

Shift in mindset: How product-led thinking can transform your approach to digital development

An article inspired by a presentation from Laura Jenner, Product Director at Immediate Media, at the Independent Publisher Conference, Friday November 8, 2019.



Look up ‘product-led thinking’ and it is unlikely you will uncover a single, definitive manifesto.

But at the PPA Independent Publishers Conference, Laura Jenner, Product Director at Immediate Media, gave a lucid and entertaining account of what this tech-native philosophy is, and what it can mean for publishers unfamiliar with the approach.

At its core, she said, was the aim to “delight, monetise and retain” the people using the content-based products we collectively produce, and so lesson one – the most important of all – is to put the customer at the heart of things. This mantra, often heard at industry conferences, has particular resonance in product-led thinking, where the customer is the ultimate filter through which decisions are made.

Lesson two, said Laura, is to ensure there is healthy collaboration between cross-functional teams. Work being carried out in isolated silos can be a common cause behind operational dysfunction, but for a digital product to succeed on all fronts, it must incorporate a diverse range of inputs across a spectrum of skills, from editorial, design and UX to business intelligence, sales and marketing.

The common ground for decision-making is the desired customer outcome (or outcomes) and not the product itself i.e. the ‘output’. A familiar challenge can be having to deal with the “roar of the HIPPO” i.e. the Highest-Paid Person’s Opinion, where loud demands are made for new product features with little consideration for how they will impact on customers or their behaviour.

Ideally, said Laura, you should be asking yourself not what you are creating but what you want it to achieve: “What is it you want people to do that will drive value for your business?”

This clear objective should be matched by objectivity of thought, and data can be valuable here as a source of independent, 'agenda-free' information – albeit without any context. And that's not to say that subjective opinion should be ignored, Laura argued - it's a case of balancing both, or "taking the data to the emotion and vice versa".

Lesson three was the advice to embrace a 'test, learn, iterate' approach to development. The aim here, said Laura, was to de-risk the potentially expensive development process. Ideas and concepts can be developed into paper prototypes, for example, providing the basis to uncover high-value insight at low cost.

Lesson four is to draw up clear lines of ownership. Collective input is one thing, but when it comes to the delivery of content, for example, that should be the domain of the editorial team. The ownership of the product itself and responsibility for its ongoing evolution? That remains with the product team.

Why, you may ask, does all this matter so much? The answer, says Laura, is cost. Software development is expensive and "talent comes at a price", so it should be managed and used as efficiently and effectively as possible, whether that's in-house resource or working with external partners.

Ultimately, a product-led approach is based on problem solving. But it is only by interrogating the problem itself that you can get true clarification of what needs to be solved. The objective to get more customers, for example, might actually be rooted in the requirement to build non-advertising revenues, which means those new customers need to be non-anonymous registered users, which then shapes how the product needs to be developed to achieve that aim.

These 'meta' questions should be put to the cross-functional team for consideration, and all research – both quantitative and qualitative – should be factored into the process of finding answers.

"Asking the questions leads through to 'what can we test easily, cheaply and quickly?'," said Laura. This, in turn, generates learnings and hypotheses, which graduate into development work, testing and then delivery of "the first slice that can impact on the business". Measurement, by getting close to the customers on the receiving end, is of course crucial to assess this impact – whether positive or negative.

It's important to recognise that the Product Manager doesn't have all the answers, said Laura, but by adopting product-led thinking, publishers can implement a truly collaborative approach to giving audiences the content they want in the way they want it.

"Working together, to me, is really, really key here. Don't put product and development in a silo, put them at the heart of your business. Publishing is filled with amazing, talented people and if they work together, they can produce some really, really amazing stuff for audiences who genuinely care."