

Thank You Aretha for Teaching Us How To Manage Beta Sites

In 1967, Aretha Franklin, The Queen of Soul, released the mega-hit, "Respect". The opening lines to what Rolling Stone considers one of the greatest songs of all time have provided encouragement to people all over the world.

"What you want
Baby, I got
What you need
Do you know I got it?
All I'm askin'
Is for a little respect..."

These powerful lyrics should also be taken to heart by organizations eager to launch new products and services. As highlighted in a previous blog, selecting and managing your early users (beta sites) is a critical part of your go-to-market efforts.

Developing new products can take years of hard work. So when an organization is finally ready to test a prototype with real customers, they are often nervous about finding beta sites. Then when they locate a customer willing to test the product, they are so excited that they fail to ask for anything in return from the customer. They feel that their customer is doing them a big favor and they should be grateful.

This is where Aretha's message of R-E-S-P-E-C-T comes in. It is important that you recognize that testing a new product is a two way street. Your customer will get the valuable opportunity to be one of the first to test this innovative offering. You make it clear to your customer that they are getting something unique and valuable.

While you don't have to sing like Aretha you should request something in return such as:

- Acting as public reference including white papers, press interviews and case studies
- Taking calls from prospective customers
- Providing feedback on the product

- Sharing data from the evaluation

A few years ago, an innovative chemical company where I worked developed a game changing cleaning process for equipment that produced toxic materials. The beta testing was going slowly and management was concerned about the program. Management asked me to take over the commercialization of this important product.

One day, I got a call from my sales executive and application engineer who were on site at one of the beta customers. Our customer had lost \$25,000 worth of chemicals that were to be used in the beta test. The sales exec and the application engineer asked me to approve their request for new materials. After all, the customer felt badly that they lost the materials. I denied the request and told them to tell the customer that they had 30 days to find the material or else we would invoice them for \$25,000 and a \$10,000 inconvenience fee. After much heated and emotional discussion, they agreed to convey my message to the customer.

Two days later I got another call from the sales executive and the application engineer. Not only did the customer find the material but they were actually going to start to run the evaluations. Before this, the product was just sitting on a shelf. At the product launch, a senior executive from this customer was our biggest supporter. Had we just given them another \$25,000 worth of material, I'm convinced we would still be waiting for them to start the evaluation.

When dealing with early users it is important to remember Aretha's words and expect to be treated with respect.

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