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Critical Steps for Tech Product Managers: Manage Product Launch

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Initiatives: Product Introduction

Product launches require leveraging prior planning and development. Product managers responsible for managing a product launch must flawlessly scope and create the launch plan; align sales, marketing, support and operations resources; and evaluate success after launch.

Overview

Key Findings

- Successful launches are whole company endeavors that require alignment of all relevant stakeholders; launch leads are led either by product management or product marketing.

- Vendors use agile methodologies and develop or refine their products in an iterative approach; anticipating the timing of the launch is a challenge.

- Product managers (PMs) who are launch leads also juggle multiple roles. They may lack the best practices for how to create a plan and may not be resourced adequately to execute a successful launch.

- Organizational constraints can complicate buildup of sales and operational readiness, resulting in missed launch targets. Business pressure to close new sales opportunities often results in forgoing postlaunch evaluations, thus losing valuable lessons for the next product launch.

Recommendations

PMs responsible for product introduction should master and execute these critical steps:

- Organize a structured launch team by appointing a launch team leader and mapping out requirements from each participant in a launch schedule.

- Scope the launch by creating a "baseline" readiness report, cataloging inputs from all functions in the launch team to determine time and scale of launch.

- Create the launch plan with definitive, measurable goals by setting KPIs and expected deliverables for each activity and member on the launch team.

- Build sales and operational readiness by allocating time and resources to ensure sales, support and operational teams are fully trained and have signed off on sales' start and postlaunch evaluation dates.
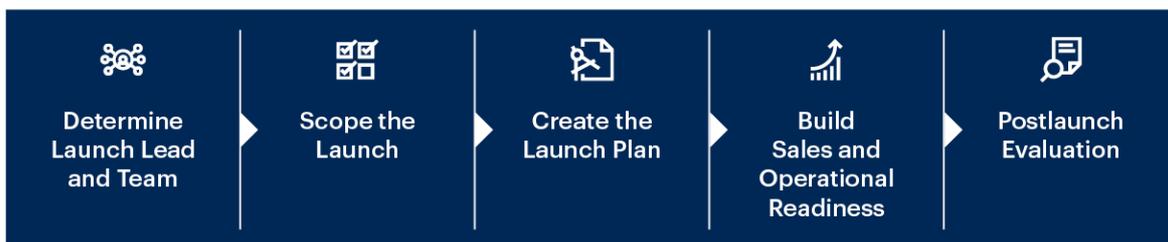
Introduction

Product launches mark the life cycle stage when marketing and sales of an offering commences and the product is made generally available to customers in the market. In the 2021 Gartner Product Management Survey, 59% of all product management teams report that they are fully responsible and contribute actively for product launches as part of their key roles. Among the many functions that PMs perform, product launches represent one of the most complex activities. For leading technology and service provider (TSP) organizations with high revenue growth, more than two-thirds (68%) of PMs are tasked with and fully responsible for product launches, compared with less than one in two (48%) PMs of laggard companies.

To prime product teams for launch success, Gartner details five critical steps (with three go/no-go gates) for PMs to manage and execute product launches, as highlighted in Figure 1. These steps should be executed with the aid of Tool: Template for a Successful Technology Product Launch for best results.

Figure 1. Manage Product Launch

Manage Product Launch

| Determine Launch Lead and Team | Scope the Launch | Create the Launch Plan | Build Sales and Operational Readiness | Postlaunch Evaluation |

Source: Gartner
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Analysis

Determine the Launch Lead and Team

PMs are involved through all phases of a product's life cycle. Based on the 2021 Gartner Product Management Survey, in 41% of cases where PMs do not lead, the product marketing function takes over the responsibilities in more than half (53%) of new product launches. While it is common for larger organizations to have dedicated product marketing resources for product launches, Gartner often sees that the launch lead is the PM, working in close collaboration with sales and marketing for the product's go-to-market (GTM) activities. For the purposes of this research, we use "launch lead" to highlight the differences to the PM's role, and to separate launch activities from the other day-to-day product management roles.

Successful product launches require an agile launch team, consisting of cross-functional representatives from product management, product marketing, marketing PR/communications, sales and channel management, customer support, and the program management office (if the organization has one). Some TSPs may have personnel whose responsibilities span more than one of these roles. The number of representatives is not the key; tapping into the various areas of expertise is.

The launch lead has to be adequately focused and empowered with the authority to assume ultimate responsibility for launch. In terms of foundational requirements, the launch lead should be knowledgeable about the product technology and skilled with project management.

To organize the best launch team for the launch, the measures of success are:

- Documentation of management approval for team participation for all members

- A launch schedule, with milestones and each participant's requirements/tasks

- Signed contracts for any external resources (e.g., marketing agency) needed

This particular step may take between three and eight weeks to complete, especially if external resources, such as onboarding new channel partners or an external creative/PR agency, need to be involved. PMs should have budgeted and planned for this during the new product introduction planning process.

Scope the Launch

With the preliminary launch schedule, the launch lead is responsible for gathering early stakeholder feedback and securing their buy-in. As launch leads gather input from all departments and roles in the launch team, they also need to be proactively obtaining management signoff. To prevent delays in completing the scoping of the launch, the entire management team needs to be regularly apprised of the launch activities in scheduled milestone sessions. Typical obstacles to precise scoping include securing budget approval for launch, getting an agreement on revenue expectations or product performance metrics, and assessing the capabilities of the sales channel.

To scope the launch, the measures of success are:

- A launch plan statement of timing and scale, with senior management signoff

- Applying lessons from postlaunch evaluations of previous products (where available)

- A readiness matrix that catalogs all the report inputs (from all roles in the launch team) and the current status of each identified input

When completed, this step helps executive teams decide if launch leads have everything they need to plan a launch. This marks the first go/no-go gate for the launch.

Gate 1 — Scope the Launch Complete

Is the launch lead ready (with an approved launch plan, metrics and budget) to start planning the launch? *(go/no go)*

Create the Launch Plan

The launch lead will then assemble the launch plan in cooperation with the product, sales and marketing teams. Depending on the complexity and scale of the launch, a complete launch plan for a major new product may take up three to nine months to create. In contrast, minimum viable product (MVP) or minor product launch plans may take no more than two weeks to one month. During this period, team members, channel partners and the press need to be consistently briefed about the impending launch. This step accounts for the bulk of the launch preparation.

In this step, launch leads need to be mindful that the launch goals are explicitly spelled out. At this stage, any pricing or discounting rules for the product need to be worked out. Together with product development, the launch lead will also need to see that beta testing with customers and users of the product do not encounter any critical showstopper bugs.

The measures of successful progress at this stage are:

- Clear product positioning and messaging

- Market and competitive analysis performed

- Definitive, measurable launch metrics

- Final pricing/discounting rules that meet profitability metrics

- Completed marketing collaterals (digital and print) tested with target segments

- Completed launch event plan

- Press plan and briefing schedules

- Updated GTM plan

The launch lead will need to update and inform the overall GTM plan for the product (in which the product launch is a major milestone in the life cycle). The GTM plan for new/major product launches minimally includes the following artifacts:

- **Internal enablement plan** — Training plan for field marketing, sales, presales, customer success management, support, and professional services

- **Inventory plan** — Beta program, test environment and inventory (hardware) for sales to start

- **Sales operation plan** — Sales tools development; sales compensation, targets and incentives; and any sales force automation changes required

- **Customer communications plan** — Briefing plan, prospect communications and customer presentations

- **Partner/reseller and channel communications plan** — Briefing plan, presentations and collaterals

■ **Marketing communications and PR plan** — Content marketing strategy, PR strategy, marketing collateral production and launch event plan (as per needs)

When the planning artifacts above are complete, the launch lead will then need to evaluate this second go/no-go gate for launch.

Gate 2 — Launch Plan Complete

Does the market opportunity still fit pricing and profitability expectations with regard to launch timing? *(go/no go)*

Build Sales and Operational Readiness

Note: This critical step can be started while scoping the launch and executed concurrently with the other steps.

Success will come only if your sales, service and technical colleagues are excited about the new product and are fully equipped to sell it. The value proposition for your product should have been introduced to the sales team well ahead of the launch (during product development), so they can feed back into it.

Next, the sales team's new product training needs to highlight the business relevance and performance measures for the products, as well as information about the target buyers and how the product meets their needs as buyers. For complex products that require customization and development, presales technical support needs to be readied in a timely manner as well.

Channel partners will also need to have been trained, equipped and assessed to be ready. The final aspect will include provisioning and training service and support teams to ensure readiness to support new customers.

In building sales and operational readiness, the measures of success are as follows:

■ Buyer personas have been built; solution selling training (on buyer personas, their challenges and answers to those challenges) is completed.

■ Evaluation/demo units or product demos/trials/licenses are staged and available.

■ Customer incentives have been created for migration to the new product (if applicable).

- Sales team compensation plans are published internally.

- Product messaging training has been completed. Battle cards, sales enablement and sales presentations are prepared.

- Sales support and technical (presales) support are signed off as ready for launch.

- User documentation and any regulatory, compliance or legal documents have been finalized.

Upon completion of the above, launch leads now face the final go/no-go decision for the launch.

Gate 3 — Launch Ready

Are all checks completed and actions closed, with no blocks or delays? *(go/no go)*

Is everything ready for the launch? *(go/no go)*

Postlaunch Evaluation

No launch is complete without the formal postlaunch debrief. Based on the launch goals and measures (captured in the launch plan), conduct a frank assessment of the success of the launch. Launch leads can go through the critical steps to ensure that all bases have been covered for a product launch to maximize their chance of success.

Success metrics vary according to the scale of product launch (MVP, major or minor). It is useful to categorize the metrics into leading, tactical and lagging categories so as to identify the priority of metrics setting. The metrics and goals for successful product launches can include, but are not limited to, meeting the targets for the following.

Leading

- Leads, opportunities and pipeline (e.g., 200 new leads and $3 million in the pipeline in six months)

- Product quality (e.g., fewer than 50 known bugs/errors in backlog at release)

- Customer experience (e.g., client retention/churn, CSAT, NPS and customer effort scores)

- Revenue, profitability and new growth deals (e.g., 25 deals and $1.5 million revenue in first year, NPV, IRR targets)

- Product analytics (e.g., daily/monthly active users, users onboarding, time on task, service tickets raised)

Tactical

- User engagement (e.g., event attendees)

- Timeliness (e.g., product release date within two weeks or earlier of target)

The initial postlaunch evaluation for the launch team should take place no later than a week after the launch to monitor metrics that are immediately available (such as product quality, timeliness and attendee participation). Subsequently, a more comprehensive postlaunch evaluation should take place within one to three months of launch, depending on the scale of the launch.

As a best practice, launch leads must lead this "lessons learned" assessment to capture the outcomes and next best actions from the launch. They must ensure these are fed into other areas of the product management framework, especially the project checklist at the beginning of the next product launch activity.

Evidence

The **2021 Gartner Product Management Survey** was conducted from May through July 2021 to understand the needs, challenges and key initiatives of people in product management roles. In total, 400 respondents were interviewed in their native language across the following regions: Australia (n = 10), Canada (n = 15), China (n = 35), France (n = 33), Germany (n = 36), Hong Kong (n = 15), India (n = 51), the U.K. (n = 70) and the U.S. (n = 135). Interpret small base sizes (n = <30) with caution. To enable the comparison and contrasting of key trends, quotas were established on key organizational and respondent characteristics:

- Qualifying organizations operate in high-tech industries (cloud services; software; communications equipment; carriers, devices and computer infrastructure; technology; and business services) with companywide anticipated annual FY20 revenue of more than $50 million or the equivalent.

- Qualified participants have the title of director or equivalent and above.

Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

Acronym Key and Glossary Terms

CSAT	customer satisfaction
GTM	go-to-market
IRR	internal rate of return
KPI	key performance indicator
MVP	minimum viable product
NPS	Net Promoter Score
NPV	net present value
PM	product manager
TSP	technology and service provider

Document Revision History

Critical Steps for Tech Product Managers: Manage Product Launch - 7 May 2019

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