

Five Simple Steps for Getting Your Software Product to Market Fast

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Abstract

The phrase ‘Time to Market is Everything’ is often quoted and many believe this to be about the so called ‘First Mover Advantage’ for those that enter a market earlier are more likely to dominate in that market than those who enter it later. Perhaps this is true. Another advantage of getting to market quickly is getting quality feedback from your early adopter customers. A well focused product will have a better chance of grabbing market share. A simple road map is presented here for how to go about getting to market fast.

Time Versus Quality

I remember working on this software development project a long time ago. I was pretty young at the time. A departmental meeting was called where it was announced that release schedules were going to be moved up. My manager raised his hand and said **you can be time driven or quality driven but you cannot be both.** It is certainly true that delivering software that human life depends on (e.g. jet fighter pilot software) with bugs in it is a big mistake. It is also true that delivering operational business software to a customer while it is still crashing a lot or while it is still producing a lot of invalid results is also a big mistake. However, I have come to learn in the long years since that manager made that statement that software can be ruined just as easily by delaying its delivery as it can be by delivering it prematurely.

The Industry Responds

There is a lot of wisdom in the industry that would seem to back up that manager’s claims. Quotes such as ‘Better, faster, cheaper, pick any two’ would seem to imply that choices must be made. [1] Even in software development, you can’t have your cake and eat it too. Perhaps a choice must be made between getting a product out fast and getting it right. Let’s look deeper to investigate whether or not the time versus quality argument holds up

by researching what the software development industry has done and where it has succeeded in the past decade.

About ten years ago, a new crop of industry leaders began a revolution in software development. At about that time, the phrase ‘time to market is everything’ started appearing. At first glance, you might come to the conclusion that getting the product out fast was the more important choice than getting it right.

Around the turn of this century, ISVs starting making a new type of claim. This time, they starting claiming that they sold solutions instead of products. How can that be? These companies hired lots of engineers to write software so how can they be claiming that they don’t sell products? Was this some new kind of cleverly marketed techno-speak designed to fool key decision makers?

In 2007, the very prestigious Association for Computer Machinery printed a landmark article. Called **The One Minute Risk Assessment Tool**, this article was the result of analyzing 720 software project assessments by senior IT managers in 60 large companies. It presented 6 characteristics of software development projects rated by how much risk that these characteristics introduced into the project. The second most risky characteristic was lack of customer involvement. [2]

A False Dichotomy

The critical need for early and frequent customer involvement shows the time versus quality argument to be a false dichotomy. The traditional approach to customer involvement is through what is called the **focus group** which is a kind of demo using mock ups in which you try to get customer reaction. Though necessary, focus groups are insufficient. You don’t get good quality feedback because the customer hasn’t really committed to your product yet. They’re there on your dime so they are more likely to just tell you what they think that you want to hear. The way to get good quality customer feedback is to use their data, to run it in their office, and to get them to pay for it. They’ll drop the polite act and start giving you the hard truth that you desperately need to build that better mousetrap. The only way to get customers to pay is to sell it to them and the only way to sell them the product is to put it on the market. That is why it is not time versus quality driven. The only way to be drive value **is** to be time driven. You need both interests represented at the decision maker’s table in order to have a quality product.

Getting to Market Fast

How can you get to market fast when every customer's needs are different? Isn't it going to take a long time to incorporate every feature request from every new customer into your product? That's the wrong approach. Remember those ISVs who starting marketing a 'solutions, not products' message? A solution is tailer made to each customer. It is a recommendation of a product (or products) and a best practices recommendation of how that company should use that/those product(s). It isn't about making a product that pleases everyone but about finding the best way to run the IT side of a particular vertical, or industry, then selling everyone to that way of running their business. This is the hard part of the sales cycle because every company thinks that it is their process that is the differentiator for them. Keeping that in mind, here are some simple but effective steps for getting to market fast.

1. build a vanilla application
 - include simple screens
 - build this around an engine
 - the big differentiator is your data model
 - avoid deferring decisions to some kind of customer configuration file or runtime logic switch
 - instead, do the research and make the decision that is best for the industry you serve
2. create strategic points of integration into the vanilla application
 - embed a report writer
 - embed a work flow engine, especially if this is an ERP application
3. increment and iterate
 - trying to build it all at once is going dark too long
 - ask yourself what the customer needs on day one and build just that
 - everything else should go into a later version
 - this is what agile methodologies are all about so use one of those
4. build into the sales cycle, the billable customer engagement
 - interview the relevant stake-holders to discover the best practices for this company
 - be prepared to customize reports, screens, and the work flow architecture
 - these customizations are specific to the customer and are not to be incorporated back into the vanilla product

5. develop a thick skin

- it's going to take a lot of iterations before you have a winner
- early adopters get to feel your app's growing pains
- they have already paid so they are going to share their dissatisfaction with you
- that's ok because I am pretty sure that you will figure out some way to make it up to them

Getting Real

The makers of Ruby on Rails have produced a book about developing software. Called **Getting Real**, this book offers some of the most lucid, practical, and yet simple to follow advice on the subject. If you find yourself agreeing with any part of this article, then you owe it to yourself to read this book. One of the best ideas of this book is to 'make opinionated software.' The best software has a vision. The best software takes sides. When someone uses software, they're not just looking for features, they're looking for an approach. They're looking for a vision. Decide what your vision is and run with it. Make a stand on how it should be done. [3]

The Power of Saying No is the title of an earlier blog of my own. It talks about setting priorities and denying non-strategic features. You are going to have to learn to say no if you want to get to market fast. [4]

References

- [1] TOMAYKO, JAMES, HAZZAN, ORIT, *Human Aspects of Software Engineering*, Charles River Media (2004), p 227
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