Use Storytelling to Inspire Commitment to a New Product Vision

Published 31 August 2023 - ID G00797171 - 12 min read

By Analyst(s): Jim Hare, Clifton Gilley

Initiatives: Product/Service Introduction and Delivery

Many tech providers communicate their product direction by talking about features, but it is the product's purpose that inspires commitment and enthusiasm. Product managers who adopt a storytelling approach will inspire internal stakeholders, ecosystem partners and customers.

Overview

Key Findings

- Communications that focus only on the product roadmap and features will both miss an opportunity and fail to address the concerns of specific stakeholder groups, risking disengagement, confusion or disagreement.

- People commit to ideas, people and things on an emotional level. Appealing to the emotional or purposeful reasons underlying the product vision puts the audience at the center and provides a basis for a meaningful connection.

- Creating a product vision focused on just what the product team cares about can alienate stakeholders in other functions. It can also hamper customer and partner alignment, creating barriers to accepting the vision, especially where there is a significant change in direction.

- Building a single storyline for different audiences will not address each audience's wants, needs, issues and concerns.

Recommendations

Technology product managers who want to improve how they communicate their product vision and strategy when introducing their products should:

- Use the outcome-situation-impact-resolution (O-SIR) storytelling format to make the product vision accessible and inspiring to diverse stakeholders. Incorporate customer successes and data to show that the vision is backed by evidence.

- Guide your audience through the life cycle of change by using stories that address key issues and concerns that the audience cares about. In other words, tailor the story to explain what's in it for different stakeholders by appealing to their emotions and clarifying the benefits they'll reap.

- Be deliberate about the story's purpose and what outcome you hope to achieve — align, inspire, inform or decide. Delivering a change message such as a new product vision requires a communication cadence that allows audiences to absorb and accept the top-level vision first.

- Create different stories for different stakeholders to ensure that your story addresses each audience's issues, needs and concerns.

Introduction

Product managers invest a tremendous amount of time, money and emotion to develop and deliver products and services (collectively referred to as "product" for the remainder of this research. As a result, product roadmap communications tend to center on great new product capabilities first, with limited effort to link them to business benefits and usage scenarios. Yet this approach often does not help the audience (whether external or internal) see the relevance to them, and so they struggle to fully engage with the vision.

Product managers often assume that audiences inside the organization will share the same enthusiasm and understanding for the product detail as product developers do. In reality, all stakeholders — whether internal or external — evaluate the message through the lens of what it means to them. This can make it harder to get buy-in and commitment from other stakeholders such as sales, marketing, channel partners or customers.

Stakes rise even more when you are communicating a change in product direction and need all parties to come together urgently to meet ambitious targets. Communicating an aspirational new product opportunity or change in direction can be a wonderful opportunity to engage the organization and get different functions aligned and committed to the strategy and hard work ahead.

Successful modern storytellers understand that authenticity is the defining characteristic of sticky, resonant stories. Authentic storytelling is the path that you can take to connect the products you are developing to the purposeful vision that stakeholders will buy into. When we say "storytelling," we are not talking about fictional stories or "marketing speak." Instead, we mean taking an approach that puts the audience first in the story, using. It uses facts and provable statements in an engaging format that:

- Builds interest (causing the audience to want to know more).

- Establishes context and relevance.

- Conveys emotion.

- Closes with a positive outcome.

Product storytelling involves telling the story of a product — including why your company made the product, the changes it has made to their customers' lives and where the product is going. Your product vision should start with a clear purpose, to solve a real challenge, to be a hero to the user by making a difference.
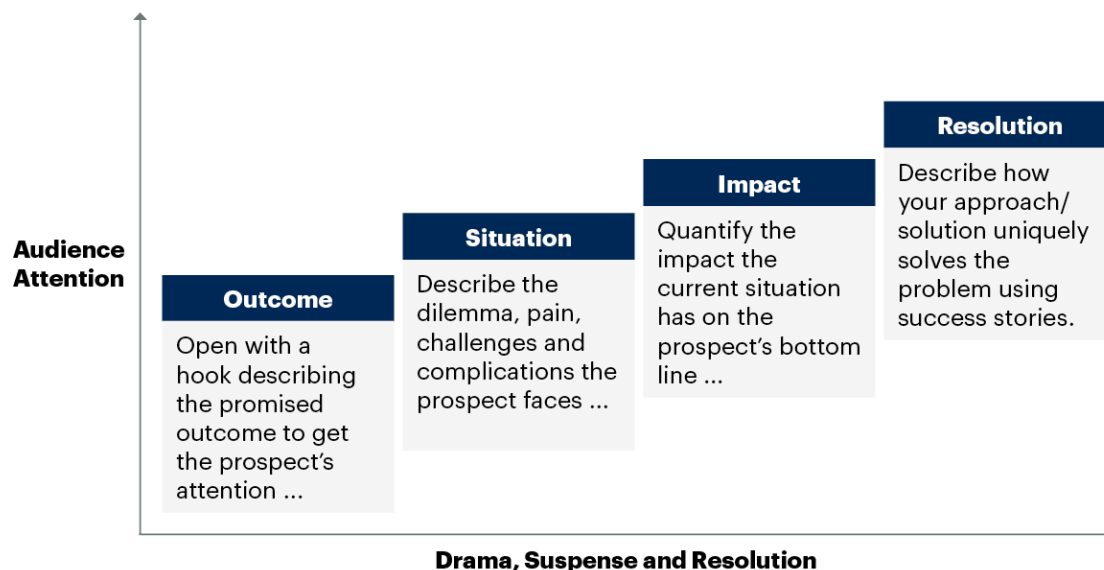
Putting stakeholders at the center of communications makes them more likely to commit to action. To improve the likelihood of gaining commitment to act, Gartner recommends a structured approach to storytelling that establishes the context for your point of view. This requires you to put the key audience's situation of the key audience at the center of all communication efforts.

Analysis

Use the O-SIR Storytelling Format

Communicating the vision for the product portfolio is fundamentally to tell a story about change. An effective structure for change stories is called **outcome-situation-impact-resolution,** or **O-SIR**. This is the approach Gartner recommends to develop storytelling skills. The core of O-SIR is a structure that starts with the customer situation, describing the impact of the current state and then closing with how your vision will resolve it (see Figure 1). Once you have the structure, you add an opening that generates immediate interest to learn more.

Figure 1: O-SIR Storytelling Format

O-SIR Storytelling Format

Audience Attention

Outcome
Open with a hook describing the promised outcome to get the prospect's attention ...

Situation
Describe the dilemma, pain, challenges and complications the prospect faces ...

Impact
Quantify the impact the current situation has on the prospect's bottom line ...

Resolution
Describe how your approach/solution uniquely solves the problem using success stories.

Drama, Suspense and Resolution

Source: Gartner
764457_C

Gartner

The O-SIR approach provides a structure that puts the audience and their situation at the beginning of the story. Additional details on each component of the structure are provided below:

- **Outcome (O).** Open with a short, outcome-oriented headline, sentence or passage that establishes the value that is achieved when the vision is realized. This effectively prefigures the rest of the story, creating a reason for the reader/listener to pay more attention and to think "I want to know more." When communicating a vision, this can equate to the aspiration or "end state," such as creating a market or societal impact. The vision of "why" should be rooted in the beliefs and values that connect with the audience. The opening is best generated after you've defined the rest of the story. Analyze the details, and then extract the best information to draw people in for the opening.

- **Situation (S).** Describe the current situation before your new vision is implemented. What is the big problem that you will address for customers and for the organization (and maybe even for society, depending on your company's mission or purpose statement)? You could look at the shortcomings of existing approaches or the fact that the problem has not been directly addressed so far. The situation section is critical; it captures the audience's attention — establishing context and relevance. You are aiming to get the audience to identify with the situation and agree with you.

- **Impact (I).** This is the story element that is most commonly omitted. The impact is the clear articulation of the pain, cost or risk that the current situation is causing. It should help to create urgency and establish why a change is important. It provides an opportunity to make an emotional appeal for change. Without impact, you are hoping that the audience will either already know the impact or make the connection on its own. While this can happen, when an audience is inundated with information (particularly when it relates to change for them), the likelihood of that happening diminishes. Being clear on the impact helps the audience commit to giving the issue their time and attention.

- **Resolution (R).** Once you have established that the current situation presents sufficient pain or risk, you can move the audience to a better place by describing how your product vision will solve the problem. As part of the resolution, address the key issues that are being confronted in "the old way" and how your way is an improvement. As part of your resolution, reinforce the outcome that you opened with, completing the full story arc. As you get to the resolution, you are creating an environment where the audience will be eager to learn more.

The format creates a discipline that establishes context and helps your audience see their role in the vision. They see how they can become the protagonist. You can use this format for many types of communications and many different story lengths (from a single paragraph to multiple pages). Beyond the structure, there are a variety of other considerations and approaches to increase effectiveness.

Use Stories That Address the Audience's Key Issues and Concerns

Don't shy away from generating emotion in your communications. People commit to ideas, people and things on an emotional level. Simon Sinek explains this commitment in his book "Start With Why." [1] If you want to drive action, you need to make an emotional connection because decision making and action are actually driven in the part of our brain that is responsible for making emotional connections. It is the purpose-driven elements of your product vision (and story) that will actually drive commitment and action — the "why" of the product rather than the "what" of it.

One of the most important benefits of storytelling is that it creates an environment for emotional connections. Far from being beyond the job of business engagement, emotions and previous experiences associated with them help the human brain remember new things. This may be the biggest reason for moving to stories. When we give an audience a list of facts to remember, quite simply, they usually don't. Studies have shown that most people can keep only three to five "items" in the brain's working memory. [2] So, when presented with long lists, they either forget them all (hopefully remembering that the list exists), or only remember the first few or last few items.

In conducting research for his book "Contagious: Why Things Catch On," Dr. Jonah Berger of The Wharton School (University of Pennsylvania) found that specific emotions created an increased likelihood of stories being shared. Specifically, stories that sparked emotions that caused arousal (such as anger, anxiety, awe, excitement and amusement) were more likely to be shared than those that sparked more passive emotions (contentment and sadness). [3] Keep this in mind as you build your stories.

Help Your Audience Move From Vision to Action

Vision is what you want your product experience to be for the customer; strategy is how you intend to reach that vision. Delivering a change message such as a new vision requires a communications cadence that allows for the top-level vision to be absorbed and accepted first. When working on stories, don't attempt to communicate everything at once. If you do, the audience will be overwhelmed and likely to disengage. This is especially true when you are communicating significant changes.

Giving consideration to timing also enables you to anticipate immediate and longer-term concerns that might arise among stakeholders. Timing will also affect how your message may be interpreted by a specific functional area point of view. You can build responses to these concerns in progressive communications. Table 1 gives an example of different stages of communication in the change context and aligned storylines.

Table 1: Storylines for Moving From Vision to Action

Stage	Focus of the Story	Key Point of Emphasis
1 New Vision Introduction	The reason to make a change.	Long-term outcomes compared to those in the current course — the aspirational state.
2 Outlining the Journey	How you will enable the change.	Addressing specific obstacles.
3 Gaining Commitment to Action	What you need from the audience to make the change happen.	Distinct situation and impact of each stakeholder group.

Source: Gartner (September 2023)

The best path to authenticity is through real customer examples. This can be difficult when communicating something future-based like a vision or a roadmap. However, in later stages, you can build in stories of successes that have been achieved along the way. For example, if you are working on a prototype with a tiger team, share the developments early. Similarly, as your salespeople experience success bringing customers on board with the new products or delivery models, share those successes also. Elevating these successes and the people involved will make the vision more real and also encourage others to want to be part of the action.

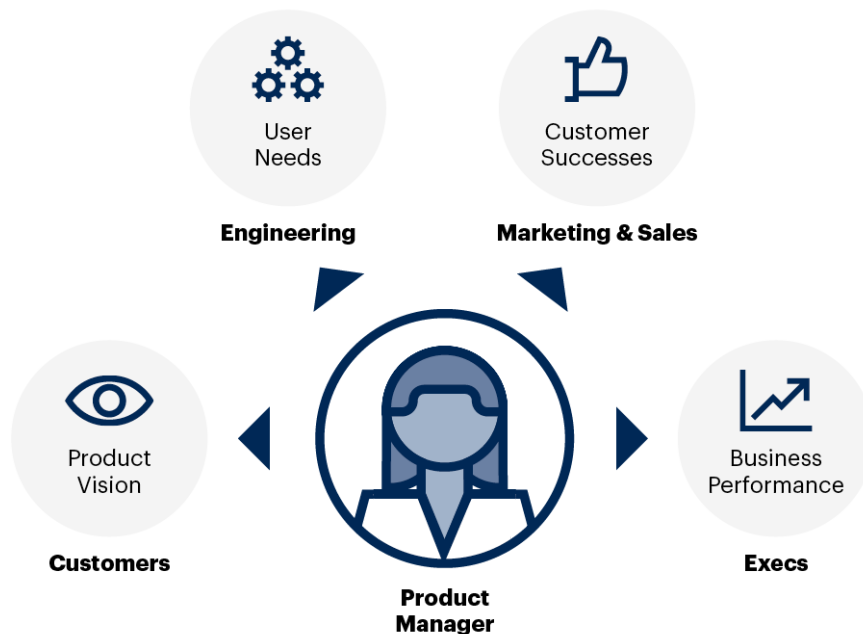## Create Different Stories for Different Stakeholders

To communicate the vision more broadly, you will need different versions of the story for different stakeholder groups, such as sales, marketing, channel partners or customers (see Figure 2). Build authentic stories that address their situation and make them feel that their needs and points of view have been considered in the larger process. When the story is contextualized toward specific audiences while maintaining a strong connection to the top "why" part of the story, you achieve consistency while better connecting with different stakeholders. For example:

- For engineering to build the right product and features, they need to understand the current customer situation at an intimate level.

- As the product is deployed, sales and marketing need customer references and case studies about real-world problems being solved.

- Sharing the product vision with customers not only builds loyalty but creates a higher level of engagement to shape the product. It also often leads to customers virally marketing the product to friends in their network.

Figure 2: Contextualizing Storytelling for Different Audiences

Contextualizing Storytelling for Different Audiences

Source: Gartner
722690_C

Gartner

As you develop these stories, make sure that the stories for each role don't contradict each other, since contradictory messages can create mistrust. Instead, focus on the aspects of the future-state vision that are particularly relevant to the audience and how their roles will benefit from that vision. For example, imagine your solution helps increase the use of expensive hospital equipment such as MRI scanners. The story for the CFO would focus on how increased use could result in more revenue and higher profits. The story for the chief of medical staff would be about faster, more efficient testing that could result in better patient outcomes.

Finally, pay attention to tone. For the executive leadership team and investors, communication should focus more directly on how the product strategy drives business and financial performance rather than appealing to emotion.

Evidence

For this research, we drew on the hundreds of inquiries we receive every year from product managers and marketers looking to improve their messaging and better communicate their product vision internally, as well as with customers and partners.

[1] S. Sinek, "Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action," 2011.

[2] N. Cowan, "The Magical Mystery Four: How Is Working Memory Capacity Limited, and Why?" National Center for Biotechnology Information, 4 May 2010.

[3] J. Berger, "Contagious: Why Things Catch On," Simon and Schuster, 2016.

Document Revision History

How Product Managers Can Use Storytelling to Inspire Commitment to a New Product Vision - 1 February 2022

How Product Managers Can Use Storytelling to Inspire Commitment to a New Product Vision - 21 April 2020

Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Product Management Upskilling: Data Analysis and Storytelling

Product Managers Can Use a 'Working Backwards' Approach to Early Vet Product Strategy

Critical Steps for Product Managers: Build the Strategy and Roadmap

Critical Steps for Product Managers: Design Compelling Experiences

Table 1: Storylines for Moving From Vision to Action

Stage	Focus of the Story	Key Point of Emphasis
1 New Vision Introduction	The reason to make a change.	Long-term outcomes compared to those in the current course — the aspirational state.
2 Outlining the Journey	How you will enable the change.	Addressing specific obstacles.
3 Gaining Commitment to Action	What you need from the audience to make the change happen.	Distinct situation and impact of each stakeholder group.

Source: Gartner (September 2023)