Why Botching Your Beta Site Is Worse Than Shanking Your Tee Shot

My fourteen year old son and I decided to learn to play golf together. We spent the better part of the summer practicing our chipping and putting. We improved our short game to the point where we were doing well at the local pitch and putt course with its 60 yard holes. What a shock it was when we tried our luck on a full size course. My tee shots were all over the place. I was in trouble long before I got near the green. I dug a deep hole from which I could not recover.

My experience with golf is analogous to the challenges faced by many technology companies as they bring new products and services to market. They spend inordinate amounts of money to develop a product or service. The results in the lab are exciting. Management starts to dream about the next blockbuster product, game changing technology or killer app.

It is now time to find some real customers to validate the lab results and demonstrate that the product actually works. And unwittingly, this is when companies go astray (just like my tee shots!).

The result of these mismanaged beta programs is:

- longer time to market adoption

- higher costs of sales

- time wasted chasing inappropriate prospects.

In the worst case scenario, the product launch fails. The beta programs are often shanked for several reasons.

1. The beta process is viewed only as an engineering effort to prove that the product works. The process of testing these new products must lay the foundation for commercial success.

2. For most new B2B technologies, too many beta sites are selected. It may be comforting to tell the board or senior management that you have lots of beta testers. The reality is that the use and testing of these complex products requires a significant amount of support and

hand holding. Most organizations are not equipped to effectively work with more than 2 or 3 beta sites.

3.   The product is "given" to the customer for testing with no strings attached.   Companies should put an agreement in place with each beta site. At the very least, the customer should agree to share all relevant data with you and publicly support the product launch.

4.   There is no strategy to convert the data from the beta test into messages that support the product's launch.   From the beta testing, companies gather information to identify the ideal customer, create the value proposition and unearth information to justify the price.

5.   The wrong person is asked to run the beta program. At one company I know, the CEO asked the sales team to manage the beta program at the customer.   Marketing with support from engineering should run the beta program.

6.   The wrong beta sites are chosen.   Beta sites should be selected on a number of criteria that will help accelerate market adoption.

In my next blog posting, I will address how to address some of these issues and use the beta process as the foundation for a successful launch.

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