

# 4 ways to ensure your marcom program keeps pace with today's accelerated product development cycles



By: Doug Smith | SMS | June 2016

Times were, the folks developing new products for your company had months, even years to 'build' whatever was in the pipeline. And you, as the marketing or marketing communications manager assigned to the project, had more or less the same amount of time to develop a suitably well-targeted, hard-hitting, and on-message marcom campaign to introduce said new products to the universe.

Flash forward to today, and -- whether the new product or service in question is entirely novel to your company or a next-gen version of an earlier offering -- there can be no doubt the concept-to-realization timeline is far more compressed.

Credit for this new reality is shared by what one might call fundamental *causes* and enabling *capabilities*, a very few of which I've listed below:

Some causes of today's compressed product development cycles	Some of the enabling capabilities that contribute to today's compressed product development cycles
Need to be first-to-market	Ever-more facile product development software
Pressure from offshore or even domestic copycats	Rapid prototyping technologies & techniques (e.g. open source software & hardware/dev kits employed in electronics space, 3D printing, etc.)
Pressure to grow or maintain market share, by introducing additional customer-valued features and functions	Concurrent engineering
Sea-change acceptance of iterative rollouts (aka: "Product 2.0, Product 3.1, and so on)	Agile or other streamlined project management approaches
Market-leader strategy focused on continuous innovation & planned obsolescence (typified by aggressive R&D investment & cultural focus on customer 'problem-solving')	Online or enterprise-level collaboration tools
Market-driven need to abruptly 're-position' an existing product	Modularity of product components & assemblies

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But whatever the cause or the enabler, it is clear that development of marketing programs must keep pace with, support, and (ideally) even identify and glean value from today's accelerated product development and introduction regimens. Here are four ways today's time-strapped marketing managers and marketing communications managers can speed up – and even benefit from – fast-tracked product development and introduction cycles:

**1. Mirror *and* participate in your product development team's 'agile' process** – This article won't attempt to do a deep dive into the principles of 'agile' project management, except to say the agile approach can be typified by such hallmarks as:

- early and constant involvement of real users and/or customers in the product's development;
- reacting to customer feedback and market realities in real time (think of it as course correction) rather than a rigid focus on original specifications;
- cross-discipline and continuous collaboration (e.g. procurement, engineering, operations, QA, biz-dev, marketing);
- despite some fluidity in the process, the deadline remains completely fixed (this being achieved through concurrent engineering, daily communication, accountability, collaboration, and documentation);
- and, oftentimes, use of an 'agile' product management tool such as [Jira](#), [Rally](#), [Mingle](#), or any number of alternatives.

Rather, the point is that marketing messaging and materials needed to support a new product launch can *also* be developed and improved by adopting the sprints, scrums, daily stand-ups, and 'stakeholder-sessions' of the agile methodology. Whether that means

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“testing” with actual customers the language you use to describe your product features/benefits; working collaboratively with engineers and product line managers from the onset of the project to ID and articulate your media strategy versus, say, hiding it under a bushel until you spring it on them as a fait accompli; or sitting in on engineering and manufacturing meetings to gain a deeper and more realistic appreciation of the technical issues and obstacles that exist when transitioning your nascent product from the factory floor to the market.

Not only will you be joining your agile team, your marketing program is likely to be better supported internally, better informed by customer input, and more resonant as a result.

## **2) Add ‘time’ to your foreshortened marketing launch schedule using ‘pre-launch’ buzz –**

Taking a cue from other sectors (e.g.: fast food, blockbuster movies), more and more physical-product manufacturers like car makers and computer hardware companies are routinely ‘leaking’ information on their upcoming product launches in order to generate buzz, preload demand, and – yeah – extend their otherwise compressed product launch timelines.

A concrete example? Consider the similarities between the build-up and launch of the Apple Watch and, say, Star Wars: The Force Awakens... Teaser ads were everywhere; influential bloggers got all kinds of ‘tips’ and insider insights they immediately shared with their publics; both ‘products’ were being marketed at full bore long before they were ready to ship.

How might this work with a less sexy, less consumer-slanted product? The same principles apply: So long as your product launch deadline is fixed and your company is fully committed to it -- you should be able to squeeze more umph out of your shorter timeline by similarly leaking select, hard-to-copy, and tantalizing product details to market influencers and loyal customers. (In fact, if you involve many of them IN your process per the agile approach, you’re already planting some powerful seeds in the market.)

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**3.) Don't wait for the finished goods to build your marcom toolkit** – Used to be, the marcom team went into action when the product was proved out on the manufacturing floor, when initial inventories were starting to be built, and when folks finally felt comfortable informing and priming the sales/distribution channel for 'what was coming' down the pipeline. (You could always tell the time had come, as the 'marketing folks' and any outside suppliers they needed jumped into high gear – scrambling about trying to build the print ads, collaterals, trade show graphics, and other such stuff needed to 'launch' a product.)

Today, there are lots of steps a savvy marcom person can take before the first gadget rolls off the production line. To name a few:

- Need product images? Use [AutoCAD](#) or [SketchUp](#) drawings to create 3D renderings instead. Today, astute photo re-touchers and videographers can apply textures and animations that render your product hyper-realistically, nearly negating the need for an actual photo shoot of the real product.
- Need brochure or website copy? Those same agile meetings mentioned earlier are rich with details, specs, and application insights that a good copywriter can use to generate web copy, feature/benefit statements, and boilerplate copy or talking points for press releases, editorial presentations, and video scripts.
- Need some added credibility to your campaign? Here again, if *both* your engineering team *and* your marketing team are hearing from customers and users throughout the agile process, you have several opportunities to turn that 'listening' into added credibility when it comes time to 'talk' to the market. Real-life testimonials are one approach; expert endorsements are another; but even baring those, imagine what you could do by simply stating that your new product was informed by ## experts, over ## beta trials, and ## user groups? All of this captured before a single pallet was loaded with actual production units.

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Point is, there's no need to wait until everyone has crossed *their* finish lines to begin *your* race to building a solid marcom program. Doing so only puts a bigger gun to your head.

**4) If all else fails, and you're plumb out of time, consider a marcom program from 'concentrate'** – The simple truth is most marketing managers will be faced, at least once in their careers, with the prospect of pulling together a product launch under, let us say, emergency conditions. Maybe no one told you it was in the pipeline. Or a launch that was on ice is suddenly a hot item again. Or funding for a backburner project suddenly materialized. Or the whole company has to respond to a competitive threat ASAP (in which case everyone from engineering to operations to marketing is suddenly in overdrive).

In this instance, calling in some hired guns to facilitate a super-condensed marcom brainstorming, strategy, and tactical session – effectively building the foundations of your marcom program in a matter of days or a couple weeks -- may be worth a look. Several firms across the US offer variations on this theme and at various price points, including [FrogDesign](#), [Ideo](#), and our own firm, [SMS](#) (our flavor of the cake is called [Rapid Rollout](#).) Additional benefits of this approach beyond time savings?

- First, while the initial cost of such sessions is not inconsiderable, you'll typically save money relative to the longer, more drawn-out traditional approach of working with an outside consultancy or 'ad agency.' That's because you'll be building the core of your marcom messaging in one, fell swoop – possibly even securing all the approvals you'll need on ads, collaterals, etc. at one time vs. the gazillions of back and forth approval loops of an ordinary roll out.
- Secondly, chances are you'll wind up with better creative since the outside firm's strategic thinkers and creative team are likewise concentrated on your 'rollout' without all disruptions of day-to-day agency life. [Rapid Rollout](#) was born at SMS when John Hoeschele, Creative Director, and I noticed that "real work began after 6:00 p.m." – when we aren't bombarded with interruptions and context shifts from account to account,

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meetings, and status check-ins. Putting creatives in direct, concentrated contact with subject matter experts from across your company's departments also helps inform the creative.

Looking to keep pace with today's super-compressed product development cycles? Hopefully I've given you some ways to keep pace – and even work the new norm to your advantage. Give a shout if you want to knock it around some more!

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