

Ensuring Product Launch Success: The Often-Overlooked Role of Marketing Execution

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Contents

Introduction3

Processes4

Organizational Structures.....4

Management Tools.....5

Technologies.....5

Post Launch.....6

Summary6

About Aquent7

Introduction

"We spent so much time and money getting everything about the new product right—development, testing, pricing, distribution, advertising, and promotional mix—but we couldn't launch on time because the box was wrong."

*Senior Marketing Executive
Global Electronics Company*

Each year, companies launch more than 30,000 new products and services. Of these, marketing experts estimate that 70 percent fail within two years. When new product launches fail, they sometimes do so for a variety of strategic reasons, from flawed market research to poor product development to a bad distribution strategy.

However, just as often, the failure of the launch is a failure of marketing execution: inconsistent product messaging, delayed sales-force collateral, and embarrassing flops at promotional events. Even short of launch failure, many marketers are familiar with the consequences of mediocre execution: around-the-clock work during the week before launch, excessive spending on overtime and outside resources for rush jobs, and costly rework.

Very often, execution problems can be attributed to the lack of an effective product launch marketing infrastructure. Most companies have an infrastructure of processes, metrics, tools, and technologies for their major functional areas: finance, sales, human resources, and even marketing. But few have a flexible and scalable infrastructure specifically for the management of marketing initiatives tied to product launches. This type of infrastructure provides companies with four basic pillars to ensure the success of product launch marketing:

- 1) Robust **processes** for the launch based on what has worked well in the past
- 2) An **organizational structure** for the launch team that effectively balances employees, contingent staff, and vendors
- 3) A proven set of **management tools** to rapidly develop a high-performing team
- 4) **Technologies** that facilitate team interaction and overall efficiency

Processes

Processes used during a product launch are often developed on an ad hoc basis. This leaves much room for error, since one has to “think of everything” when designing and putting these processes in place. Relying on proven project management templates enables a product launch manager to craft processes and project plans that are:

- Complete, ensuring that no key task is omitted
- Efficient, with key dependencies accurately defined, allowing work to be driven in a logical sequence and ensuring that outputs from one task smoothly flow as inputs to other tasks
- Well managed, with the routing of approvals (e.g., for product brand guidelines) matched to the level of responsibility of the approver
- Customized, geared to the particular type of product launch at hand—for example, more tasks (and more complex tasks) are required to launch a new product than to relaunch an existing product to which a new feature is being added

Organizational Structures

A product launch team is, by definition, an interim organization. This organization needs a structure and needs to populate that structure with a mix of existing employees, new hires, and contingent staff. In addition, certain tasks and functions may be best completed when they are outsourced to an external vendor.

It is critical to balance internal talent with external talent. When the skills and time are available internally, it often makes sense to do work internally, both to reduce costs and to build knowledge within the organization. There are, however, certain instances when the engagement of external resources makes more sense: when specialized skills are required that are not readily available within the organization; when you encounter spikes in workload that are too great for internal staff to handle; and when it will not be possible to redeploy product launch staff elsewhere within the organization after the product goes into maintenance mode.

Using external vendors can be an easy way to extend execution capacity without creating an unnecessarily permanent, not to mention expensive, infrastructure. In addition, there are more and more opportunities for routine execution of marketing materials (e.g., fitting multilingual copy into brochure templates) in offshore locations to generate significant savings.

Management Tools

Management tools used during a product launch (such as metrics, benchmarks, and policies) should focus primarily on cycle times and management milestones.

Task-specific benchmarks can allow product launch managers to set aggressive but reasonable work times and cycle times for key tasks in the project plan. At a higher level in the plan, a project manager needs to measure and report against clear management milestones at which critical decisions need to be made. For example, measuring and communicating the status of approvals that need to be made by key managers provides visibility into the process and highlights those decisions that, if not made in a timely manner, have the potential to delay the entire project.

There are no universal metrics appropriate to product launches in general. Specific metrics for a product launch project must be defined based on the overall objectives of the organization as well as the specific objectives of the launch itself. Once the metrics for the project are fully defined, it is important to have a management dashboard that provides real-time status information to the entire team and to the management in charge of the team. This enables:

- Visibility into real-time management objectives for the organization and the product launch
- Frequent reviews of progress against milestones and key metrics
- Rapid response to issues that are identified as a result of these reviews

Technologies

Numerous technologies are available to marketers to support launch marketing activities. These include collaboration or portal software, workflow management applications, digital asset management (DAM) systems, variable data publishing software, and marketing resource management (MRM) applications. Most of these technologies are available under the application service provider (ASP) model and can be set up quickly and without significant up-front costs or IT involvement. Perhaps just as important, they can be shut down when the launch period has ended.

These technologies can dramatically increase the marketer's flexibility and bandwidth for launch marketing. For example, all the marketing assets could be stored in a DAM repository established specifically for a particular launch campaign, and members of the launch team could share those assets among themselves or with outside vendors. The work itself could be managed through a workflow application. Marketing collateral could be personalized automatically according to a database list with the variable data publishing software. With an MRM application, spending could be tracked and the return on individual initiatives calculated and reported to management.

In addition to bringing together processes, organizational roles and responsibilities, and management tools, such a technology platform can also serve as a link to a database for commonly used digital

assets, such as approved marketing messages and brand standards. It also can provide for full-team and sub-team collaboration workspaces to share ideas and to allow version-controlled development of jointly produced outputs.

Post Launch

Once the launch phase is complete (hopefully with great success), the interim infrastructure needs to be merged into the product management organization. This transition can be challenging if it is not well planned. Often a product launch team develops some good practices from which other parts of the organization can learn. Software functionality of a stand-alone launch support system will sometimes need to be integrated into services provided by corporate IT. And, of course, the people on the launch team need to be reassigned, some to manage the product on an ongoing basis and some to perform other functions.

Summary

Doing product launches right is a critical success factor for most businesses, yet many marketing organizations have not built a reusable infrastructure that allows an organization to do the following:

- Define projects in detail before they are executed, ensuring that strategic decisions are set and used as input when executing.
- Schedule effectively, avoiding rework and rush charges at agencies and printers.
- Set and communicate deadlines and milestones that drive the marketing execution process to move quickly.
- Effectively balance the use of employees, contingent staff, and vendors, utilizing each for their most effective contribution to the project.
- Execute a set of marketing collateral that is high-quality and complete, has consistent messaging, and is integrated with the overall schedule of the product launch.

About Aquent

Aquent pairs marketing and design specialists with challenging jobs to create inspired, productive partnerships that produce meaningful work for our client companies and the talent we represent. We're a world-leading innovator in improving the way companies, and talent, work.

Our agents are organized into four specialized practice areas: Marketing, Online Marketing, Graphic Design, and Interactive Design, each with a practice leader who's a senior expert in that space. Practice leaders bring on agents who have complementary expertise so that as a team they can cover every type of work done in that practice area.

This level of specialization provides a significant advantage to our clients and talent. When you talk to an agent who specializes in your exact field, she or he will not only understand your needs and concerns, but also will be able to provide valuable context based on what is working these days for other people in similar situations.

Learn more at aquent.com.