Product Launch Readiness
10 Common Pitfalls to Avoid
by Anne Bakstad

In addition to all the externally focused activities required to ensure a successful product launch – marketing, advertising, PR – there are a number of activities that companies need to focus on internally. It is common to encounter numerous pitfalls when preparing to operationally support new products and services in the market. Being aware of the pitfalls and knowing how to avoid them has a huge impact on the success or failure of a new launch.   Here are the pitfalls we have seen again and again, as well as tips for avoiding them in your product or service launch.

Not having standardized tools and templates
Planning a product launch is infinitely easier if there are project management and product management tools and templates in place to help the team. Make sure you equip your team with the right planning tools including project schedules, launch plans, issues trackers, roles and responsibilities matrices, etc. Keep the tools and templates simple so they aren't a burden, but help facilitate keeping everyone on track.

Not involving the right people
Involving a cross-functional team at the early stages of planning will bring with it the buy-in and accountability required to get things done.   This buy-in is critical to ensuring the momentum you need to be successful. Establish the cross functional team up front and involve them in launch planning through process mapping, project schedule development, etc.

Not appreciating the importance of project planning and scheduling
Any successful product launch hinges on everything coming together at the right time, not just product development completion – this can't happen without cross functional preparation, scheduling, AND contingency planning. Create project schedules that include ALL the tasks involved in a launch and all the interdependencies.

Not resolving issues or tracking decisions
One or two unresolved issues can bring a launch to a screeching halt – issues need to be resolved in sync with the project schedule. Also decisions tend to get made and remade as the product development lifecycle proceeds – to eliminate rework and misunderstandings, decisions need to be tracked and owned.

Not mapping out processes in advance
Process mapping enables the whole organization to truly understand their roles in supporting the new product or service – it helps identify which systems, tools and documentation will need to be changed or created. Conduct a cross-functional process mapping session to build the process as a team to ensure no steps are missed. The process should include all of the steps from quote to cash for the new product or service; it also identifies who is responsible for each step and what the customer touch points are throughout the process.

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Not having the right tools and systems in place to support launch
New products often require different levels and types of infrastructure and support including modifications to business systems. Developing requirements for the infrastructure in advance makes a big difference. Your process mapping efforts will help determine what systems and tools may need to be modified. Identify this early in the launch planning so that customers are properly supported at launch.

Not putting customer support in place
Customer support can be a big expense and is often viewed as a place to cut corners on costs. Inadequate customer support can cause huge customer dissatisfaction at launch and dictate product success or failure. Be sure to map out the process for customer support and make sure roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Be sure that customer support is included in all internal and external communications.

Not understanding the true priority of launch
Product launch should be viewed as a distinct project phase. Priorities are most often dictated by dollars; know where your launch falls into the larger picture of corporate priorities. Be sure to get the support you need to be successful.

Not testing that the product can be supported
Comprehensive testing of the infrastructure and support can help detect those small oversights that can bring the whole launch down. Be sure to include operational and support testing, not just product testing, in your launch planning.

Not communicating enough
Product launch requires communication across multiple groups. Communicate, communicate and over-communicate with the launch team. Plan to communicate to the whole organization well in advance of the launch. There is nothing like launching a new product only to have a customer call and no one know what they are talking about. Establish multiple vehicles for communication to hit people at all fronts.

About the Author, Anne Bakstad
Anne is a Product Launch Consultant for Clearworks -- www.clearworks.net. Clearworks provides product management and product marketing expertise and resources to help companies build, launch, and market new products. Projects span the product lifecycle from new product research and market analysis to writing product requirements to product messaging strategies and product launch planning. Clearworks team members also deliver workshops on a variety of new product topics including innovation tools and process mapping for product launch. Contact Anne at *Anne@Clearworks.net.*