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nobody is waiting for your product.

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Nobody Is Waiting for Your Product.

Every new product enters a world that has already learned to live without it. The real competition is everything the customer must disturb to choose yours.

At nine on Monday morning, somewhere inside a company, a launch meeting begins. The product is ready, sales has the deck, marketing has the campaign, and months of research, engineering, design and argument have converged on the moment everyone in the room has been organising towards.

Outside the room, Monday continues.

Customers open the same software, call the same supplier, update the same spreadsheet and tolerate the same inconvenience they tolerated on Friday. Nobody woke up wondering when the product would finally arrive because, in its absence, they had already found a way to function without it.

Every company has a launch date. The customer does not.

That asymmetry explains something fundamental about innovation. Companies tend to see opportunities waiting to be captured; customers inhabit lives already in progress. By the time a product reaches them, habits have formed, budgets have been allocated, relationships have accumulated and temporary workarounds have quietly become the way things are done.

A new product does not enter empty space. It enters an equilibrium. The job is not simply to build something better, but to make changing worth it.

Your Real Competitor Is the Present

The incumbent is not always another logo on a market map. It may be Excel, email, an assistant who remembers everything, a supplier trusted for a decade, or three mediocre systems held together by somebody who knows precisely where each one breaks. Sometimes it is doing nothing.

Doing nothing is formidable competition. It requires no procurement, migration, integration or retraining. Nobody needs to find budget, persuade security or explain why the new thing failed.

This is why companies and customers can look at the same innovation and see different propositions. The company compares capability; the customer compares states of the world. The existing arrangement may be inelegant, but its imperfections have been absorbed. Data lives there, processes assume it, people know the workarounds and the risks are familiar.

The new product arrives carrying potential value, but it also arrives carrying work.

Building founder-led ventures taught me to become suspicious of enthusiasm. The meeting in which somebody loves the idea is useful; the interesting moment comes when they volunteer data, introduce the economic buyer, change a workflow or find budget. Until something is surrendered, interest and commitment can look remarkably alike.

AI sharpens that distinction. It can compress parts of the journey from idea to functioning product dramatically, but procurement committees, capital cycles, organisational politics and human habits have acquired no corresponding acceleration. Companies can increasingly build faster than their customers can change.

The Product Includes the Change

Most product teams concentrate on making the destination better: greater capability, lower cost, better design, more intelligence. Customers must also cross the distance between where they are and where the product wants them to go. That distance is part of the proposition.

Atari offers an unusually vivid example. Its Video Computer System arrived in 1977 with interchangeable cartridges, turning the television into something whose purpose could change with whatever game was inserted. Then *Space Invaders* came home. The arcade hit became available for the Atari VCS in 1980 and helped drive a dramatic increase in console sales. People were not buying interchangeable-cartridge architecture. They were buying the possibility of bringing an experience they already wanted into the living room.

A few years later, the same market demonstrated the other half of the lesson. Too many consoles and too much uneven software flooded the American market while home computers offered consumers a broader alternative. Atari compounded the problem with expensive bets on games including *E.T.*, whose disappointing sales became the popular symbol of the 1983 crash. The cartridges really did end up in a New Mexico landfill; an excavation in 2014 recovered them. But *E.T.* did not single-handedly destroy the video-game industry. Reality was less cinematic and more instructive: supply had expanded faster than the market's reasons to keep buying.

Atari had helped create a new equilibrium and then discovered that producing more for it was not the same as making it stronger.

The same distinction survives in less colourful markets. In enterprise technology, the distance between old and new can include procurement, security review, migration, integration, retraining, governance and somebody willing to attach professional credibility to the decision. A technically superior product can therefore be a commercially inferior proposition if reaching its value requires too much disruption.

There is a useful distinction between **product value** and **change value**. Product value is what becomes possible once the customer arrives. Change value is what remains after the effort, risk and disruption required to get there. A less capable product can sometimes have greater change value because it is easier to try, faster to adopt or safer to reverse.

This is why adoption belongs inside product design. Migration, implementation, trust and time-to-value are not problems to hand downstream after the interesting work is finished. They are part of what the customer is buying.

Markets Have Weather

The customer's willingness to change is not constant.

A proposition rejected in March can become urgent in September without changing very much. A contract expires, a new executive arrives, regulation moves, costs become intolerable, growth breaks an old process or an incumbent disappoints at precisely the wrong moment. The product may be the same; the economics of staying still are not.

Markets have weather, and good distribution provides more than reach. It provides proximity to those changes in pressure. A company close to customers can see where workarounds are becoming intolerable, where budgets are moving and when something that was merely inconvenient becomes consequential.

During my time building Microsoft's startup and developer business in North America, that gap was impossible to miss. Founders could have excellent technology and still need customers, partners and credible routes into markets before technical possibility became commercial adoption. The distance between something working and somebody changing because of it could be enormous.

This matters to capital as much as product. A vast theoretical market populated by customers with little reason to move can be less attractive than a narrower one entering a moment of disruption. Timing cannot rescue a weak proposition, but it can transform the conditions facing a strong one.

The useful question is not merely whether customers have the problem. It is whether the present has become uncomfortable enough for them to act.

The Sale Is the Beginning

Eventually somebody pays, and after months of ambiguity revenue feels wonderfully objective. It is evidence, but the first transaction tells you only that somebody was willing to begin.

One of the more memorable examples from my Microsoft years was Real Madrid. The club already possessed what most businesses spend fortunes trying to manufacture: extraordinary affinity. Microsoft reported around 500 million supporters worldwide, with fewer than three per cent in Spain. The challenge was not persuading people to care about Real Madrid. It was understanding and serving that relationship beyond the ninety minutes on the pitch.

The digital platform developed with Microsoft brought together more than 70 sources of data, allowing the club to understand individual supporters and personalise interactions across its global audience. Fan profiles grew by around 400 per cent into the millions. Real Madrid subsequently reported digital revenues growing 30 per cent a year compared with what its previous digital platforms had delivered.

The numbers are impressive, but the idea underneath them stayed with me.

Football makes customer lifetime value visible in a way a spreadsheet never can. A supporter can carry the relationship for decades. Matches matter enormously, but they are episodes inside something larger: memory, identity, content, community and ritual accumulate across seasons and sometimes generations.

The commercial opportunity follows the relationship rather than creating it.

Most businesses inherit nothing like that emotional advantage, but the principle travels. The first sale is not the relationship; it is permission to begin one. A stronger business learns from what happens afterwards, makes subsequent interactions more valuable and gives customers reasons to continue without repeatedly buying their attention from scratch.

Seen this way, customer lifetime value is more than a finance metric estimating future spend. It is the economic consequence of a relationship that keeps earning another interaction.

That changes how growth should be judged. Capital can buy acquisition for a surprisingly long time. More salespeople, marketing and implementation capacity can make revenue rise while every new customer remains expensive to win and difficult to serve. The business gets bigger without becoming easier to grow.

Scale begins to appear when repetition improves the economics: acquisition becomes more repeatable, implementation less exceptional, retention reflects continuing value and additional demand does not require equivalent additional effort. The question is not simply whether customers buy, but whether the business becomes better because they stayed.

Earn the Change

Customers do not owe an innovation a fair hearing because it was difficult to create. They do not care how elegant the architecture is, how much capital has already been invested or how passionately the team believes in it. Those are the company's sunk costs, not the customer's reasons to change.

The better place to begin is the present. Understand the spreadsheet, the incumbent supplier, the political compromise, the familiar failure and even the deliberate decision to do nothing. They are not evidence that customers have failed to recognise innovation; they are evidence of what the innovation must overcome.

Then design the journey as carefully as the destination. Look for evidence that costs the customer something, because behaviour carrying consequence tells you more than applause. Stay close enough to the market to recognise when the equilibrium begins to move. Once customers arrive, build a relationship whose value deepens rather than repeatedly starting again from zero.

That also gives a more revealing way to look at a business. Impressive technology with heroic adoption requirements may still be a product in search of scalable economics. Growth that requires each customer to be won and implemented as an exception can flatter revenue while hiding the operating model underneath it. Retention created by continuing value is different from retention created by the pain of leaving.

The deeper opportunity may therefore be less glamorous than another breakthrough feature. Companies spend enormous energy increasing the value waiting on the far side of adoption. Sometimes the more valuable innovation is reducing the distance required to reach it.

AI makes that distinction harder to ignore. We are becoming extraordinarily good at producing new possibilities. Human beings and institutions have acquired no corresponding obligation to reorganise themselves around them.

The winning product may not be the one furthest ahead of the present. It may be the one that understands the present deeply enough to make leaving it more compelling than staying.

Every company has a launch date. Outside, life is already in progress.

Nobody is waiting for your product. Earn the change.

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