

How to Turn Great Ideas Into Real Opportunities for Your Product



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Idea Intake and Triage Process: How to Work With Ideas	5
Four Common Pitfalls To Avoid	13
Best Practices: How To Turn Great Ideas Into Reality	16
How Capturing and Validating Ideas Is Different With a Product Management Platform	19
Conclusion	20

Introduction

Why Read This Guide

If you asked most product teams, they would tell you that one problem they **don't** have is too few things to do.

In fact, most product teams would tell you they are absolutely drowning in ideas, feature requests, and feedback about their product.

The most valuable resource you can give customers is your time. Listen to them to uncover their real needs. Only then can you find a way to solve their problems or meet their expectations. Treat the cause, not just the symptoms.”

Ginger Conlon | Thought Leadership Director and Customer Experience Advocate at Genesys

That situation results in a backlog overflowing with items that the product team **could** potentially deliver. This wealth of ideas can often paralyze teams—there are so many things to work on that they have trouble determining what they should do next.

The answer to this conundrum is not to stop collecting ideas and ignore feedback.

Your product teams need some way to elicit ideas, evaluate which ideas will help your teams reach their targeted outcomes, and turn those ideas into opportunities that make their way to your roadmap and eventually into your backlog.

This guide walks you through an approach to managing ideas so that you can make informed decisions about opportunities you should pursue for your product.

The Role Feedback and Ideas Play in the Product Development Lifecycle

Feedback and feature requests are perhaps the best source of ideas for your product team. There are few things more valuable than hearing from your customers, either directly or indirectly, about what they think about your product and what they wish the product would do that would make them use it even more.

The thing is, people who provide ideas usually describe them in terms of solutions. Your product teams have to dig deeper into feature requests and feedback to understand the problems that underlie those requests.

The information you hear from your customers won't explicitly tell you the changes you need to make in your product. They will provide evidence about the problems that people face. It's up to your teams to discover what changes to make in your product to help customers solve those problems.

What Role Do Product Leaders Play in Collecting, Processing, and Validating Ideas?

As a product leader, you need to make sure your teams have a consistent and effective process for collecting ideas, evaluating which ones are worth pursuing, and organizing those ideas into the opportunities that inform your roadmap initiatives.

Feedback and Ideas Are a Key Part of a Successful Customer-Led Strategy

80% of customers say the experience a company provides is as important as its products/services. Part of that superior customer experience is ensuring your customers feel their feedback and ideas are heard by your product team.

You also want to make sure that your teams have access to the tools to support that process and the knowledge on how to use those tools.

Idea Intake and Triage Process: How to Work With Ideas

- Collect and Consolidate Ideas
- Analyze Ideas and Identify Opportunities
- Connect Opportunities to Your Roadmap Initiatives

It's tempting to think that ideas should go directly to your product teams' roadmap backlog along with all the work that they've already identified.

One of the problems with that approach is that most of these ideas haven't been validated yet. Your roadmap backlog is already filled with initiatives, and adding unvalidated ideas makes it difficult to separate the signal from the noise. This will leave your team in danger of spending time on ideas that aren't worth the effort at the expense of other changes that can drive meaningful outcomes.

You're better off if your teams can establish a process to collect ideas, validate them in order to identify opportunities, and then determine which opportunities will feed initiatives on your roadmap.

An idea is a concept that your product teams haven't researched yet to determine its chances of market success. [Ideas become opportunities](#) when you can validate that they solve customer problems in a commercially viable way for your company.

Let's look at how ideas become opportunities that result in initiatives on your roadmap via the idea intake and triage process.

Collect and Consolidate Ideas

There probably isn't such a thing as too many ideas, although it can sure seem that way if you find you're getting inundated with things to do.

Ideas can include:

- Customer feedback
- Feature requests
- Identified bugs
- Other types of suggestions and complaints
- Ideas derived from competitor solutions

Ideas help identify which problems to solve next. Use an idea to describe a pain point or problem that you believe your product should help your customers solve.

Since most ideas will come in the form of solutions such as "I want to edit my tweets," you want to resist the urge to put that directly on your roadmap.

Instead, you'll want to dig deeper to understand what underlying problem your customers are trying to solve that drove them to make that request.

While you'd like to ask for a bunch of information up front, that will only reduce the likelihood that you'll get people to submit ideas. Instead, make it easy for people to submit ideas and make it easy for your team to contact those folks for more information.

There are perhaps as many sources of ideas as there are formats. Besides direct feedback from existing customers, you can also get ideas from:

- Product team members
- Sales representatives
- Customer success agents
- The marketing department
- Executives
- Investors
- Prospective customers

With ideas coming in several forms and from several places, the chances are pretty good you'll see a bit of duplication in the ideas you're working with. In fact, if an idea gets repeated several times from different sources, that may be a good sign that the idea could point to a true opportunity.

But because those ideas come in different forms from different sources, it's likely that the ideas will be scattered across multiple spreadsheets, documents, emails, and other tools.

If you have existing mechanisms to collect ideas and feedback that your customers are comfortable with, don't throw those channels out. Instead, figure out how you can merge input from those different sources into a centralized location. Having a centralized location to collect all of those ideas, [such as an idea backlog](#), helps you to organize all the feedback you

receive from different sources and identify trends amongst the items from disparate sources.

Example: Consider a company that makes call center software for customer service departments. The software compiles call data and generates reports in tabular format to help these departments manage their call queues more efficiently.

The reporting product team received feature requests to display the data in bar graphs and pie charts and heard that customers convert the existing reports into graphs. That led the product team to identify an opportunity related to visualizing data.

Analyze Ideas and Identify Opportunities

Once you've collected all those great (and not so great) ideas, your product teams need to sort through them and determine which opportunities you've already identified or indicate new opportunities you haven't identified yet.

Think of ideas as the evidence you gather to identify which problems are worth solving. Opportunities represent the value that you might achieve by solving those problems.

Clarifying Questions

A good way to evaluate ideas is to use a set of clarifying questions to ensure you understand the ideas and know which ones point to excellent opportunities.

Exactly what problem will this idea solve?

Since people state most ideas as solutions, this question identifies the underlying problem that the idea addresses.

For whom do we solve that problem?

Identify the people helped by the idea and see if those people match up with the target audience of your product.

What can we gain from solving this problem?

This question explores why you should solve the problem. Don't feel as if you need a highly precise answer at this point. An order-of-magnitude answer is usually good enough to determine whether the problem is worth solving.

How will we measure success?

This is a way of knowing if you've successfully solved the problem.

What alternatives are out there now?

This is another way of asking what would happen if you don't solve the problem, as well as identifying different ways of solving it.

Why now?

This question asks what time constraints exist for delivering the product.

What factors are critical to success?

This singles out any specific requirements identified during the discussion or subsequent analysis. This question should not identify the solution; rather, it highlights any dependencies or constraints that may exist.

Is this problem worth solving?

This question sums up the discussion. Based on what you've discussed up to this point, does the idea point to a legitimate opportunity?

Ask questions like these about any idea before you begin the development process. That allows you to avoid spending time on ideas that don't align with your product strategy and focus on those opportunities that represent a good fit for your product.

This set of questions allows your product teams to explore ideas (expressed as solutions) in terms of the problem space and see if they support existing opportunities or identify new opportunities.

If several customers ask for the same thing, your customer-facing teams have identified similar ideas, and if competing solutions appear to be addressing those challenges, that's probably a problem worth looking into.

If you've only ever heard a request from a single salesperson trying to close a deal and there's no corresponding feedback from your direct customer contact, you'll want to think twice before prioritizing it. It's worth doing more discovery to validate whether it represents an opportunity to drive real business outcomes.

Thinking back to our call center software example, the product team used the questions above to validate an opportunity based on the feature requests shared by their customer success team.

Connect Opportunities to Your Roadmap Initiatives

Collecting ideas, evaluating them, and organizing them into opportunities is the heart of discovery.

Exploring those opportunities against your business strategy and deciding which ones will make their way to your roadmap is where you form the bridge between your discovery and delivery efforts. This is where you decide which opportunities you want to explore further through roadmap initiatives.

To decide which opportunities your teams should explore with roadmap initiatives, evaluate those opportunities against your business goals. Business goals make up your uppermost company strategy, and seizing the right product opportunities helps accomplish your business goals.

To use business goals to evaluate your opportunities, create [decision filters](#) based on those business goals. A decision filter converts your business goal into the form of a question like “Will this help us [X]” where X is your business goal.

To decide which opportunities your teams should explore with roadmap initiatives, evaluate those opportunities against your business goals.

You'll see one of three scenarios as you evaluate your opportunities against your business goals.

Common Scenarios That Come From Reviewing Opportunities

SCENARIO 01

ANALYSIS REVEALS

Your research suggests the opportunity aligns with your strategy and is worth pursuing now.

NEXT ACTIONS

Work with your product team to translate the opportunity into initiatives that you place on your roadmap.

SCENARIO 02

ANALYSIS REVEALS

The opportunity shows promise but does not fit in with your team's existing product strategy.

NEXT ACTIONS

Keep the opportunity on your list, but tag it as viable—to revisit when/if your strategy changes.

SCENARIO 03

ANALYSIS REVEALS

The opportunity does not represent a viable investment, at least not now.

NEXT ACTIONS

Delete the opportunity.

Let's consider our call center software example to see how this could work.

Imagine that the company's current goal is to sign up new customers. Their decision filter might be: "Will this help us sign up new customers?"

When they evaluate the data visualization opportunity against the decision filter, they realize the opportunity doesn't support the goal. If they believe there may be some value from that opportunity in the future, they'll hang on to the opportunity for future reference but not include it on their roadmap.

If the company's goal is to encourage retention of existing customers, their decision filter may start with: "Will this help us keep current customers?"

If the teams conclude that the effort to create data visualization will require far more effort than the value it returns, they remove the opportunity from further consideration.

However, if the company's goal is to encourage retention of existing customers, their decision filter may look like this: "Will this help us keep current customers?" If the team concludes that data visualization is a key factor in keeping customers, they'll conduct additional research to determine if the additional revenue this new module will generate justifies the time and money required to build it.

The product team will need to talk with existing and prospective customers. They will want to research competitive apps to learn if data visualization makes those products more valuable to the market. And they should also run some numbers—to determine, for example, if they can raise the app's price for new customers based on this new module.

Four Common Pitfalls To Avoid

The process of converting ideas into roadmap initiatives comes along with some common pitfalls.

- 01 Too Much of a Good Thing
- 02 Not All Ideas Are Created Equal
- 03 The Feature Factory
- 04 Upsetting Customers

01 Too Much of a Good Thing

The advantage of collecting a lot of different ideas from different sources is you get a wide range of feedback that can lead to new opportunities.

But that large number of ideas can also become a burden. The more ideas you collect, the more ideas you have to manage and the more time you spend wading through all of those ideas.

If you're not careful, you can get lost in the minutiae of all those ideas and lose sight of the potential opportunities that they may hint at.

02 Not All Ideas Are Created Equal

Ideas can come from a variety of different sources, and it's usually a good idea to consider the source when evaluating an idea.

Your product teams may put more weight on the ideas coming from your customers than those coming from internal stakeholders, especially if you have to choose to put effort toward changes that help your customers versus those solely being requested from stakeholders inside your company.

Ideas and feature requests from your customers are feedback. Don't treat all of them as requirements or must-dos. Just because an idea is popular among your customers doesn't mean it is the most important to pursue, especially if those ideas don't align with your product strategy.

03 The Feature Factory

Ideas should serve your overarching product strategy, but they shouldn't replace it.

When you immediately put the ideas you receive on your product backlog and treat them as things you have to do, you'll find yourself in a feature factory. You'll become so focused on output - delivering on all of those ideas that you'll lose sight of what outcomes you're trying to deliver and end up creating many features that do not add value to your product and may actually detract from it.

Feedback from your customers and ideas from your internal stakeholders are valuable input to your overall product planning approach, but they should not be the only thing you consider. Ideas and opportunities inspire and influence roadmap initiatives; they don't become roadmap initiatives. You need to factor in how those ideas support business goals and move your product forward.

04 Upsetting Customers

When you openly accept suggestions from your customers, you set the expectation that you'll act on those ideas with additional features in your product.

When customers don't see their ideas show up in your product and never hear an explanation of why your teams didn't implement their ideas, they're going to be less likely to suggest ideas in the future. They may even look at the lack of results as a reason to look for a different product to solve their problems.

Upvoting can exacerbate this problem. If customers look at the items getting the most votes, and don't see those items implemented (probably because the idea doesn't align with your product strategy) they're going to feel ignored.

Remember, customers influence your decisions, but they don't make them for you. All the same, you need to acknowledge their input and keep them up to speed on your plans.

Best Practices: How To Turn Great Ideas Into Reality

01 Create a Standardized Way To Evaluate Ideas and Opportunities

If you actively seek ideas, feature requests and feedback, you're going to be inundated with a wealth of different ideas. A consistent way to analyze ideas helps you speed up the time to evaluate them and prevents your teams from getting overwhelmed by all those ideas.

A common approach to evaluating ideas and opportunities also helps you decide on the right opportunities faster and get the right initiatives on your roadmap.

A standard list of questions is usually the best way to evaluate ideas and opportunities because it allows you to evaluate all ideas and opportunities in the same way without being stymied by the uncertainty that comes with ideas.

Your product teams may be tempted to use a scorecard to evaluate ideas. The ability to assign a ranking to ideas brings a level of comfort that you're using an objective approach.

But just because you're using numbers doesn't mean that your scorecard is actually objective. Chances are you know a little about the idea, what it would take to implement it, and the outcomes you'll experience. It turns out that scorecards can be considerably more subjective than you would initially think.

Rather than relying on quantitative upvoting or scorecards, your product teams should ask the right questions to get to the root problems. Focus less on feature requests and more on problem spaces.

02 Group Ideas Into Themes

When you collect ideas from a variety of sources, you'll inevitably get duplicate ideas or slightly different ideas that still address the same underlying problem.

To quickly assess all the ideas you get, it's often helpful to group them together into similar themes. Those themes may relate to an existing problem you're already trying to solve or show a new problem you weren't aware of before.

Grouping ideas by themes helps identify trends across similar points of feedback.

Grouping ideas by themes reduces the number of things you have to assess to identify opportunities. It also helps identify trends across similar points of feedback that may show that a particular problem is definitely worth tackling.

03 Communicate

Since your teams will want to contact the people submitting ideas and providing feedback, collect contact info so you can follow up with clarifying questions to get context.

It's also helpful to know how to contact people so that you can follow up with customers who provided feedback and people inside your org who suggested ideas so you can let them know what you're doing with their input - even if it is to tell them you're not implementing anything at the moment.

When coworkers or customers submit suggestions for improving your product, it's in everyone's best interest that they understand your process for dealing with those suggestions. If they don't, and they don't see your team moving forward with the idea, they will assume you've rejected it.

You want to let people know about the disposition of changes so they'll be willing to continue submitting ideas and providing feedback

04 Don't Lose Focus of the Product Strategy

Ideas can help you identify potential opportunities, and those that relate to existing opportunities can confirm that opportunity is viable.

Your product strategy is best used as a filter to sort through ideas and their derivative opportunities.

But you don't want your product teams drowning in an overflow of ideas without some way of sorting through them in an intelligent fashion. That's where your product strategy comes into play.

Your product strategy is best used as a filter to sort through ideas and their derivative opportunities. You don't want to fall into the trap of always attempting to "find a place" for each idea within your strategy without culling out the ones that make little sense for your product. It's also important to remember to tie the outcomes of your opportunities back to the strategy.

When you create decision filters from your business goals, you're in an excellent position to apply your product strategy as a filter to narrow down the opportunities to the ones that make the most sense for your product.

How Capturing and Validating Ideas Is Different With a Product Management Platform

Ideas are an essential part of the product management process. They help you identify and validate the opportunities your business should pursue.

It's helpful to collect ideas, identify opportunities, align them with their strategy and prioritize them on the roadmap within your product management platform. Having all that information in the same place provides you with easy access to the full context that comes from the original ideas.

Tracking your ideas and opportunities in your product management tool also allows you to view your ideas during roadmap reviews and quickly move worthy opportunities straight to your roadmap. The key is to be able to measure the outcome of your efforts and communicate the results to your key stakeholders. The reporting and analysis will ensure the bets you're making in your product strategy are paying off.

When you manage your ideas in your product management platform, you'll be able to:

- Minimize time spent collecting, consolidating, and understanding customer feedback
- Minimize the time to make a decision
- Minimize the likelihood of misalignment with stakeholders/company vision
- Minimize time spent on the wrong things

Conclusion

Ideas and feedback form an essential aspect of your product development process. You want to get as much feedback as you can so that you have a full picture of the problems that your customers have, but the more ideas you get, the more work it takes to get to the opportunities that will bring value to your company.

Your product teams need an effective process to manage ideas and make informed decisions about opportunities to pursue for your product. When your product management tool supports that process, your product teams can efficiently populate their roadmaps with the right opportunities.

To learn more about how your product management tool can support an effective process to manage ideas and opportunities, [schedule a demo of ProductPlan today](#).





About ProductPlan

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