently, I am a founder of a startup, which I've been working on for the last two years. Prior to that I was working on another startup. Believe it or not, I started my career journey doing environmental work. However, the environmental work didn't fulfill me and it didn't help that I felt like a cog in the government's wheel. So, I set out to get an MBA in Toronto and that introduced me to the world of tech.

In the beginning of my MBA, I focused all my attention on corporate social responsibility. I thought that by working in tech I would have more control over the process and results of the work. So I moved to Palo Alto, and I started working on everything that I possibly could. I started reading books, meeting people, and going to events.



Sandi MacPherson started Quibb in 2013 from the heart of Silicon Valley, in small cafes on University Ave in Palo Alto. Before starting Quibb, Sandi was in environmental science, holding roles at Environment Canada and Social Venture Partners. She transitioned to tech after receiving her MBA from the Schulich School of Business.



Sandi MacPherson
Quibb, Founder

I worked on four different products until I built on one that finally worked. My successful product was Quibb, a professional network to share industry news and analysis. Sadly, I shut it down about three years ago. However, I've been working on this new thing which we've been experimenting on some different social products for the past two years.

The skills and motivations for working in product

People often ask me what benefit my environmental science background has for my career in tech. I like to point out that one of the things that is well recognized in the field of environmental science is complexity and systems thinking. Furthermore, I think a lot of that stuff can be applied to tech and products. Another benefit is that environmental science helped me work on applying research knowledge to solve a problem.

Regardless of my background, I like being exposed to all the different parts that are involved in building a product. Yet, I think it also comes down to the fact that I want to see certain products come to life. I have ideas, wants and needs for things that I think should exist in the world that other people aren't doing. It also helps that I personally have the skills, capacity, and privilege to be able to do so.

Nonetheless, coming up with a great product is difficult. However, one thing that helped me is my empathy. Product people have commented that I'm highly empathetic. In fact, it's very easy for me to be open-minded and put myself in the shoes of users. This allows me to understand not just like their actions, but the life that they live and their environment.

Product 'truths'

There are a lot of things that are preached as "truths" when working at a startup. However, they're not actually true once you take the time to dig under the covers. For example, people say that the best product usually wins. That's something I've understood and internalized as true. Eventually, you realize they're not absolute truths and it's a little heartbreaking.

There's a lot of other factors at play regarding your business and competitors. So, the idea that the best product wins always is nice and a really great theory to have, but in the real world it does not actually play out.

Recently I had a conversation with a fintech investor who invests solely in fintech companies. He believes that all the existing fintech products are terrible. For this reason, he believes that it's easy in this category to build a 10x better product. Nonetheless, that might mean that the product is better than the existing thing, but it might not be the best.

What is considered the best product depends on your definition of "the best". Some people define the best product as the one that is easiest for the users to use. Others define the best product as the one that makes the most money. Then there are those that believe the best product is the one that uses the newest coolest technology in an amazing and innovative way.

Learned lessons from Quibb

Quibb, which I shut down in 2017, was a professional network to share industry news and analysis. It functioned most comparable to Twitter, the content people shared would show up on your feed. You could comment on it and have discussions about whatever content was shared.

One of the biggest problems Quibb faced was this existing mental model of how email worked. Quibb sent out a newsletter to users that linked to articles that their connections on Quibb read. This was all made possible by an algorithm that ran in the background of the product. It was the actions of the users in the product that were creating the content in the email, and not a copywriter.

At the time, email made sense as the main channel to communicate with users. However, since email operates as a channel, as a medium it was difficult to work with. Usually, there's a channel that acts as the method of transmitting a message, and then you apply your own medium, which facilitates the exchange information. But email is this all encompassing thing, so you don't have a lot of flexibility in terms of how you present the content.

Eventually, we realized that people were not using the actual product to get their content; they were just clicking on the links in the emails. This created a problem for us: without users interacting with the product the algorithm that wrote the emails began to have trouble generating new content links.

A new focus on machine learning

Looking back, Quibb relied on influencers creating content, which is time consuming. We tried to avoid this obstacle by allowing influencers to share what they are reading instead of creating original content. The theory behind this was that the topics people write about often come from what they read. So if you're interested in a person because of the things they think then the things they read are a component of that.

My new company develops products that are at the intersection of artificial intelligence and user interfaces. We've built, launched, and trashed a few different things. One of the things I've learned about machine learning is that we're only one level of abstraction above pure math. ML is hard to do – it requires a lot of technical people who understand the underlying science.

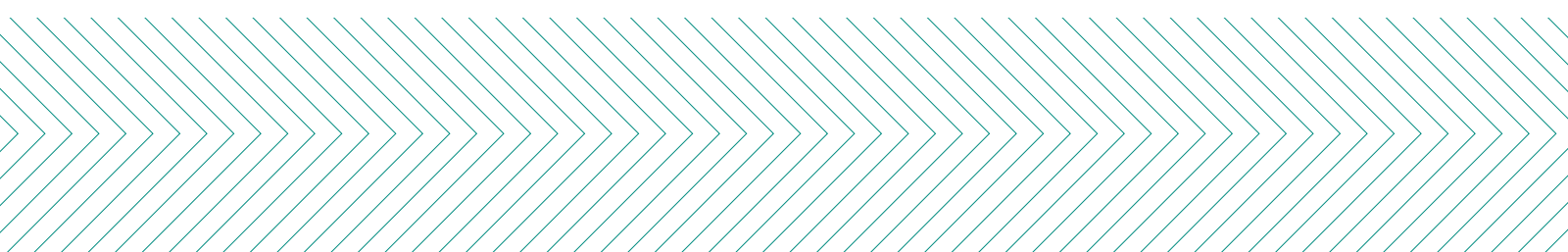
From my experience ML is not a simple plug into your system and you're done. I think some people believe they can win a product category by simply saying you have an ML product which is not true. This touches on our earlier conversation about what makes a winning product. I think that there are some uses for ML that make sense. Which is why we're still on this bumpy road of people trying to figure out how to evaluate and when to use ML.

Winning product categories and vectors of success

To win product categories, you need to think about the vectors of success that are required. Not all vectors are the same. It depends on which vector you're talking about because some of those vectors are changing quickly. Some of them are changing slowly. Some of them have a lot of people going after them and some of them don't.

How do you create the vectors that you're chasing with your product and feel confident that you have the capacity to win? You could build a really crappy product in some category – let's say you've got a bunch of money and you can buy up all the ads for it. Chances are you'll win. So I think those underlying dynamics will always be the same irrespective of what changes are happening in the broader macro environment.

It reminds me of a shared wisdom about product, focus, and especially getting something off the ground. You have to be willing to let some fires burn and just be okay with it. So, you need to think broader than just product vectors. In fact, you need to think specifically of the world. Take note of what is changing and what product you can build to fit in those spaces.



The Case for Generalist Pms — Perspective 03

The evolution of product management

Product management is a field that is ever-changing. Christina Lucey recently sat down with Andreessen Horowitz General Partner Anish Acharya, to discuss how product management has evolved over time and within companies.

You can listen to the full episode of Product Talk, but the highlights are detailed below.

On the role of product in early-stage companies

According to Acharya, the role of product changes as a company evolves.

“Early is exciting because it’s when there is the most potential and the products can go, and really the business can go, in so many different directions. I think the product is the most interesting sort of interface between all of the intentionality and all the sort of designs of the creator of that product, of the PM, and the market, their customers.

So the product really represents, especially at this early stage, this manifestation of ambition and intention. It’s something that you can over-index at the early stage. At later stages, it becomes more of a financial conversation. So, it’s an exciting time and the product is the best representative of what’s going on and what to be excited about for companies at that stage.”

On what has changed in product over the last 10 years

This change is what Acharya sees as creating the best products from his perspective as a GP at a16z.

“There was a world maybe 10 years ago when product was really, I don’t know if clean is the right word, but it was a narrow domain where it was really the business of product people and engineering people. Everything now, most of the best products are created by joining the perspectives of people in many different functions.”

On the evolution of product within a company and industry

The evolution of product within a company changes as a company grows. We’ve seen the role of product evolve within industry as well.

“I think that the way that you actually have leverage changes over time. It happens both within a company and in the industry more broadly. So, I think a great example is if you look at how a company is built, like what is a

Anish Acharya is General Partner at Andreessen Horowitz and is the former VP of Product Management at Credit Karma. He founded two companies with successful exits: Social Deck, which was later acquired by Google, and Snowball, acquired by Credit Karma. Through his companies, roles and successes, Acharya knows that his heart is in product.



Anish Acharya
Andreessen Horowitz
General Partner

company superpower over time, maybe at the beginning, when your pre-product-market fit, it's just speed of learning. Whether that's our lovable YC founders eating ramen noodles, coding till three in the morning, or a very different style of teams. Either way, the faster you go, the faster you learn, the faster you get to product-market fit.

So your superpower is speed, then post product-market fit you start to look at how you get scale. How do you take the thing that's working for a small number of people and working really well, and actually get it to all of the people? Then there's a phase that asks how do we start to unlock the adjacencies around that product? So, at each of those different phases, you go from speed to scaling to product design and product strategy to perhaps going all the way back to the initial state and saying, 'Hey, now when we need to build our second successful product, we need to go back to being fast and creative.' So, I think companies change in how they actually can exert leverage and I think industry has also changed in a very similar way."

On the evolution of the product manager

Product manager is a role that is constantly changing.

"I think if you look at what's happened in the last 10 years, the last 20 years, in fact, more of the things that product managers traditionally used to do are getting done by their teams. One of the roles of the product manager was to actually handle all the designs and get them from design to engineering. Now design and engineering are collaborating more directly. That's a cultural change. But there are tools like Figma, which are enabling that. There are also things like product managers collecting requirements and feedback from customers, while increasingly we have a customer advisory board or we have a Slack channel with a bunch of key customers.

What you're starting to see is that a lot of work that can be automated will be automated. And that's a good thing because where product managers really add value is in these sorts of highly ambiguous situations. So within an organization, I think that's where PMs earn their paycheck. Sometimes ambiguity is customer-oriented. Like they're asking for x, but we think they need y. Sometimes the ambiguity is organizational. So like, how do we actually get something done that may be unpopular or uncomfortable for the organization.

The Case for Generalist PMs - Perspective 04

Personalization vs. community products

Christina Lucey sat down with the Nudge Co-founder and CEO John Peterson, to discuss personalization versus. community products and how the Nudge, since its inception, has adapted to meet its customers where they're at.

You can listen to the full episode of Product Talk, but the highlights are detailed below.



On why the Nudge works

Great product managers listen to their customers. John Peterson had this to say for every person who says customers won't try something new.

"Throughout the history of the company I've found that users are incredibly willing to try out new stuff – in fact, a lot of them really look forward to it."

On why personalization in products isn't always the answer

The Nudge built its lifestyle planner friend with personalization in mind. However, they found out that wasn't what their customers actually wanted.

"[Personalization] was something people always asked for, which is why we made it, but once we created it for people, most of the people who got it said they didn't want it anymore."

There's something in human nature that drives us to want as many choices as possible, but choices are ultimately a barrier to action."

On how to be a bit of both in the battle of personalization vs. community products

The Nudge has managed to keep the community feeling while still seeming to offer some level of personalization.

"The way we have adapted to [deliver personalization] without destroying the community is to do what we call macro personalization, which is if we think this nudge won't be relevant to at least 60 percent of people, we will build in a menu."

On the tools behind the product

The Nudge works independently of its app, but just don't call it a bot.

"The idea of not having a platform and just making decisions for people really, really worked. Our engagement in terms of click-through and retention was off the charts, only about a fifth of our users has the Nudge app. 'Bot' is kind of a dirty word at the Nudge. A bot is trying to guess what you're trying to say and pretending to be open-ended and analog. Something it's not. To do that and still come across as a friend is not possible and not necessary."

John Peterson is the CEO of the Nudge, which is a planner friend in your pocket. He studied computing and economics at UCLA and began his career as a growth analyst for American Airlines, helping them understand the behaviors of university students. He has since built and sold a financial portfolio-generating tool called 9 Financial and spent several years as a growth consultant and freelance growth hacker. Three years ago, he founded the nudge with his sister.



John Peterson
The Nudge, CEO

The Case For Generalist PMs - Perspective 04

Sam's Club VP Product Management on adaptable retail products

"Four-in-a-Box is an empowered collaborative team. It represents the business owner of the product, it represents the product owner, it represents the designer or the UX, and it also then represents the engineer.... the four together work in a collaborative way to make sure that we're solving the problem in the right way."

Sam's Club VP Product Management, Tim Simmons, on 'Four-in-a-Box' Product Methodology

Established in 1983, Sam's Club is no stranger to changing environments and creating adaptable products. The retail warehouse survived the switch to the digital age. It extended the stock of its physical locations into a viable e-commerce platform. To survive throughout technological advances and thrive in a modern world, Sam's Club has had to adapt. It's a concept that our next podcast guest knows very well.

Sam's Club VP, In Club Product Tim Simmons and Product Talk host Christina Lucey spoke about adaptable retail products.

Tim Simmons currently serves as the Sam's Club VP, Product Management. Prior to joining Sam's Club, Tim worked mainly in professional services for advertising and consulting firms, including MRM/McCann West, Rapp, Hewlett-Packard, Peppers & Rogers Group, and Ernst & Young. He also interestingly founded an international language program, which is a nonprofit organization, serving the needs of children in Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltics.



Tim Simmons
Sam's Club
VP, In Club Product

As businesses face changes, be it a new means of receiving information or a global pandemic that shuts down locations, they have to consider whether their products are adaptable to these challenges. You can listen to the full episode of Product Talk, but the highlights are detailed below.

On the goal of Sam's club's in-club product team

As Vice President of Product Management, Simmons has taken on a role that caters to two parts of the equation.

"We want to create wonderful experiences for our members that deliver a really special experience for them. And then, the second piece is that we create products that make it easier on our associates to operate our clubs and make their lives and jobs easier."

On the mindset that inspires adaptable product management

From the outside looking in, it can be difficult to pinpoint what would keep a product manager so focused on their end goal. For Simmons, it's pretty straightforward:

"How can I create a special experience that brings about an element of delight? To me, it's a very, very fulfilling and rewarding challenge to be faced with day in and day out. And so I think that's the main thing I really love thinking through? where are we not delivering a great experience today for both associates and members? And how can we fix that and make that something special?"

On his PM superpower

As product managers, we often talk about our “PM superpower.” They’re the essential tools that product managers use at each stage of the product lifecycle to elevate efficiency. This is even applicable to adaptable products.

Simmons shared his own superpower:

“Well, honestly, I think it’s the ability to walk a day in somebody else’s shoes. I guess you could call that empathy.”

The power of not knowing

Everybody can’t know everything, especially when walking into a new role. After discussing his introduction to being a retail operator and his experience of starting with no experience, Simmons provided some sound insight.

“There’s a great article by Liz Wiseman called ‘The Power of Not Knowing.’ And in that article, she talks about the knowledge trap and she talks about how it’s often actually good to get out of what we think we know. And there’s a great power in just saying, ‘I don’t know the answer.’ And so I have to explore this. I have to discover it myself.”

On innovation and adaptable products in Sam’s Club

Speaking to the podcast’s topic, Simmons discusses a special innovation in Sam’s Club. It showcases the company’s vision to create adaptable products that cater to the modern, mobile world.

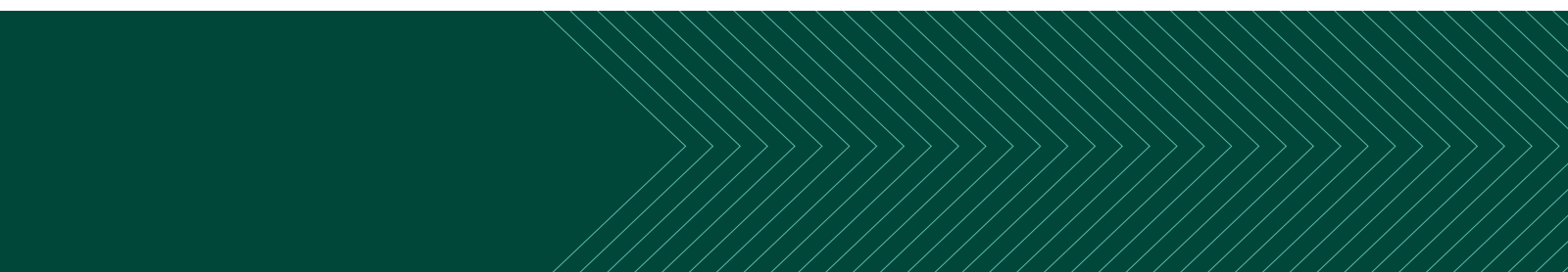
“So today, with our scan and go app, a member has to scan the barcode on the product in order to log it in the app as putting it into the cart. And sometimes, barcodes aren’t positioned optimally on the packaging. You know, you have to lift the heavy thing up to get to the barcode at the bottom of it, for example, to scan it. With item vision, one of the things we’re testing with is you just hold your phone up to it, it recognizes that item and asks you if you want to add it to your cart. You don’t have to scan it.”

On the impact of COVID-19

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses across the globe had to adapt. Sam’s Club was no different. As Simmons puts it, “To say that the pandemic has had a profound impact on us is probably an understatement.”

He goes on to explain, “So our first thought was, ‘how do we keep our associates safe, and how do we keep our members safe?’ And that might seem a funny answer in the context of adaptable product management, but actually, it’s a perfect fit.”

“We were working on a product that we call our ‘emergency app,’ and the problem the emergency app is solving is how can we clearly protect associates and members in the case of an emergency?”

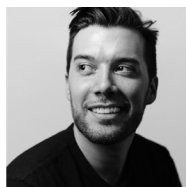


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- **Programs focused on answering the question, “What makes a great product?”**
- **Our commitment to increase diversity and inclusion in product**

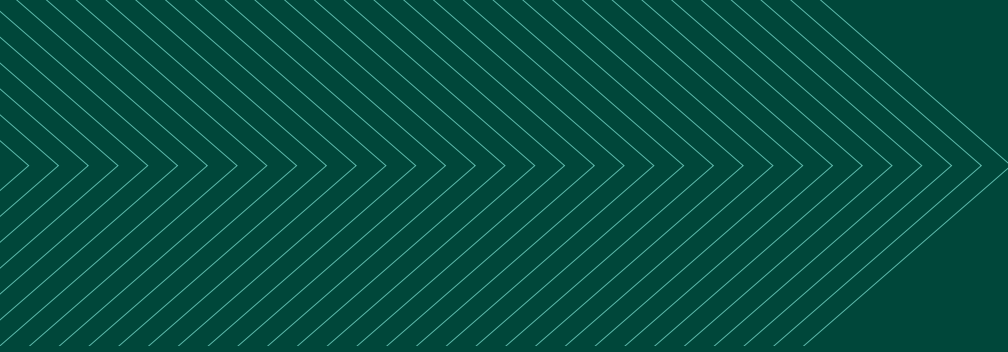


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