

The ABCs of

## Product Management

> productboard

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### Introduction

If you want to be a designer, you go to design school. If you want to be an engineer, you get an engineering degree. If you want to be a product manager...well, where's the school for that?

Product management is both an art and a science. If you're looking to brush up on fundamentals that will help you excel in your role, we've got you covered.

In this ebook, you'll learn how to:

- Arrive at a deep understanding of your users and their needs
- Build a product strategy that unites your team around strategic objectives
- Collaborate with cross-functional teams
- Define a roadmap that rallies everyone around your plan

It's as easy as ABC.

#### Ready? Let's dive in!



#### Chapter 1

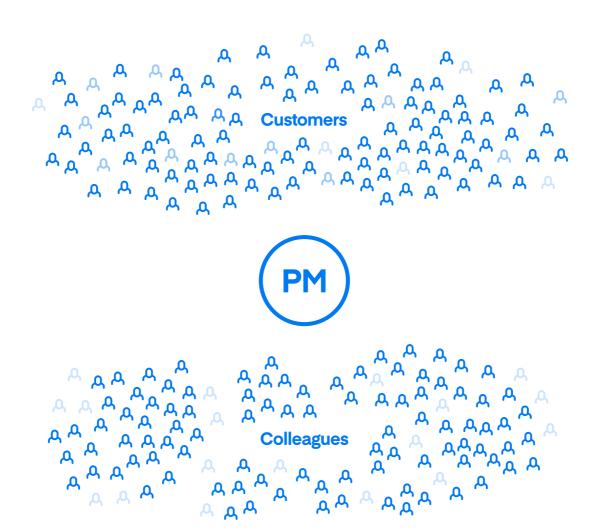
# Arriving at a deep understanding of users

How to gather deep user insights and build a shared understanding of users across your entire product team.

In a perfect world, the entire organization has a grasp of user problems and what they need from your product.

In reality, this shared understanding is really hard to achieve.

For every product manager, there are often thousands of customers providing feedback, requests, and other insights about the product. Not to mention the tens or even hundreds of colleagues.



Without coherent processes in place, it's hard to make sense of this onslaught of information. And good luck actually leveraging this information to build better products!

To begin your journey towards deep user insights, try the following best practices.

# Complete an audit of your existing product inputs

Product feedback is funneled in from many different touchpoints:

Some of these include:

- Existing user research
- Feature requests
- Conversations between the sales team and prospects
- Customer support tickets and email exchanges
- Win/loss analyses in Salesforce
- Qualitative inputs from NPS results
- Exit surveys conducted by the success team when important customers churn

Taking note of everywhere you receive feedback ensures that nothing important slips through the cracks and gets you one step closer to a holistic overview of your insights landscape.

Now it's time to set up ongoing processes and make sure you capture all of these nuggets moving forward.

# Regularly interface with customer-facing teams

Teammates on sales, success, and support are a treasure trove of insights from the frontlines. Make time to talk to them. Set up regular, monthly syncs with customer-facing teams. Run interviews to share, rank, and elaborate on user needs. Give examples of what valuable feedback looks like so they can model their own after it. Create clear processes for folks across the organization who are interested in submitting feedback. And sometimes, just listen.

You might find it useful to carve out some dedicated time for a "listening tour." You can interview folks on your customer-facing and delivery teams, ask broad questions about where they think the product is, how well it solves your customers' needs, and where they see the biggest gaps.



Set up bi-weekly or monthly syncs



Run interviews on user needs



Create clear processes for submitting feedback

# Make it a habit to talk directly to customers and prospects

It can be nerve wracking to reach out to customers and prospects for one-on-one conversations. A simple way to get started is to schedule a phone call with customers or prospects once a week. Keep track of how their responses evolve over time. Remember, you are seeking to understand core problems, how those problems are being solved today, and what an ideal end state looks like.

To get the most value out of your conversations, ask the right questions, the right way. Here are some examples that we like to use at Productboard:

- What are your three biggest challenges?
  - This question allows you to focus on the most pressing issues that your customers or prospects are currently facing.
- How do you currently solve these challenges?
   By not asking about specific products, you're more likely to uncover unique workarounds.
- What do you love or hate about these solutions?
   Try using passionate language to get a passionate response.

#### • Can you provide an example?

When statements are high-level, look to ground your interviewee in specifics.

#### • How do you measure success?

It's important to find out what motivates our customers, prospects, and market.

#### • Why?

Uncovering needs is a multi-step process. Always dig deeper into every answer for greater understanding.

#### **Practice makes perfect**

At Productboard, we train our product teams to talk to customers using a simple exercise.

Two product managers are paired and asked to interview one another with the goal of identifying a birthday gift — a solution — that their partner would like.

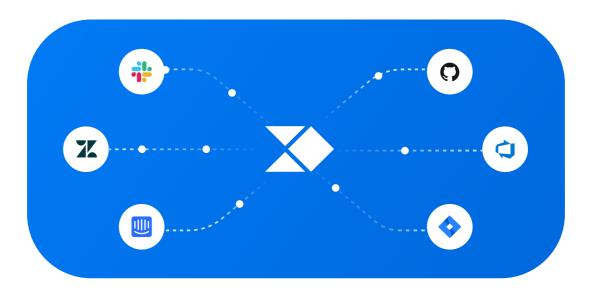
Birthday gifts are hard. Everyone has different preferences, and there are an infinite number of unique gifts to give.

By completing this exercise, PMs practice their skills in asking the right questions and developing the right solution.

# Set up a system to consolidate product inputs from all sources

In typical organizations, teams use many tools to manage their interactions with prospects and customers. Unless you have access to these platforms and regularly check on them, many insights end up slipping through the cracks.

That's why it's essential to have a system like Productboard that syncs with your existing tech stack and *automatically* captures all inputs.



This central searchable repository allows product teams to have continuous access to fresh insights. These insights can be linked to related feature ideas so they are always on hand to inform every prioritization decision.



#### Chapter 2

# Building an excellent product strategy

The best practices that unite your team around shared strategic objectives.

To sum it up in one sentence, being a good product manager is to champion the voice of the customer while also advancing broader business goals. At the same time, you have limited resources and can't do everything at once.

That's where product strategy comes in. A good product strategy outlines how you plan to address your users and their needs. It provides a framework that guides the allocation of resources. Done well, it steers your team towards a set of shared priorities.

### The building blocks of an effective product strategy

While every product strategy looks a little different due to a number of factors, sound product strategies do share some common elements:

- A vision statement summarizes an ideal future state of your product and how it contributes to the overall company mission. It should be short and simple enough for everyone on your team to understand, repeat, and share.
- The timeframe of your strategy is how long you need to accomplish your goals. This window varies depending on your company's industry and maturity.
- **Business objectives** tie your strategy to the bigger picture and articulate how your plans will advance business goals.
- A well-defined audience, perhaps an ideal customer profile (or profiles), ensures that everyone knows exactly who you are optimizing your efforts for.
- Your product objectives are the key problems you've
  decided to solve different areas of investment your
  product team will ultimately focus on. Objectives provide a
  roadmap for teams to rank and prioritize features and fixes
  that make sense for what you're trying to achieve. Uniting
  your team around objectives empowers them to problem
  solve on their own.

- Measurable outcomes and metrics help you stay outcomedriven and track the progress you've made towards your objectives. At Productboard, for example, we track weekly active makers and weekly active contributors.
- Tactics are more granular initiatives that will help you advance your product and achieve your objectives.

#### **Product strategy exercise**

Let's go through a product strategy exercise together. We'll be using our own work here at Productboard as an example.

To set context, Productboard is mostly competing against spreadsheets and PowerPoints. For people to adopt a new type of solution — a dedicated product management platform — it needs to be 10x better than the alternative. That's how strong the gravity is around the status quo!

As a result, a key part of our strategy is to reduce the friction of adopting a new solution. We believe once users get basic data in Productboard and create their first roadmap, they won't look back.

#### 12-Month Product Strategy

#### Vision Statement

Productboard aims to be the source of truth for where the product is headed and why

### **Business Objective**

Make it incredibly easy to get started with Productboard and create a roadmap that is ready to share in minutes

### Ideal Customer Profile (ICP)

A 3-400 person company with 15-25 makers, including product managers, designers, and engineers

#### Product Objectives

#### Measurable Outcomes

#### **Tactics**

Enable users to build and share roadmaps right away

Time-to-first roadmap how long it takes users to create their first roadmap

- Easier import of external data
- Showcase the value of each roadmap
   Productboard currently offers and empower users to quickly select one that meets their needs

#### Help users find the right format for their needs

Trial-to-paid conversion for new roadmap users increases by 10%

- Launch new roadmap templates with prepopulated demo data that people can easily customize to create their own roadmap
- Unify the roadmap creation process and make it intuitive to set up all formats of roadmaps in Productboard

Make it easy to share roadmaps with stakeholders

An increase in workspaces with one or more roadmaps shared externally

- Enable sharing of roadmaps with stakeholders without a Productboard login
- Embed roadmaps where people work (Wiki, Notion, etc.)

As you can see, the process of creating a product strategy is both top-down and bottom-up. You need to work closely with executives to understand broad business goals and incorporate customer feedback related to their problems and needs. Your strategy should meet both of these inputs somewhere in the middle.

As one of Productboard's PMs advises: don't sweat over perfection when it comes to your product strategy because it's unattainable. It's more important to have a clear view of where you want to get to. Be crisp and brutal in prioritizing, tell people why, and earn buy-in. But you're never going to please everyone, and every plan will be imperfect in some form.



### Looking for recommendations to create an effective product strategy?

Explore best practices in our Product Makers community



#### Chapter 3

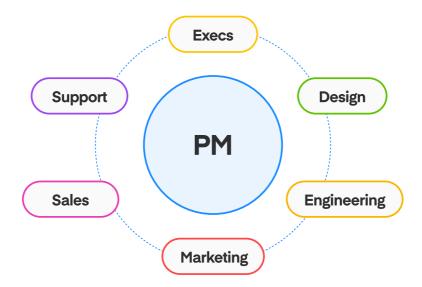
# Collaborating with cross-functional teams

Effectively involve stakeholders in the product management process.

Product management is not a solo task.

Within the product org, PMs work side-by-side with design and engineering.

Beyond the product org, PMs partner with marketing, sales, support, executives, and more.



It's a rewarding job. You get to build things together — taking something you've imagined and turning it into real value for your users. But working with so many different stakeholders does come with its challenges.

One Productboard PM describes her job as being the captain of a boat that could mutiny if she doesn't lead effectively.



You need to be navigating, providing context, and steering everyone in the right direction. It's a delicate balance, and you must learn how to communicate, build trust, and influence without authority.

To work more cohesively with stakeholders both in and outside your team, try these crowdsourced tips from real product teams.

#### **Tip #1**

# Learn what drives your stakeholders

All teams across the organization have their own motivations and goals. Developers take pride in their craft. It pains them to write inelegant code, and they're always going to want more time to get the architecture just right. Sales is driven by products and features that will help them close significant deals. CEOs want higher velocity and to increase the bottom line of the business. And PMs aim to get features and updates out the door faster.

To develop empathy, go the extra mile to learn what drives your stakeholders. This is an essential soft skill that will help you figure out how to communicate in ways that folks across the organization will hear, appreciate, and understand.



"Go out there and walk, if not a mile, then at least a few yards in their shoes."

— Rich Mironov

#### **Tip #2**

# Involve stakeholders early and often

Uncover fresh insights from multiple perspectives, and get buy-in early to ensure that significant resources, time, and work don't go to waste. Here are some ways to engage stakeholders throughout the product management process:

- Establish regular meetings with customer-facing departments.
- Have regular product calls where anyone in the company who's interested can learn about what teams are working on.
- Invite people to customer calls or share recordings.
- Share relevant roadmaps with the right level of visibility with each team and give them the ability to check them on their own time.
- Have regular roadmap presentations and Q&As in front of the company.

# Cross-functional collaboration at Kontent



Martin Michalik, VP of Product at Kontent, has years of experience leading product teams and forging effective relationships with crossfunctional departments.

He recently shared how his team includes the broader organization in the product management process, and how they provide visibility into tradeoffs, decisions, customer insights, and more. Through these methods, Kontent's product team established trust and improved communication with stakeholders across the organization.

- 1 Kontent's product team hosts monthly meetings with customer-facing departments to keep everyone up to date on progress. This fosters transparency, opens up the floor to two-way conversations, and builds trust.
- 2 The product team worked cross-functionally to get rid of other tools and centralize insights tracking in Productboard. To achieve this, the team had to explain why they wanted to track everything in Productboard and how it affects the prioritization process.

- The product team shares an internal roadmap and release plan documents that they update on a regular basis. These showcase what's happening in product along with other important information like release tiers, pricing limitations, early designs, and more.
- A shared chat is set up for product managers and customer-facing team members to discuss ad-hoc issues in real-time.
- The product team creates enablement materials for each new release, including a short video that captures essential information like use cases covered, the ideal customer profile, and future timelines.



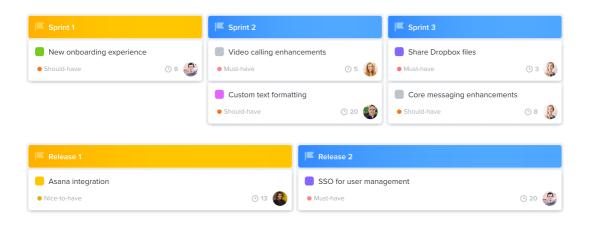
#### Chapter 4

# Defining your roadmap & rallying everyone around your plan

Create a shared vision for where the product is headed and why.

True product leaders ensure that product management is not a black box. They don't just share their plan — they rally everyone around a common vision for where the product is headed and why. And a well-defined roadmap is their communication tool of choice.

That being said, roadmaps mean different things to different people. To make communication more efficient, product managers can create tailored roadmaps that provide just the right amount of detail for each stakeholder. Ideally, stakeholders should be able to access self-serve roadmaps and trust that they're always up-to-date.



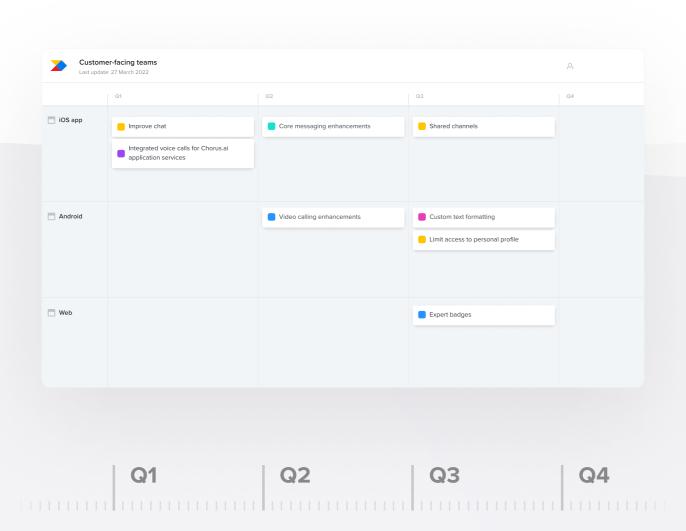
There are many benefits to this transparent approach. When you share your plans, you get feedback from a huge range of stakeholders. This turbo-charges your product discovery process, helping you crowdsource new problems or look at existing problems in a new light. And, when folks are looped in early, it's easier to earn buy-in down the road.

Let's take a look at this in practice. At Productboard, we leverage our own system to create roadmaps for different audiences.

### Roadmaps for internal stakeholders

For **customer-facing teams**, we share **release plan roadmaps** that use time horizons to show when features will be released.

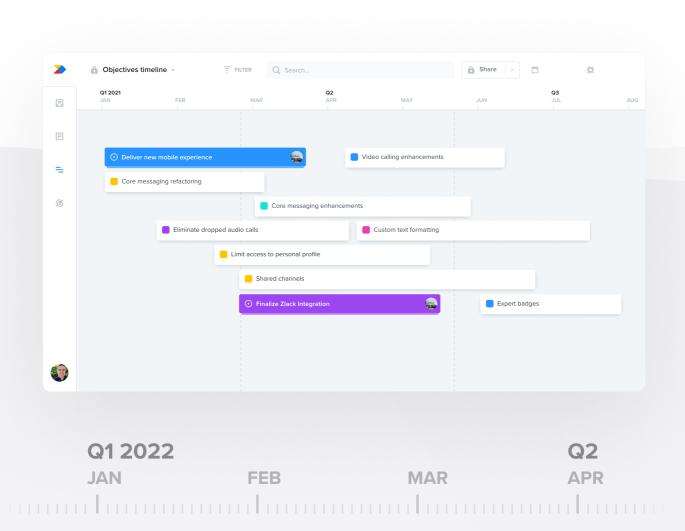
This level of detail allows customer-facing teams to set appropriate expectations with prospects and customers.



### Roadmaps for internal stakeholders

For engineering, product, and design teams, we share product objectives roadmaps that showcase objectives and features in a timeline format.

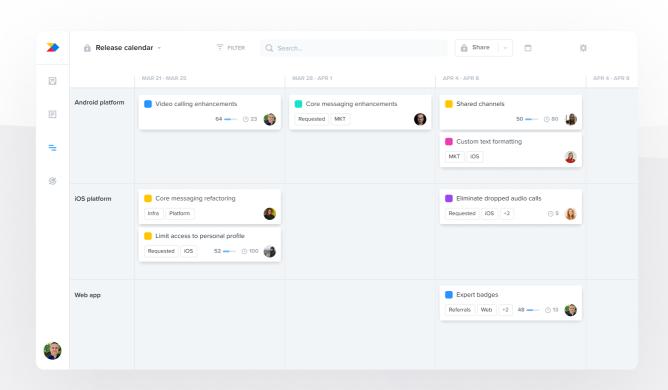
The goal is to rally these teams around shared objectives and what features we will deliver to achieve them.



### Roadmaps for internal stakeholders

Productboard's **cross-functional product teams** — including product managers, designers, and engineers — use **sprint plan roadmaps.** 

Each column here represents a sprint. Sprint plan roadmaps showcase a tactical plan, providing more granular detail of what is being worked on and when.



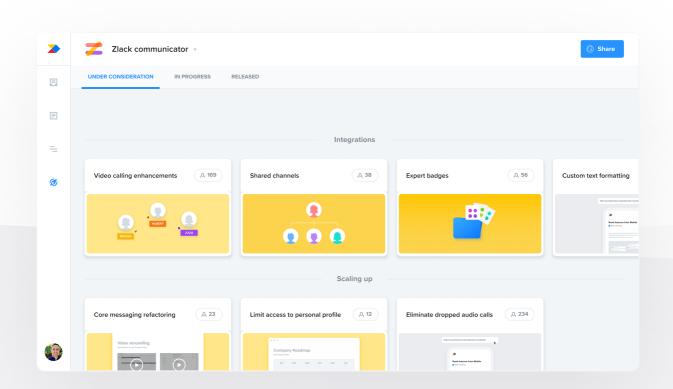
MAR 21 - MAR 25

**MAR 28 - APR 1** 

### Roadmaps for external stakeholders

Our **public product Portal** is where the public can come to see our ideas, what's coming next, and what we've released. And the conversation is two-way. If anyone has thoughts, they are encouraged to leave feedback.

Our portal has become a main source for our discovery interviews and serves as evidence for many of our product decisions.

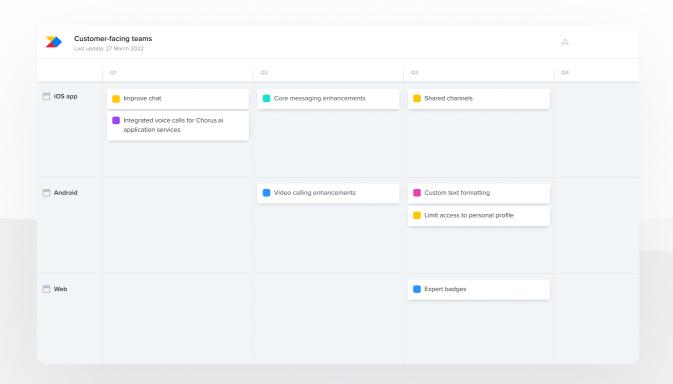


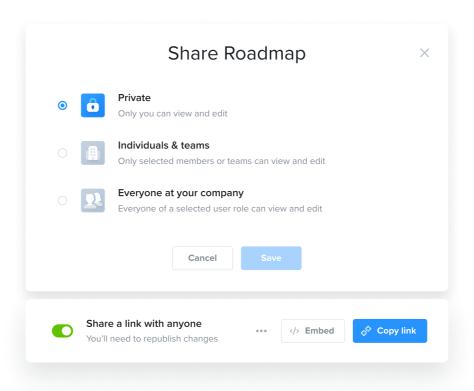
### Roadmaps for external stakeholders

For **customers and prospects** looking for details like timeframes, objectives, or product specs, we use **self-serve**, **customer-facing roadmaps**.

Once these are approved for sharing, anyone with a link can easily access them.

This saves our product managers a lot of time and aligns the product org around what is best for our closest customers.





The great thing about using Productboard is that we don't have to manually create and update multiple roadmaps. We simply create different views — some more high-level, some more granular. These then update automatically based on changes in features and product strategy.

### Conclusion

Now you know your ABCs (and Ds)! To recap what we've covered, being an excellent PM revolves around the core concepts of:

- Arriving at a deep understanding of user needs (by identifying where feedback is coming from, creating regular touch points with customers, and centralizing all inputs in a single, easily accessible location).
- Building an excellent product strategy (championing the voice of the customer while also advancing broader business goals and doing it all with limited resources and time).
- Collaborating with cross-functional teams (taking the time to understand your stakeholders and then speaking in the language that resonates with them the most).
- Defining your roadmap and rallying everyone around your plan (using the right format for the right audience and making sure it's available when they need it).



#### **About Productboard**

Productboard is the leading customer-centric management platform, helping product teams to deliver the right products to market faster. Over 5,400 modern, customer-driven companies — like Zoom, UiPath, JCDecaux, and Microsoft — use Productboard to help understand what users need, prioritize what to build next, and rally everyone around the roadmap. With offices in San Francisco, Prague, Vancouver, Dublin, and London, Productboard has raised \$262 million in funding from leading investors like Dragoneer, Tiger Global, Sequoia Capital, Bessemer Venture Partners, Kleiner Perkins, Index Ventures, and Credo Ventures.

Learn more at productboard.com and follow @productboard.







