

## Chapter 1: So You Need a Widget

Sometimes you need a widget. A widget can be anything: a pair of shoes, a VCR, a new car, or an aircraft carrier. It can also be a service, like a haircut or a house painter. When you need a widget for yourself, how do you choose it?

For small widgets, you may already have a regular place you go with a name you trust. You buy your groceries at Boorsma's Supermarket and get your hair cut at Moe's. You may have a particular brand preference, so when you need a new pair of shoes, you go to Florsheim. Sometimes you may not be able to afford Florsheim, so you go to Shoe Mania. But chances are that you try on any pair of shoes to make sure that they feel good and complement your feet.

For more expensive or longer-lasting widgets, you will probably do a little more homework. You have several house painters give you bids, discuss the job with them, and think about whether you can do it yourself. You weigh price and time against your impressions of their people and your own personal abilities. For a new car, you may do your research about brands and models, trying to figure out which ones best fit your needs. You shop around, test drive a few, and compare prices. Only those with a lot of money will just call up a dealership and say, "I want a red BMW Z3 by next Tuesday. Make it so."

Let's say you're looking for a long-term relationship. You don't just pick out the best-looking person you know and happily spend the next several years with them (hours, perhaps...years, no). You talk, you get to know them, you see how they react to things, and you evaluate their perspective and disposition against your own. You look for

someone who will respect you, and someone on whom you can depend when things get rough.

For our personal relationships and widgets, we spend all this time and effort. So when a company needs a widget, it's an even bigger challenge. Usually the company's widget is affecting more than one person (sometimes millions of people), and may be used for many years. The relationship with the vendor may be long-term, as the companies work together to develop and grow the widget. It is also a relationship of groups of people and corporate cultures, which have a lot more complexities than a one-to-one association.

Thus it is critical to find the right widget and vendor for your company. Like the frustration of buying a car that ends up being a lemon, a bad widget can cause you to lose thousands of customers and millions of dollars. And like the upset and heartbreak of a bad personal relationship, a bad vendor can make your corporate life a living hell. This book will help you find the **right** vendor, and reap the rewards from your relationship with them.

### ***The Birth of a Need***

The need to start looking for a widget can come from a variety of directions. Optimally, it is based on the needs of your customer, internal or external. The problem is that customers do not always know what they want. This is especially true of new technology, as with microwave ovens. Who would have said, "You know, this range just isn't fast enough for me. I wish I had a little box that I could just put my food in and have tiny little invisible waves heat it for me. And if it made popcorn, that would be way cool."

There is also the "magic bullet" mentality, where some piece of technology looks to be solution to everyone's problems. Sometimes this is due to a person's area of

expertise. If you ask a database developer how to address a range of problems, they'll probably show you how a database can solve all of them. A Java programmer will come up with Java code to solve all your problems, and a mechanical engineer will devise a Swiss army knife. So it isn't surprising when a bunch of people all suddenly say that a Web form (or whatever the current "magic bullet" is) is EXACTLY what they need...but may not be.

So the lucky folks in Marketing and R&D get to consult their collective crystal ball to determine what products are going to excite customers enough to pull out their credit cards. This is a momentous and difficult task, and I heartily applaud anyone who can do it consistently well. Then there's the technology side where we enjoy toying with our boxes to see what sort of neat things we can get them to do. It is unbelievably easy to get lost in this pursuit, doing development for development's sake and enhancing a product far beyond the customer needs. Sometimes you can come up with a product or feature that many customers find helpful. Or you can build a Rube Goldberg contraption with lots of crazy bells and whistles that only excites people in the lab.

For example...back in the days when wireless phone calls were about a buck a minute, there was a concept that customers didn't like giving out more than one number. Customer studies had been done, and people liked the idea of being able to have a single number that could route to their home, office, wireless, pager, or whatever. We also thought our competition was going to launch a similar product. Then somewhere along the way, other features started appearing. The capability of call screening was introduced, where a customer could accept or reject calls after the caller recorded their name ("Laura, it's Jim and my hair's on fire."). The vendor made an error in coding, documented it, and it became a

feature to record a message back to the caller when you rejected them ("Hi Jim. Burn baby burn. Later."). And there was a sleep mode, and...and...and...and... The test plan was about four inches thick. A few million dollars later we launched it. Internally we called it "One Customer" because at its peak, it only had 13 paying subscribers on it. So we eventually pulled the plug, although I imagine that the cassette of the hold music is still probably playing somewhere in one of our sites.

Why did this fail? Customers liked the original idea; we based it on their input. Technology claimed that Marketing didn't define it properly. Marketing claimed that Sales didn't position it properly. Sales claimed that Technology had made it too complicated for anyone to understand. The vendor kept repeating "It works to spec!", meaning that they had built it exactly as we asked. Maybe it was the customers' fault for not knowing what they wanted. Perhaps under other circumstances, it could have been launched successfully.

A couple months ago I was at a breakfast meeting of a local association. As we discussed certain issues, an advertising person turned to me and said, "You know what I think is going to be the next really big thing? I heard about this service where you can set it up to route all your phone numbers through a single number. Then you just give out that one number and people can get you wherever you are!" I suggested we have that conversation another time.

Here are some conversations I have had where needs are born:

### **The Solid Plan**

Randy: Hey Laura, you got a minute?

Laura: For you, of course. What's up?

- R: Well, you may have heard about the widget work we've been doing.
- L: Yes, some...tell me about it.
- R: Well, you know that we regularly survey our customer base to find their interests. And recently they started showing some interest in widgets. So we did some more in-depth interviewing with them to understand it, and put together our Marketing requirements. We presented to the Development Council yesterday, and they approved our moving forward with it.
- L: Congrats! I know you are always a winner with the Development Council. They give you a budget to go with it?
- R: Yes, we've got \$20K to take a look at it and figure out what we want to do.
- L: Money. That's always nice.
- R: We were pretty happy with it. So do you have some time that you could help us look around at widget makers, see what's out there, and determine who we should use?

(Note: This scenario rarely happens in real life.)

### The Up-and-Comer

- Chas: Knock, knock.
- Laura: Hey, Charles, how's it going?
- C: It's going great. How's things with you?
- L: Doing well, keeping busy. Anything new in your neck of the woods?
- C: Well, I've been thinking about this widget thing.
- L: Uh huh.
- C: They've been talking about it in the press, and I'm starting to wonder if we shouldn't be looking at it more actively.
- L: Any particular customer demand for it?

- C: Not yet, but it would probably be like microwave ovens...you know, after people get it they wonder how they lived without it.
- L: Hmm....maybe.
- C: Would you have some time to survey some widget vendors and find out what they're doing?

### The Panic

- Jane: Laura, you have a sec?
- Laura: I have a meeting in a few minutes, but what's on your mind?
- J: Have you heard about the competition?
- L: What about them?
- J: They're launching widgets!
- L: Really, when?
- J: We're not sure yet, but we think it's going to be soon.
- L: Interesting. I wonder how successful they're going to be.
- J: Well, we need to make a competitive answer or they may start taking customers away from us.
- L: Are you sure about that? Maybe we should see if it works for them first.
- J: No, we've got to be right with them on this. We need you to start looking at widget vendors and finding one for us.
- L: Do you have requirements for this?
- J: No, we'll base that on the information you find.
- L: Hmm. Is this a project yet?
- J: No, but it's going to be soon. Can you start on it this afternoon?

### The Rescue

- Steve: Hey, stranger.
- Laura: Steve! I haven't seen you in a while. Guess you've been knee-deep in it.
- S: Yeah, it's this widget project. It's driving me nuts.

- L: Oh? What's happening with it?
- S: Well, corporate decided that we needed to use this widget vendor. I don't know how they picked them, but there it is. Anyhow, it's just hell trying to work with them. They don't deliver their releases on time, they don't communicate, there's no documentation, and nothing ever works as it should.
- L: I don't envy you that task.
- S: Yeah, me neither. A couple of folks almost got into a shouting match in today's conference call.
- L: Oh, that's not good.
- S: No, it was pretty embarrassing, but I understand why people were upset.
- L: How mandatory is this vendor?
- S: Well, that's actually why I'm here. We want to be able to bring a presentation back to corporate recommending an alternative vendor and getting rid of this one.
- L: Aha...not just a social call.
- S: Right. Now this is completely confidential. Can you do some checking around of widget vendors and see what you can find? Remember that we don't want any of this to leak out to the current vendor, or we'll never get anything more out of them.

## The Sales Pitch

(Phone rings)

Laura: Phoney Corp, this is Laura.

Dawn: Hey Laura, guess who!

L: Hi Dawn! How are you doing?

D: Doing great...and you?

L: I'm keeping out of trouble, at least for the moment.

D: Is your husband still working at that great restaurant?

L: Yes, I'm happy to say. He's learned a lot and is keeping me well fed.

D: That's got to be great being married to a chef.  
L: Well, it is, but it makes it really tough to lose weight. *(Thinking: typical salesperson...what does she WANT?)*

D: I'll bet!  
L: How's things over at SoftWhereCo?  
D: Fantastic. I'm working with some big potential clients, and things look really good. Well, say...do you have a couple of minutes? I wanted to run something by you.

L: Okay. *(Here we go...)*  
D: First off, how's our software working for you?  
L: I'd have to check with Ops to be sure, but I haven't heard any complaints. I think it's doing pretty well, and we're putting customers on it.

D: That's good. Well, we are just on the verge of announcing something that we think is pretty exciting.

L: Uh huh. *(It's the wind up...and the pitch...)*  
D: In a couple of days we're going to be sending out a press release about our newest product...WIDGETS!

L: Oh really?  
D: Yes, we think this is going to be one of our most popular offerings. And it would be a great addition to what you've already got. So, I was wondering if I could get together with you and your team next week to discuss how we can make this work for you.

### The 12<sup>th</sup> Hole Deal

Norm: Hi, Laura.

Laura: Hi boss!

N: Say, can you step into my office for a minute?

L: Uh oh.

N: No, no...everything's fine.

L: Okay, what's up?

- N: Well, I know you've been pretty busy lately, but I've got a new project for you.
- L: Okay.
- N: We need to look at implementing widgets.
- L: Uh, okay...where did this come from?
- N: Well honestly, our CTO and one of the VPs from BigAsSco were playing golf last weekend and they decided to do a deal for us to launch their new widget.
- L: So let me guess...no customer demand or requirements yet.
- N: No, just implement what they've got.
- L: Budget?
- N: We want to do this pretty lean. So just charge it to overhead right now and we'll see if we need a code for it. I need a target schedule for it by the end of this week.

These illustrate four basic scenarios for the definition of a product and its associated customer need: product defined/undefined and need defined/undefined.

### **Product and need defined**

This is where most of us prefer to play...The Solid Plan. You know (or you think you are pretty clear on) what the customer needs, through interviewing, polling, focus groups, product feedback, trouble tickets<sup>2</sup>, or evaluating product usage patterns. This gives rise to a product outline or marketing requirements<sup>3</sup>: to fill this need, we require this

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<sup>2</sup> A trouble ticket is a report on a specific problem. For example, if your mobile phone always drops calls in a certain area, you might report it to Customer Care and they can document it in a trouble ticket.

<sup>3</sup> A product outline is a general statement of the desired product or functionality. Marketing requirements are a

functionality. This is also The Rescue, where we have enough experience with a prior product or vendor that we can take the lessons learned from it to seek a replacement.

### **Need defined but product undefined**

This can be, in part, The Up-and-Comer. We are looking for ways of meeting our customers' need, so we look around to find something that satisfies it. Perhaps we find a concept in a trade journal or white paper, or just have a brainstorm that leaves us sitting bolt upright in bed in the middle of the night. However, the concept is not clear enough for us to act on it, so we want to look around within the industry to see if anyone is providing a product that is similar to what we have in mind.

### **Product defined but need undefined**

This is The Sales Pitch and The 12<sup>th</sup> Hole Deal, where the vendor has approached you with their product and you are considering its implementation. It also can be a competitive response, when a new product has been launched and is understood within the industry, but has not yet found its customer niche. Short Messaging Service (SMS, or Text Messaging) fell into this category for a portion of its early life. Who would want to tap messages into their phone when you can just dial someone's number and talk to them? After a year or more of floundering, one company threw a biscuit to a hungry young Marketeer—a small budget to promote SMS. With some strategically placed advertising blitzes in dirt bike and teen music magazines, texting suddenly became hip. Then kids communicated it to their parents, who took it into the office. Need found...big time.

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more detailed definition of the specific functionality required.

## Neither product nor need defined

This is The Up-and-Comer and The Panic; the two are basically the same except for the competitive pressure to act in The Panic. We have sort of a concept, which various people may interpret in different ways. The first document I read on my first day at a wireless telecommunications company in 1993 was a white paper on PCS networks. My boss came in around noon and asked for my thoughts. "Well," I said, "I read the paper but I don't think I fully understand the concept. It sounds like it may be an idea for a high-speed alternative to cellular, or it may be a network specifically targeted to wireless LANs, or it may be something for a system like CB or packet radios. Are any of those right?" He shrugged his shoulders and smiled at me, "We're not really sure yet. We'll have to build it and see what happens."

## **Great. So NOW what do I do?**

The first thing that you *should* do is define your customer need. Once you understand this, it can be a component of your scope statement. A scope statement provides a documented basis for making future project<sup>4</sup> decisions and for confirming or developing common understanding of project scope among the stakeholders<sup>5</sup>. In other words,

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<sup>4</sup> The Project Management Body of Knowledge distinction between a product and a project is used throughout this book, with the terms "product" and "program" used interchangeably. A program is a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way. A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result. Therefore, a product may encompass several projects to release a variety of features. A project is an endeavor to deliver a single facet or release of a product.

<sup>5</sup> A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, p. 208.